



Northwestern Minnesota Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

In this difficult ministry time, we recognize a great need to focus on the mental and spiritual health of our leaders in NWMN. We acknowledge the exhaustion, burnout, and wear and tear of our people caring for the public's mind, body, and spirit, as they are often the folks who absorb people's discontent even in the best of circumstances.

We desire that our congregations be well-cared for by healthy leaders. One way to do this is to encourage conversation between Rostered Ministers and congregational leaders. As you begin this work, here are some points to consider, reasoning, and resource links for funding and further support.

When drafting a sabbatical leave policy, consider the following:

- **Qualifying years of service:** Consider how many years a leader must serve before gaining this privilege. It's common for employers to grant sabbatical leave to leaders who have been with them for 5 or more years.
- **The maximum length of sabbatical permitted:** Your policy may set a blanket limit on the duration of sabbaticals, have a limit length, or be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.
- **Sabbatical purpose:** Some permit staff to take a life sabbatical for any purpose, while others only approve leave for certain activities, such as respite, volunteering, traveling, or studying. Broader might be best. Consider how sabbatical leave is defined for your congregation, and state this clearly in your policy.
- **Required notice:** Consider how far in advance a leader should notify you of their sabbatical plans. Three- six months' notice is common, as this allows time to reassign the leader's duties, hire any temporary staff if required, and perform any necessary training before the leader leaves.

- **Frequency of sabbaticals:** Decide how often leaders can take sabbaticals to minimize disruption and maximize connection.
- **Evaluating sabbatical requests:** Explain who reviews sabbatical requests and define the approval criteria in your policy. Having a transparent process with clearly documented eligibility rules helps reduce confusion and maintain good morale.
- **Employment agreement post-sabbatical:** You may also choose to add a clause that encourages your leader to serve your congregation for a set period after taking sabbatical leave. Of course, noting that emergency situations will be evaluated.
- **Other obligations:** You may expect pulpit supply and other responsibilities to be planned for coverage before going on a sabbatical. Outline all obligations so leaders know exactly what is expected of them.

Helpful sabbatical language examples:

A Minister of Word and Sacrament or Minister of Word and Service is eligible for a sabbatical after five full years of service in the same congregation. The concept of sabbatical is grounded on the biblical idea of Sabbath rest. The example of Jesus, who frequently sought out a quiet place where he could meditate and pray, away from the constant demands of the crowds, is a strong model for a sabbatical. Unlike a vacation, a sabbatical is intended for purposeful reflection and restoration. A sabbatical also provides the opportunity for the congregation to experience the freshness of a break in the rhythm of parish life and leadership. A conversation about a sabbatical could begin with the Mutual Ministry Committee, executive/personnel committee, church council, or a special Sabbatical Task Force. The following guidelines give some helpful information.

1. A sabbatical provides the professional leader a measured time to step aside from congregational responsibilities to pursue opportunities for a renewal of vision and perspective. It creates space for creativity, rest, and renewal. It may include continuing education, travel, a concentrated time to study or read, reconnection with immediate or extended family, and time away for spiritual renewal. Rested and energized pastors are likely to have longer and healthier calls in a congregation. Sabbaticals give congregations the opportunity to provide and experience new leadership opportunities. A sabbatical is a way for a congregation to express how much it values the rostered minister.
2. A sabbatical may be taken after five full years of service in a particular parish. Years of service can accumulate between calls but should be agreed upon at the time of the new call. A sabbatical will normally be for 12 weeks and should not be less than 6 weeks. The full 12-week sabbatical may include up to two weeks of vacation, a ten (10) week sabbatical may include up to one week of vacation, and a six (6) week sabbatical would normally not include vacation time. Regardless of the length, the sabbatical needs to be consecutive weeks of time away. Clergy are expected to continue ministry in that congregation for at least one year after the sabbatical.
3. The congregation will continue to pay full salary and benefits for the rostered minister who is on sabbatical. The congregation will recruit a temporary minister and provide a salary in the rostered minister's absence. There are a variety of options for leadership including members of the congregation assume new leadership roles, a retired pastor, a neighboring ELCA. It is possible that a communion partner pastor and your pastor take a sabbatical at different times and exchange pastoral coverage. The bishop may authorize a well-qualified lay person for word and sacrament ministry for this specific time and place. Congregations

are encouraged to begin putting money aside for a sabbatical when a newly called rostered minister begins. Grants are available through We Raise Foundation (formerly Wheat Ridge Ministries) at <https://weraise.org/> or the Lilly Foundation at www.lillyendowment.org.

4. The congregation is not under obligation to fund the cost of the sabbatical itself. Continuing education dollars, which can be accrued up to three years, can be used for the educational costs of the sabbatical. Planning for the sabbatical should begin the calendar year before in order to take advantage of grant opportunities (We Raise Foundation, formerly Wheat Ridge Ministries, at <https://weraise.org/> or the Lilly Foundation at www.lillyendowment.org) and so that the congregational budget can allow for additional expenses.

Here are some resources that congregations and Ministers of Word and Service and Ministers of Word and Sacrament may find helpful:

1. "Creating a Sabbatical Plan", a Lutheran Partners article by Pastor John R. Gugel.
2. "Sabbaticals are a win-win", an article in the July 2007 issue of The Lutheran, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/>.
3. "Changing the Rhythm of Parish Ministry: Sabbatical Policy Insights," a 13-minute video that looks at sabbaticals through the experiences of three pastors and one congregational member. It comes with an 11-page study guide and is available at the Lutheran Resource Center at <https://associationoflutheranresourcecenters.wordpress.com/>.
4. "Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning" by A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff.
5. "Why Should You Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical?" a video featuring Roy Oswald that is available from the Alban Institute.
6. We Raise Foundation, formerly Wheat Ridge Ministries (<https://weraise.org/>) and the Lilly Endowment

(<http://www.lillyendowment.org/religion.html>) both offer sabbatical grant opportunities to congregations.

7. For additional resources go to <https://www.elca.org/Resources>.