

## Sabbatical Policy Template

A sabbatical leave is good for the pastor, the congregation, and the church. While this is an accurate statement, it is often met with mixed emotions including enthusiasm, tension, conflict, and confusion. If understood and planned properly, many of these emotions can be dealt with in a healthy way.

Pastors often work six days per week, rarely get an entire weekend off, seldom get a three-day weekend, and generally find that Christmas, Easter, and other holidays are among their busiest times of the year. The demands of pastoral ministry can drain a person's physical, emotional, and spiritual energy.

While pastors are responsible to God and to their churches for their spiritual well-being, our local churches and church leaders are also responsible for the care of their pastors.

The Sabbath has its roots in the Bible. In Genesis 2:1-3, we read about God resting from His work of creation on the seventh day. In the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11), we are told to take a break from work and focus on the blessings of God's creation. God even wanted man to give the land a Sabbath year of rest every seventh year (Leviticus 25:1-7).

The sabbatical becomes an investment in pastoral renewal. Comments by pastors who have completed a sabbatical include:

- *It was extremely beneficial to me, my wife, and family.*
- *We renewed our marriage commitments.*
- *I spent quality time in prayer, solitude, and reading.*
- *I visited other churches and saw what God was doing in their lives.*
- *I was able to step back from the day-to-day pressures of ministry and review my calling.*
- *I was able to pursue some personal dreams – writing, painting, journaling, etc.*

This sabbatical template will provide biblical rationale for a sabbatical, the purposes of a sabbatical, guidelines for a sabbatical, and a suggested process for gaining Elder/Board agreement for a sabbatical policy. This template is a working document for you to customize for your church ministry by including desired details and using the correct terminology for your church polity.

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### Biblical Rationale

Throughout Scripture, God establishes rhythms of work and rest for the good of His people and the flourishing of His creation.

- **Sabbath Principle:** God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2–3) and commanded His people to set apart one day in seven for rest and worship (Exodus 20:8–11).
- **Sabbatical Year:** Every seventh year, Israel was instructed to let the land rest and be renewed (Leviticus 25:1–7).
- **Jesus' Example:** Christ personally modeled times of withdrawal for prayer and renewal (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16).

- **Jesus' Oversight:** When the twelve returned from a ministry of preaching, casting out demons, and healing, Jesus had them report what they had done. He then said, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while. . . . And they went away in a boat to a lonely place by themselves." (Mark 6:31, 32)
- **Spiritual Care:** Pastors and leaders are called to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2). As undershepherds, pastors must also care for their own souls in order to lead faithfully over the long haul by spending time with the Good and Great Shepherd.

These patterns teach us that rest is not merely a pause from ministry, but a biblical practice for renewal, trust in God's provision, and long-term faithfulness.

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### **Purpose of a Sabbatical**

The purpose of a sabbatical is to provide pastors with extended time away from regular responsibilities for:

1. **Spiritual Renewal** – deepening their walk with Christ through prayer, study, and reflection.
2. **Rest and Refreshment** – recovering physical, emotional, and spiritual energy.
3. **Family and Personal Health** – strengthening relationships with their spouse and children and giving attention to their personal well-being.
4. **Vision and Growth** – engaging in learning, study, or experiences that can enrich long-term ministry.

A sabbatical is not a vacation, but a sacred time of intentional renewal for continued faithful service by reconnecting with the Lord Jesus Christ for His strengthening and leading.

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### **Policy Guidelines**

1. **Eligibility**
  - A pastor (full-time, part-time, or bivocational) becomes eligible for a sabbatical **after 5-7 consecutive years of service in the same church.**
  - The church at their discretion can include the pastor's years of service at a prior church, if no sabbatical time had been given.
2. **Length of Sabbatical**
  - A sabbatical will be **8-12 weeks** in length, with specific duration determined by church leadership in consultation with the pastor.
3. **Compensation**
  - The pastor will continue to receive **full salary and benefits** during the sabbatical.
  - The sabbatical time is separate from the pastor's yearly vacation time.

- This planned compensation is the church's investment in the long-term care and health of both the pastor and the congregation.

#### **4. Planning and Approval**

- The pastor should submit a written proposal in advance of the sabbatical, outlining intended use of sabbatical time (rest, study, spiritual retreat, family, etc.). If submitted 12 months in advance, there is the opportunity for the pastor to apply for Clergy Renewal Grant through Lilly Endowment (more information below).
- The church Elders/Board will review and approve the proposal.

#### **5. Pastoral Ministry During Sabbatical**

- Church leadership will arrange pulpit supply through lay leaders or guest speakers.
- The pastoral care coverage will be through lay leaders or a prearranged agreement with a neighboring pastor.
- The congregation is encouraged to view this as an opportunity to grow in shared leadership and ministry.

#### **6. Accountability and Return**

- Within **60 days of return**, the pastor will share with leadership (and as appropriate, the congregation) insights and experiences from the sabbatical that may benefit future ministry.

#### **7. Frequency**

- After the initial sabbatical, a pastor may be eligible again **every 5-7 years of continuous service**.

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### **Congregational Encouragement**

The sabbatical is not only for the pastor's renewal but also for the church's growth. As the congregation takes on greater responsibility during this season, members are reminded that ministry is shared among the whole body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). In this way, the church and pastor are both strengthened for ongoing faithful service.

### **Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Grant**

The **Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs** at Christian Theological Seminary seek to strengthen Christian congregations by providing opportunities for their pastors to step away briefly from the demands of daily parish life and engage in a period of renewal and reflection. These competitive grants programs help congregations in the U.S. and Puerto Rico fund renewal leaves for their pastors with awards of up to \$60,000 each. Click on this link for more information:

[Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs – Christian Theological Seminary](#)

## **Suggested Process for Gaining Elders/Board Agreement on Sabbatical Policy**

The following is a suggested process to gain Elders/Board agreement to a sabbatical policy and its implementation. It is often better to take extra steps than fewer steps to give the leadership team time to think about their decision. If you have a more introverted Elders/Board, the meeting will actually take place in the parking lot after the meeting. To avoid this, give them time between meetings to think and discuss so that they don't make a hasty decision they regret.

### **1. Prayerful Preparation**

- As pastor, personally pray for unity, humility, and openness.
  - Gather biblical rationale for sabbatical (rest, renewal, rhythms of work and Sabbath: Gen. 2:2–3; Ex. 20:8–11; Mark 1:35; 6:31).
  - Provide for your Elders/Board any denominational/ministry affiliation policies or practices.
  - Discuss with denominational/ministry affiliation leaders your plans and solicit any suggestions and their availability to help.
  - Prepare a clear **draft sabbatical policy** (already created) that is simple, practical, and tailored to the church's size.
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### **2. Initial Conversation with Board Chair (or Key Leaders)**

- Share heart-to-heart: sabbatical is not about “time off” but “time for renewal for longer-term ministry health.”
  - Seek feedback and identify concerns early.
  - Ask for their help in positively framing the conversation with the rest of the Board.
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### **3. Elders/Board Study Session (Grounding in Scripture & Purpose)**

- Set aside a meeting (or extended time at a regular Elders/Board meeting).
- Open with prayer for wisdom and unity.
- Lead a Bible study on Sabbath and sabbatical:
  - God's design for rest (Gen. 2:2–3).
  - Renewal for ministry (Ex. 33:14; Mark 6:31).
  - Paul's example of refreshment in ministry (2 Tim. 1:16–17).
- Discuss: “Why do pastors need intentional times of renewal?”

- Emphasize **sabbatical as investment in the pastor and congregation's future**, not just the pastor's personal benefit.
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#### 4. Present the Draft Sabbatical Policy

- Provide copies in advance.
  - Walk through it slowly, highlighting:
    - Eligibility (who and when).
    - Purpose (spiritual renewal, not job hunting or extended vacation).
    - Benefits to the church (fresh vision, long-term pastoral health, avoid burnout).
    - Plan for coverage (guest preachers, lay leaders, interim support).
  - Allow space for questions and concerns.
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#### 5. Guided Discussion and Listening

- Invite each Elder/Board Member to share their perspective.
  - Acknowledge concerns (e.g., finances, coverage, tradition).
  - Use phrases like:
    - “That’s a good concern. How could we address that together?”
    - “What’s most important to you about ensuring the church thrives during sabbatical?”
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#### 6. Revise the Policy Together

- Note suggested adjustments (e.g., timeline, eligibility length, reporting afterward).
  - Make revisions transparently so Elders/Board Members see their input shaping the policy.
  - Emphasize flexibility while keeping the biblical principle intact.
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#### 7. Build Consensus

- After revisions, ask:
  - “Are we moving toward agreement?”
  - “Does anyone have lingering reservations?”
- Aim for **unity over majority vote**, but use a vote if needed.
- If the Board is not ready, schedule a follow-up meeting rather than forcing a decision.

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## 8. Formal Approval

- Present a final draft for the Board vote.
- Record approval in official meeting minutes.
- Celebrate with a prayer of thanksgiving.

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## 9. Communication to Congregation

- Pastor and Elders/Board announce the policy jointly.
- Frame it as a **church-wide investment** in long-term pastoral health.
- Share biblical teaching with the congregation so they understand the value and purpose.

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## 10. Implementation & Review

- Once adopted, put a timeline and expectations into place.
- After the first sabbatical, evaluate together:
  - What worked well?
  - What should be adjusted?
- Continue refining for long-term sustainability.

## Sabbatical Policy – Elder/Board Discussion Guide throughout Process

You will have several meetings to bring you to the place of final approval of a Sabbatical Policy. This is a working document throughout the Gaining Approval Process for each meeting. As you work through Gaining Approval Process, isolate the section(s) you will be discussing and make sure there are next steps at the end of each meeting, showing clearly the person responsible for completing those steps.

You can print this handout and give it to each Board Member alongside the draft policy. It's streamlined, bullet-pointed, and designed for quick reference during the meeting.

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### Sabbatical Policy – Elders/Board Discussion Guide

#### Biblical Foundation

- **Genesis 2:2-3** – God rested.
  - **Exodus 20:8-11** – Sabbath is God's design for renewal.
  - **Mark 6:31** – Jesus invited His disciples to rest.
  - **2 Timothy 1:16-17** – Paul was refreshed by others.
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#### Purpose of a Sabbatical

- Gives time for **spiritual renewal, rest, and vision**.
  - Helps prevent pastoral burnout.
  - Strengthens long-term ministry health.
  - Provides opportunity for church leaders to grow.
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#### Draft Policy Highlights

- **Eligibility:** after \_\_\_ years of full-time service.
  - **Length:** \_\_\_ weeks/months.
  - **Purpose:** renewal, not job search or extended vacation.
  - **Coverage:** guest preachers, lay leaders, interim support.
  - **Report:** pastor shares reflections upon return.
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#### Discussion Questions

1. What part of this policy do you find most helpful?
2. What concerns do you have?

3. How can this policy be shaped to bless both pastor and congregation?

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**Next Steps**

- Share input → refine the policy together.
- Seek unity in the decision.
- Approve the policy → communicate to the congregation.

## Sabbatical Policy Final Approval Process

This is the template to guide the Elders/Board toward understanding and approving the final sabbatical policy. It's simple, provides some scripture, and is designed for discussion.

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### Sabbatical Policy Presentation Outline

#### Opening (5 min)

- Pray together for wisdom and unity.
  - Share your heart: *“This is not about time off, but about long-term ministry health for both pastor and church.”*
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#### Biblical Foundation (10 min)

- **Genesis 2:2–3** – God rested, establishing a rhythm of work and renewal.
- **Exodus 20:8–11** – Sabbath is part of God’s design for human flourishing.
- **Mark 6:31** – Jesus invited His disciples to rest.
- **2 Timothy 1:16–17** – Paul was refreshed by others in ministry.

#### Discussion Question:

- Why do you think God built rhythms of rest and renewal into creation and ministry?
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#### Purpose of Sabbatical (5 min)

- Sabbatical = intentional time for spiritual renewal, prayer, study, and rest.
  - Benefits:
    - The pastor returns refreshed, with renewed vision.
    - The church grows by exercising leadership during the pastor’s absence.
    - It helps prevent burnout and prolongs effective ministry.
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#### Draft Policy Summary (10 min)

*(Distribute one-page draft policy)*

- **Eligibility** – after X years of full-time service.
- **Length** – X weeks/months.
- **Purpose** – renewal, not job search or extended vacation.

- **Coverage** – guest preachers, lay leaders, or partner pastors.
- **Report** – pastor shares key learnings upon return.

**Discussion Question:**

- What parts of this draft feel most helpful to you? What concerns do you have?
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**Guided Discussion (15 min)**

- Invite each Board Member to share their perspective.
- Write down concerns on a whiteboard or paper.
- Together, discuss adjustments (timeline, coverage, expectations).

**Prompt:**

- “How can we shape this policy so it blesses both the pastor and the church?”
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**Path to Consensus (10 min)**

- Ask: “*Are we ready to move forward or do we need more time for prayer and discussion?*”
  - If ready, take a vote or acknowledge unanimous affirmation.
  - If not, schedule a follow-up meeting.
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**Closing (5 min)**

- Pray together for ongoing unity and God’s blessing on the church’s future.
- Thank the Church Leaders for their time and partnership.