

Lancaster Mennonite Conference

SABBATICALS FOR BISHOPS

This document summarizes Lancaster Conference's guidelines and recommendations on sabbaticals for bishops (overseers). It is written as a series of responses to Frequently Asked Questions and adapted from the Mennonite Church USA guidelines on sabbaticals for pastors.

What is a sabbatical?

In the Old Testament, God instructed the Israelites to give the land a sabbatical (a rest) every seven years, by which he meant that they should allow the land to remain fallow for one year (Lev. 25). In the academic world, faculty are often eligible for a sabbatical year after being awarded tenure and after fulfilling their regular responsibilities for at least seven years. The college or university usually provides full salary and benefits during a half year (or half pay for a full year) of release from teaching duties. In order to be awarded a sabbatical year, the faculty member must propose a study, research, or writing project that will enhance their understanding and skills in their area of expertise.

In the last several decades, pastors and church leaders have begun to realize that the unique emotional, psychological, and spiritual demands and burdens of church ministry leave pastors and overseers particularly susceptible to 'burnout.' Many pastors and overseers who leave Christian ministry do so in response to the weight and relentlessness of the demands placed on them or in response to an experience of feeling 'burned out.' Also, many pastors and overseers benefit from the opportunity for an extended break from their regular ministry responsibilities in order to learn new skills or to engage in deeper learning experiences.

For bishops and pastors, a "sabbatical" is an extended period of time during which they are released from their regular oversight duties and responsibilities, while being fully supported by their usual salary and benefits package.

Why should a bishop take a sabbatical?

Sabbaticals for bishops are good for the bishop, good for the district, and good for the conference. Bishops are more likely to serve longer and to serve with greater enthusiasm if they have regular opportunities for study, service, or renewal leaves. Sabbaticals provide spiritual refreshment, new vision, strengthened skills, and wider perspectives on Christian ministry.

Districts and the conference benefit from the opportunity to allow experienced pastors an opportunity to exercise oversight gifts or to experience the ministry of an interim bishop during the leave. When the bishop returns from a leave, the district and conference experience more effective oversight and leadership and longer service. The whole church benefits by having better leadership, cross-congregational sharing of perspectives and ideas, and greater satisfaction in ministry for those in whom the church has invested time, money and energy in training for leadership.

Bishop sabbaticals should be seen as investments in future ministry rather than as entitlements for bishops. They should be part of the district's and the conference's strategy for enhancing and strengthening oversight ministry.

Bishop sabbaticals are important because of the significant amount of time and energy a bishop gives to congregations, the district and the conference. Bishop responsibilities beyond the district include Bishop Board meetings, Executive Committee meetings, and serving on a variety of task forces, writing teams, commissions and committees of the conference.

How should a sabbatical be implemented?

The Bishop Board Executive Committee will recommend approval of a team of three persons to form the Bishop Sabbatical Committee. The committee should consist of two pastors familiar with sabbaticals and one bishop whose primary role is to guide the financial concerns related to a bishop sabbatical. A staff person may be asked to assist the committee as needed.

What results might a sabbatical produce?

One important result of a sabbatical may be the renewal and restoration of bishops whose emotional wells have been drained over years of ongoing ministry.

Another result might be further equipping for ministry through a study leave that combines rest from oversight duties with structured study. For some bishops, a study leave provides an opportunity to complete a seminary degree or to pursue post-seminary studies. For others, specialized studies can develop skills in particular areas of ministry – areas in which the bishop has need or interest in developing new skills. Bishops can improve their effectiveness in ministry through additional training in oversight skills and in pastoral skills (e.g., organizational leadership, conflict mediation, theological reflection, family systems theory, spiritual formation, preaching). Many bishops would also benefit from studies that are not directly related to Christian ministry, but which provide a better rounded understanding of the world outside the church. Of course, bishops should be receiving ongoing continuing education through short-term seminars and workshops, but longer blocks of study time are also important for cultivating deeper learning.

A third result, usually from a service or exchange leave, may be the chance to learn and grow through serving in a different setting for several months. Many Christian leaders have gifts and interests that are not fully exercised in any one ministry assignment. Sometimes a bishop's family can resent the amount of time and energy invested in oversight work. Districts and congregations can become overly familiar with one bishop's style, gifts and perspectives. These factors can lead to shortened ministries and more frequent moves. One alternative to this type of situation is a short-term leave or exchange that reinvigorates the bishop, re-engages the district and its congregations, and opens new possibilities for the bishop's family.

Finally, the larger church can benefit from bishops and other leaders who are available for short-term assignments. Mission and educational institutions can use the energy of a bishop on leave. Congregations and other institutions that receive the ministry of bishops on leave can be encouraged to experience new life. The exchange of ideas, gifts and resources can strengthen the corporate witness of the church.

What kinds of sabbaticals are there?

A. Study Leave

A study leave is not a vacation. It is undertaken to work on a particular learning goal. Usually it involves completion of a defined academic course or program, seminar or study tour. Occasionally a self-directed program of reading and study is appropriate, but the purpose should be clearly defined in advance and some form of reporting (e.g., publication of a document or presentation of a seminar) should be the result. The length of the leave could range from a few weeks to several months or a full year. Some study leaves take the form of a reduced work load while continuing in ministry, but the preferred model is a complete suspension of oversight duties during the leave.

B. Rest and Spiritual Renewal Leave

Spiritual renewal and rest should be planned as part of every leave, but sometimes a leave should be taken for this purpose alone. After an extended or particularly intense time of pouring themselves out for the church, bishops often need time (several weeks or more) to replenish their spiritual resources through prayer and reflection. Even Jesus needed to do this from time to time (see Luke 5:15-16). Such a leave will often include time spent at a retreat center and involve some combination of reading, rest, physical exercise, spiritual disciplines, journaling, spiritual direction, and worship. The bishop should articulate clear goals for such a leave and provide a concluding written report upon return.

C. Service Leave

A bishop, the district, and the conference may benefit from a service leave when a bishop has particular expertise or experience that is needed for a time by another part of the church. Examples include overseas service or short-term service in another church agency or institution, such as interim teaching or administrative assignments, return trips to other countries previously served, or helping to start a new ministry. The form and length of such leaves varies greatly depending on the nature of the assignment.

D. Special Assignment Leave

Bishops may be released by their districts and the conference for short periods (usually not more than one month) to work on a special assignment. Examples include writing Sunday school curriculum or other teaching materials, visiting other churches and ministries, or assisting in the development of a local service ministry. A special assignment leave may be somewhat similar to a service leave, but it is usually shorter than a service leave.

E. Short term or Interim Pastor Leave

Since most, if not all, bishops have previous experience as a pastor, some bishops may welcome the opportunity to fill a pastoral role in a short-term assignment (often two to six months) to a congregation in another district, another conference, or another country. This sort of leave allows the bishop's family to experience another part of the church more fully since they are engaged in the life of a specific congregation.

How long are sabbaticals?

Bishop sabbaticals generally vary from one to four months. The length varies depending on the purpose of the leave, family circumstances, financial considerations, and district oversight needs. The primary consideration is that the leave be long enough to achieve its goal. The most typical duration is three or four months.

Based on experience with pastoral sabbaticals, it seems that longer leaves (e.g., six to twelve month leaves) are likely to lead to too much disengagement for both the bishop and the district and to consideration of making a permanent change.

How often would a bishop be “on sabbatical?”

Districts should expect sabbaticals for both pastors and bishops to happen on a regular basis. Some districts may plan for a leave (lasting two to four months) at the beginning of each new term of service (assuming terms of service are usually three to five years). In other cases, a longer leave (four to six months) may follow 7 or 10 years of ministry. Another approach would be to offer one month or one-half month of sabbatical leave for every year of service up to a maximum of four or five months, and to allow the bishop to schedule the sabbatical at their convenience. The Mennonite Church USA guidelines encourage 1 month of sabbatical for each full-time year of ministry.

The paragraph above assumes the bishop is full time in their role. The district may want to pro-rate the amount of sabbatical time “earned” or “awarded” based on the FTE of the bishop's appointment. On the other hand, bi-vocational bishops may actually be in greater need of sabbatical time given the complexity of juggling multiple work commitments.

Here is an example of the “Sabbatical Leave” paragraph from two different bishops' “Covenant[s] of Understanding.” These bishops serve multiple districts with part time assignments to each district. The Mennonite Church USA guidelines in question must be the guidelines for pastoral sabbaticals, because there are no Mennonite Church USA guidelines for overseer sabbaticals.

Sabbatical Leave for a bishop in a district where the bishop serves 1/2 time:

“The district will grant up to one-half month of sabbatical time for each completed year of service. Sabbaticals will be administered according to Mennonite Church USA guidelines.”

How much will a sabbatical cost, and who will pay?

Some leaves are self-supporting. A short term or interim pastoral leave, for example, would include salary, travel, and benefit coverage for the bishop and family by the receiving congregation. The costs of a service leave or special assignment leave may be covered by the receiving agency or institution, or the bishop's salary and other expenses could be paid by the district as a way of sharing in the larger mission of the church. Another possibility would be to negotiate a cost-sharing arrangement between the district and the receiving agency or institution.

A study leave or a leave for rest and spiritual renewal is not as likely to be funded by another organization. Typically, for a leave of one to four months, the district would continue to pay the full salary and the bishop would apply continuing education allowance to any tuition costs. For a longer leave, districts may prefer to pay 66% or 75% of the bishop's salary and 100% of benefits for months five and six. Many congregations, schools, and other institutions follow this practice with longer leaves.

Additional financial support for bishop sabbaticals may be available through Lancaster Conference's Leadership Education Grants (for tuition costs), the Lilly Foundation's Clergy Renewal Grants (for ministers with an M.Div. degree), or the Louisville Institute's Sabbatical Grants for Pastoral Leaders.

Who will be our bishop during the sabbatical?

In the case of a short leave (up to three months) districts will usually arrange for a pastor from the district to cover the oversight duties, thus incurring few additional expenses. The district pastors may also decide to share these duties as a group or by taking turns providing oversight while the bishop is gone. This helps to manage the cost of the bishop's sabbatical, and provides an opportunity for pastors in the district to try out oversight gifts. Many districts will find this to be a good growing experience and a chance to experiment with new approaches to oversight.

The Sabbatical Committee will assist the congregation, district and conference on coverage for the bishop's responsibilities while the bishop is on sabbatical. In the case of a longer leave (four months or longer), it may be preferable to name an interim bishop.

Will our bishop come back afterward?

A bishop usually returns from a sabbatical refreshed and eager to reengage in ministry and usually returns to the district(s) with renewed passion and enhanced skills, which contributes to longevity in the role. But districts may want to include a statement in the sabbatical agreement that spells out an expectation that the bishop who takes a sabbatical will complete the contract term after the leave or will serve at least one year after returning.

On the other hand, sometimes a bishop (or a district) will realize during the bishop's sabbatical that it is time for a permanent change. In these cases, there is little to be gained by insisting on the fulfillment of the contract term when there is no enthusiasm for it. This is one reason to consider scheduling sabbaticals at the end rather than at the beginning of a contract term.

Districts and congregations that see their ministry as part of the larger work of the church sometimes provide financial support for a bishop to take a shorter (two to three months) study or spiritual renewal leave at the end of a term of service to that district, especially if the ministry has been more than 10 years long. This enables the bishop to make a better transition to the next assignment and may be less disruptive for the district than expecting the bishop to return briefly after a sabbatical before moving on to a different ministry assignment.

What happens to the bishop's family?

Family considerations are very important in deciding the timing, length, location and focus of the leave. A well-planned leave that involves the bishop's family in the planning will renew family life and encourage the bishop's spouse and children to support a return to ministry with enthusiasm. Districts and the bishop sabbatical committee should help bishops ensure that a sabbatical does not place excessive financial or other burdens on the family.

What should the district leaders do?

- Consider the benefits your district will enjoy as a result of a well-planned leave for your bishop.
- Talk about your approach to bishop sabbaticals before your bishop asks for one.
- Develop a sabbatical policy that specifies frequency, length, expectations, options, and coverage of costs to guide your discussion of specific proposals. Include enough flexibility to respond to the particular needs and circumstances of your bishop.
- Be open to adjustments to the policy if circumstances warrant—e.g., if an opportunity or invitation for a service leave or exchange arises, or it becomes evident that the bishop needs a spiritual renewal leave before the policy calls for one.
- When you renew your bishop's contract or call a new bishop, add a paragraph to the covenant of understanding that spells an approach to sabbaticals.
- Consider including some set aside money in each year's support budget for your bishop, so there will be a fund available after six or seven years to cover the costs of a leave.
- When you receive a proposal for a leave from your bishop, negotiate details that benefit everyone concerned. Then write up an agreement that specifies the type of sabbatical to be taken, its duration, a budget, coverage of the oversight needs of the district while the bishop is on sabbatical, and accountability for the bishop during the sabbatical period.
- Make sure the conference sabbatical committee is informed and aware of the negotiated plan for the bishop's sabbatical, including coverage of the oversight needs of the district, conference-wide responsibilities, and accountability for the bishop during the sabbatical period. The conference sabbatical committee may be a helpful resource in working out the details of the sabbatical plan.
- Make sure the leaders and congregations in your district are aware of and supportive of the sabbatical plan.

What should the bishop do?

- If you are considering a call to a new oversight assignment or renewing a contract, negotiate a policy (or at least a commitment to work at a policy) to be included in your memorandum of understanding.
- Talk with your district leaders about formulating a policy on leaves. If there is no such policy, begin working on one within the usual decision-making structures of your district.
- Once a policy is in place, consider when you might benefit most from a leave. It is best to plan a year in advance—longer if it is your district's first experience with bishop sabbaticals.
- Talk with your spouse and children, if appropriate, and pray about the opportunities for you and the district. Get counsel from colleagues, your conference minister, and your district leaders about the best way for you to use sabbatical time.
- Develop a specific proposal to present to district leaders. Define what kind of leave you want, what you, the district, and the conference stand to gain from it, how you will be accountable for the results, when and where it might happen, and so on according to your district's policy requirements.
- Notify Conference Sabbatical Committee and the Conference minister about your sabbatical plans, including coverage of the oversight needs of your district while the bishop is on sabbatical. The Conference Sabbatical Committee may be a helpful resource in working out the details of the sabbatical plan.
- After your sabbatical, report to your district leaders and the conference minister about how the experience has impacted you and your continuing ministry.
- After a longer leave, expect some awkwardness around returning to your district. Prepare yourself and your family for this. Consider what kind of celebration or reacquainting time might be appropriate for you and your district leaders as you begin working together more closely again.

Where can we get more information on planning a leave for our bishop?

Contact Lancaster Conference's moderator, conference minister, or director of leadership development.

For reflections on the value of sabbaticals, see:

- February 2, 1998 issue of *Canadian Mennonite*, the February 1997 issue of *Clergy Journal*
- Chapter "Desert and Harvest: A Sabbatical Story" in Eugene Petersen's *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Word, 1989)
- <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/clergysabbaticals.aspx>

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Sabbatical Experience for a Pastor and Congregation

Joseph S. Miller, lead pastor of Mellinger Mennonite Church

The Hebrew word Halakha describes the way a person walks as a person of faith. Walking was the theme for my three-month sabbatical in 2010. One of the highlights of my sabbatical was hiking the Jesus Trail in Israel. The 40-mile pilgrimage starts in Nazareth where Jesus grew up and ends in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus made his home as an adult. The four-day pilgrimage was both a physical and a spiritual adventure. During my time on the Jesus Trail I stayed overnight in a Palestinian Christian home in the city of Cana and on another night I was the guest of a Jewish family who operate an organic goat farm.

As I walked 10 miles a day on the Jesus Trail I was able to start to understand the land and the people that Jesus connected with and that is recorded in the gospels. Some have called Galilee the “fifth gospel” because the land is so profoundly connected to Jesus’ ministry. I chose to do the hike alone because I wanted to be open to God speaking to me as I walked and receptive to whomever God put in my path.

I was surprised by the ruggedness of Galilee and as I walked I marveled that even today one could be alone for hours hiking through fields, forests, and rocky hills. I will never read in the gospels how Jesus and his disciples journeyed throughout the region without realizing something of what that meant. I too joined Jesus and his disciples as I walked the hills and valleys of Galilee.

Walking is a unique way to travel. The pace is slow and even humble. When walking as a pilgrim, people responded to me differently. It seemed like I was more approachable. One Jewish Sabbath day I was walking through a forest and came upon several families having a meal in a picnic area. When I sat down to rest at a table on the edge of the clearing, the Jewish families invited me to sit with them and share their food. They talked about being secular Jews and I shared about being an American Christian who was walking in the path of Jesus whom I had as Lord of my life. I was grateful—grateful for shared food, grateful for human contact in the middle of a solitary day of hiking, grateful to hear their story, and grateful for the chance to share my story. That is the pilgrim’s life and witness. It is done as one who is walking.

For a second portion of my sabbatical I was a continuing education student at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. For one month, 17 church workers from different Christian denominations formed a Christian community as we studied and traveled around Israel. A typical day involved biblical studies lectures in the morning and then a tour in the afternoon of a site of historical importance from the Old or New Testament.

My final weeks of sabbatical were spent at home where I wrote two articles about my experiences in Israel. I remain incredibly grateful to the Mellinger congregation for giving me the gift of a block of time to be renewed. My prayer was that I would find significant opportunities to step back from the daily routine of ministry and gain new insights into the life of Jesus and into my own pilgrimage as a follower of Jesus.