



# Upper Susquehanna Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

## Sabbaticals for Rostered Ministers

God's command to keep sabbath lies at the heart of the church's understanding of sabbatical leave for Rostered Ministers. The creation of a sabbath day, the seventh day of the week, is God's gift to humanity, and, indeed, all of creation, because sabbath is essential for the creation's health. More than an after thought, time to remember who we are and whose we are provides an opportunity for needed reflection, leading to renewal and hope, and the worship of the God who is the creator of all.

As Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness prior to the start of his public ministry, and as Paul disappeared in the desert for three years following his Damascus road conversion, sabbaticals provide an opportunity for new directions. Even the land was provided a sabbatical by God's people when it was allowed to lie fallow and replenish itself.

Sabbaticals provide Rostered Ministers the opportunity to reflect on their call to ministry and their relationships with God and God's people. While the concept of a sabbatical in the business and academic world is tied to research and finishing advanced degrees, a sabbatical in the church is provided as time away from the busyness of daily ministry in order to nourish one's relationship with God for the sake of the ministry to which one has been called.

Sabbaticals are not vacations. While a sabbatical may include both planned activities and unplanned periods of rest, its focus is on reconnecting with one's sense of call, vocation, and spiritual journey. At the heart of a sabbatical is rest, disengagement, study, exploration, reflection and prayer. Alternating between planned activities and rest, a sabbatical might include a pilgrimage to the Holy Land or Lutherland, a retreat at a monastery or retreat center, time for daily prayer and reading, conversation with a spiritual director, participation in a seminar or learning experience, and attention to both physical and emotional health. Rediscovering one's spiritual roots, time with family, and reconnection with those who were important in one's faith journey, also can be part of a sabbatical.

## Why Grant a Sabbatical?

Pastor Roy M. Oswald, a senior consultant at the Alban Institute, has written and lectured extensively on many aspects of congregational life and pastoral ministry. He provides several reasons which are summarized below as to why a congregation should want its rostered minister to be provided with a sabbatical leave.

### A sabbatical...

- **Encourages longer pastorates.** Congregations have difficulty realizing long-term goals without having long-term pastorates. Adopting a policy for periodic sabbatical leaves is one way to increase a congregation's likelihood of keeping its pastor. Whenever a Rostered Minister leaves a congregation, more than five years can be lost before development and growth can happen (including a few years of burnout before the Leader resigns, a transitional or interim period before another Leader is called, and a few years for the new Leader to get to know the congregation and to lead them in developing a strategic direction for ministry).
- **Contributes to a leader's spiritual growth.** Spiritual growth occurs only through intentionality. Growth calls for setting aside time for reading, prayer, solitude, and reflection. Being intentional about spiritual growth is very difficult when working 45-55 hours per week. If a Rostered Minister is to provide dynamic leadership and deliver deep and challenging sermons regularly, he or she will need to get away for extended periods of time dedicated to spiritual development.
- **Refocuses ministry.** A Rostered Minister needs an astounding array of skills to be effective. Parish ministry today is changing rapidly, and fresh ways must be developed to respond to these changes. A sabbatical offers an opportunity for a Leader to learn from others, to sharpen his or her skills, and to return to the congregation with new ideas and a new vitality for leadership.
- **Prevents burnout.** People in "helping professions" burn out faster than people in other professions, in part, because of their constant, intimate involvement with the emotional burdens of others. Many have come to refer to this as "compassion fatigue." Many Rostered Ministers, over time, will demonstrate its key characteristics —exhaustion, cynicism, disillusionment, depression, and self-depreciation. Those who do usually become dull, hollow, and uninspiring and are more likely either to seek another call or to leave parish ministry altogether. A regular schedule of sabbaticals can help to prevent burnout to the good of both the pastor and congregation.

## **Guidelines and Suggestions for Providing Sabbaticals**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America through the action of the churchwide assembly in 1997 recommends that a rostered minister be granted time for a sabbatical after 3-5 years in a congregation/agency. In the Upper Susquehanna Synod, however, we recommend that a sabbatical of three months be considered for Rostered Ministers at least every seventh year. When granted, Rostered Ministers should agree not to leave a congregation or other ministry setting for at least one year upon returning from the leave unless mutually agreed upon by both the Rostered Minister and congregation council or necessitated by discipline.

Rostered Ministers should enter into a covenant with the congregation council specifying how the sabbatical is to be used and other understandings including financial arrangements and coverage.

While the length of a sabbatical is normally three months, sabbaticals may vary in length, depending upon the covenant agreed upon by the congregation's council and the Rostered Minister. It is strongly encouraged, however, that the entire sabbatical be taken continuously to allow for disengagement from pastoral responsibilities and duties.

A Rostered Minister's base salary, social security, housing allowance, and other benefits are fully provided during the sabbatical. An automobile allowance/mileage is not included but may be negotiated.

In a sabbatical year, a Rostered Minister's two weeks of continuing education is included in the three months of sabbatical leave. While a sabbatical and continuing education are not synonymous, a three-month sabbatical is not normally to be combined with an additional two weeks of educational leave. Vacation time is provided as usual, however.

A plan needs to be developed for covering pastoral or other needs for the sabbatical period, i.e., worship services, confirmation instruction, funerals, marriages, hospital visitations, care for the homebound. Possibilities include utilizing retired pastors, synodically authorized lay worship leaders and/or catechists, youth led worship services, hymn sings, etc. Coverage for pastoral care may be arranged in a variety of ways, including support from area pastors. Normally a congregation is not in contact with the Rostered Minister during the sabbatical.

Advance planning for a sabbatical leave is essential. Congregations are well advised to budget for a leave during the six years prior to its being granted. This money should be escrowed in a separate interest-bearing account, e.g. Mission Investment Fund or bank account. If a Rostered Minister leaves the congregation before a sabbatical leave is granted, the sabbatical reserve fund belongs to the congregation. In multiple staff situations, plans should be made for each of the leaders.

Expenses incurred during a sabbatical leave--e.g., tuition, books, supplies, travel and room/board expenses-- are borne by the Rostered Minister. These expenses may be

covered by continuing education or professional expense funds that may be accrued for up to three years.

Supplemental funding for sabbaticals might come from scholarship and grants to the congregation or rostered minister. Funds obtained may support both the leader and the congregation's expenses for coverage, depending upon the stipulations made by the funding source.

Upon returning from a sabbatical leave, the Rostered Minister is encouraged to provide a reflection or report to the congregation about the sabbatical experience. This can be flexible and creative in its form, yet provide an opportunity for the congregation and Rostered Minister to learn from and explore the benefits of the sabbatical leave.

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