

SABBATICAL LEAVE POLICY

Illinois Prairie Presbytery

INTRODUCTION

Sabbath rest is built into the fabric of creation and is necessary for the well-being of community, for it reminds us of who we are and who God is. Jesus offered this invitation to his disciples: “Come and rest awhile” (Mark 6:31). Amid the constant demands of ministry, Jesus knew the need for Sabbath time. A sabbatical is a time to dig deeper into oneself and one’s relationship to God, away from the demands of long-term ministry. It is a time to be renewed, refreshed, and revitalized by the breath of God.

Sabbaticals not only benefit the pastor, but the congregation or other validated ministry as well, giving all involved an opportunity to try new things and develop untapped gifts. Sabbaticals are a useful tool for maintaining a healthy and thriving relationship between pastors and those they serve, preventing pastor burn-out, and fostering vital ministry.

ELIGIBILITY

Illinois Prairie Presbytery recommends that all ministers of the Word and Sacrament and all commissioned pastors be eligible for sabbatical every seven years. Sabbaticals should be in the terms of call for all installed ministers of the Word and Sacrament and in the contracts for temporary ministers and commissioned pastors. Sabbatical time should also be provided to all pastors currently serving by adding it retroactively to the date of hire or the beginning of the call.

PROCESS

While Illinois Prairie Presbytery strongly recommends sabbaticals for all persons in ministry, it recognizes that pastors who serve in non-Presbyterian settings, such as hospital chaplains, may have fewer options or a different process. The process below is thus limited to those pastors working under a Presbyterian council (i.e. a session or the presbytery) in Illinois Prairie Presbytery. The following schedule applies:

1. After six years of service to a particular ministry, or as agreed upon by the employing council, the pastor may have up to three months of sabbatical leave to be taken in the following year.
2. Vacation time may be attached to the sabbatical with the employing council’s permission.
3. No study leave will be granted during the year of sabbatical.

4. The pastor must commit to remain at their church or other validated ministry for at least one year of service beyond the date of return. Any pastor who does not return to their employment for at least one year shall be required to refund the entire salary (excluding benefits) received for the period of the sabbatical leave. The requirement for repayment may not be waived without the specific approval of the employing council.

PLANNING

Advance planning of the sabbatical leave is vital to success and should not be overlooked. After assessing eligibility, the pastor shall:

1. Submit an initial request for sabbatical to their council one year in advance of the leave for the council's approval.
2. Upon approval of the request, the council will appoint a Sabbatical Renewal Team (SRT) to work with the pastor on planning. The SRT shall consist of at least two elders and members at large of the congregation or other ministry.
3. The SRT will present a written plan to the council for its approval at least six months prior to the start of the sabbatical. The plan should include:
 - a description of the goals to be achieved and the expected end result,
 - a personal statement from the pastor as to why this sabbatical leave would be valuable to both the pastor and the ministry, and
 - a preliminary proposal for coverage of the pastor's services, including the financial cost to the council of providing coverage.
4. Upon approval by the council, the plan will be forwarded to the Commission on Ministry (COM) for its review and its assistance in insuring adequate coverage.
5. Once the plan is approved by the council and COM, the SRT shall inform the congregation or other ministry of the sabbatical leave and the plans for coverage.

FUNDING

During the sabbatical leave, the employing council will continue to pay the pastor's salary and benefits at the same level as those in effect prior to the leave. Each council will also contract for the necessary interim staff coverage during the period of sabbatical leave. COM can assist in this process.

Since the leave itself can be expensive, pastors are encouraged to apply for grants supporting sabbatical leave. Possible resources are available on the Presbytery website.

RE-ENTRY

Experience has shown that sharing the sabbatical experience enhances the experience for both the pastor and those they serve. Thus, at the completion of sabbatical leave, the pastor shall present an oral and written report to their council and congregation or ministry with the details of their leave as well as reflections on its value. This is a time when the ministry participants can also share how their service was changed during the sabbatical time.

CONCLUSION

A sabbatical for clergy renewal creates space in which God can work in new ways, for both the pastor and the church. Let the creative juices and imagination flow. Avoid prescriptions; grow in your own way. Set out with enthusiasm and expectation. Breathe deeply as you go. Let yourself wonder and be open to the surprises of God, and know that years from now you and those you serve will still be reaping the benefits and the blessings of the experience.

RESOURCES FOR SABBATICALS ARE AVAILABLE ON THE PRESBYTERY WEBSITE