

## SABBATICAL POLICY REGIONAL SYNOD OF MID-AMERICA

From the current *Minister's Minimum Salary Schedule and Rules*:

6. Sabbaticals: Churches are encouraged to grant pastors a six-week or more sabbatical at full salary after each seven years of service with that congregation. The agenda for such sabbatical should be submitted and approved by the consistory with the express intent that such sabbatical shall be an investment in the future to the benefit of the church.

After eight years of pastoral service without a sabbatical, churches, through its consistory or other appropriate committee, are **required** to annually review the Synod's sabbatical policy with its pastor(s).

The following policy was adopted by the Synod of Mid-America in 1988 and appears in the minutes of the Synod of Mid-America of 1988:

### CLERGY SABBATICAL POLICY

The General Synod Executive Committee has encouraged denominational staff to develop a model sabbatical policy that might be included in classis salary and benefit plans. In addition, the Executive Committee of the Particular Synod of Mid-America has asked the Ministry and Parish Life Committee (MPLC) to prepare a report on clerical sabbaticals for discussion during its 1988 meeting.

### THE SABBATICAL

The practice of sabbaticals originates in the Old Testament (Exodus 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7). The Lord commanded the people of Israel to let the land rest every seven years. There appears to have been three motives for the sabbatical year: economic, social and spiritual (William Baur, "Sabbatical," **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**). Economically, the land was entitled to rest in order to gain fresh strength and to insure its future fertility. Socially, the seventh year was intended for the relief of the poor and for the awakening of a sense of responsibility in the hearts of those blessed with material possessions. Spiritually, the leisure time during the twelve months of sabbatical rest provided an opportunity for increased religious devotion and instruction.

In recent years, the sabbatical has become almost the exclusive property of the academic community. Teachers in colleges, seminaries, and universities commonly receive time off, with pay, to engage in study that will strengthen their academic skills. In fact, the notion that a sabbatical year is due after a number of years of service is prevalent in the academic world, almost to the point of entitlement.

Academic sabbaticals are considered work time rather than vacation time. It is considered an alternative form of employment which provides a different agenda within a new context. In many cases the faculty member is required to do extensive research in preparation for the publication of a manuscript. Through research and its subsequent publication both the school and the faculty member are enriched.

Recently, sabbaticals have been granted to pastors of local congregations. As noted in a RCA denominational report, "Clergy Sabbatical Policy," both the concept and practice of sabbaticals

for ministers of local congregations have been with us for some time. However, sabbaticals are not a common practice in the RCA.

In general, clerical sabbaticals can be viewed as a response to two maladies that plague the pastorate: burn-out and rust-out. In addition, clerical sabbaticals can be viewed as preventive care to insure that a pastor does not suffer these problems.

Sabbaticals have been granted to pastors who have served the congregation energetically and ambitiously, but have "run out of steam," that is, they have burnt out. In such cases the pastor has served the church effectively, but has reached the point where he seems to have lost his creative edge, or he may appear tired much of the time because of his many duties. (See "Does Your Pastor Need a Sabbatical?," by Robert C. **Anderson in Moody Monthly** 88 [Number 1, September, 1987], 24-27.) A sabbatical in this case is an opportunity to be renewed and to deepen the resources of his spiritual life.

Rust-out is a different kind of problem. It is often associated with pastors who have been serving a congregation for a number of years, i.e., the long-term pastorate. Rust-out is often perceived by the consistory who detect ineffectiveness in the ministry of its pastor. With no hope of the pastor taking a call, the consistory would like the pastor to improve his ministry in particular areas that would be of benefit to the congregation. A sabbatical in this case is an opportunity to be exposed to new ideas, broaden perspectives, experience a different context, and learn new skills.

A sabbatical can best be used as a means to maintain a healthy relationship between a pastor and a congregation by preventing burn-out and rust-out. Recently, a pastor in our Synod received a sabbatical after twenty years of ministry to a congregation. The consistory has enjoyed the ministry of its pastor and would like to see his ministry continue in a positive manner. To insure this the consistory granted the pastor some time off for study, reflection and renewal. This is indeed the best context in which to enjoy a sabbatical. The pastor enjoys his ministry to a particular congregation, and the congregation enjoys the ministry of its pastor. All involved would like to see the relationship continue. In order for the pastor to continue his ministry in a creative and energetic fashion a sabbatical is granted.

### **CLERICAL SABBATICALS FOR THE SYNOD?**

But the question remains. Should the Synod of Mid-America recommend to the Synod Ministers Salary Committee and to the Classes within its bounds the implementation of a sabbatical policy for pastors of local congregations?

- I. The MPLC believes that there are a number of advantages to a sabbatical policy, but the committee has a number of reservations:
  - A. It is a difficult concept to sell to the laity who work productively and efficiently without such a benefit. Laity also may begin to question the commitment of the pastor to his congregation if every five years he leaves them for a few months.
  - B. At present there are a shortage of good programs that a pastor on sabbatical can take advantage of, especially if he does not live near a seminary and does not want to leave home.
  - C. A sabbatical policy may encourage pastors to neglect continuous study while in the pastorate. In that pastors know they will have a few months off for study in the future, they may become so involved in ministry that they leave little time for personal study and renewal while actively serving the church. This, in turn, would accelerate the rate of burn-out among pastors.
  - D. A sabbatical policy reflects a mixing of academia with the church that should be done with caution, especially when determining the length of a sabbatical.

- II. The MPLC also believes that there are additional ways to prevent burn-out and rust-out.
  - A. The consistory can encourage the pastor to take advantage of a number of conferences every year by providing time off during the week in addition to the annual week already provided for continuing education.
  - B. The consistory may simply double the amount of time and money given for continuing education each year.
  - C. The consistory may encourage the pastor to set aside at least one day off of work and one day for personal study and devotion every week, and encourage the congregation to honor these days.
  - D. The consistory may seek to be more sensitive to the personal needs of the pastor. For example, some consistories have sent their pastors "home" during holidays so that they can be with their extended family. Others have given time off after the pastor has had an exhausting week. There is no limit to the ways a consistory can care for their pastor.
- III. Although the MPLC believes that a sabbatical may be appropriate in some situations, it would be difficult to adopt a sabbatical policy as a norm for the Synod. Consistories may, however, recognize the sabbatical as an appropriate benefit to their pastors, but should also creatively and personally work out the best possible scenario for their particular relationship.
- IV. If a consistory and pastor do agree to a sabbatical, the MPLC committee recommends the following guidelines for the implementation of a sabbatical program in the PSMA:
  - A. The pastor is encouraged to negotiate an appropriate sabbatical leave with the Consistory no earlier than after four years of service and no later than seven years. At least six months prior to the beginning of a sabbatical leave, a detailed plan shall be presented to the consistory for its approval.
  - B. The content of a sabbatical leave is to be agreed upon by the Pastor and Consistory. The Consistory is encouraged to consult with appropriate persons in Classis or the Office of Human Resources for guidance as to the significance of the planned sabbatical. The sabbatical should be of mutual benefit to the pastor and the congregation. Working with the consistory, the pastor may refine his plan to assure that he sets objectives that will not only enhance his own skills, but also train him in areas beneficial to the ministry of the church.
  - C. The length of a sabbatical leave should equal approximately two weeks of leave per every year of service to the congregation being served. It is unwise for a pastor to be gone from his congregation so long that he loses the momentum of his ministry. If he has to work twice as hard to restore it when he returns, this may undo the benefits of the sabbatical to himself and his congregation (Anderson, 27).
  - D. During a sabbatical, salary and benefits shall continue to be paid as during normal service. This is consistent with the understanding that a sabbatical leave is not time-off but an alternative form of employment.
  - E. Expenses incurred during a sabbatical leave, such as the cost of tuition and travel, are the responsibility of the pastor. However, the Consistory may decide to offer the normal annual professional development allowance (1/52 of the pastor's salary) to the pastor in order to help defray some of these expenses.
  - F. The pastor is encouraged to relinquish the annual week for professional development during the year of his or her sabbatical.
  - G. The pastor is encouraged to relinquish 1/2 of the annual vacation time in that the sabbatical, while a time of continued employment, will provide numerous opportunities for rest and relaxation.

- H. The pastor is encouraged to take the other half of his or her annual vacation in conjunction with the sabbatical leave so that the leave and vacation form one block of time during the year.
- I. Within one month following completion of a sabbatical, the minister shall provide a report of the experience to the consistory in a form which can then be shared with the entire congregation. The minister is encouraged to submit this report to OHR for inclusion with his MPF so that it becomes part of his permanent record.
- J. Following completion of a sabbatical, a minister is morally obligated to remain as pastor of that same congregation for at least one year, unless released from this obligation by consent of the Consistory.
- K. Provision for sabbatical leaves may be included in the consistory's call to the minister or simply negotiated at a later time. Appropriate provision in the annual budget shall be made to ensure that when a plan for a sabbatical is agreed upon the funds for adjunct pastoral assistance (as needed) are available.
- L. Additional logistical questions should be worked out carefully.