

## CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

# GUIDELINES FOR SABBATH REST (Sabbatical)

### I. INTRODUCTION

The 1999 paper on “Ministerial Leadership” calls all ministerial leaders to “pay special attention to their ‘spiritual health,’ and continue to improve their professional skills”<sup>1</sup> The paper goes on to say that continuing education guidelines, including information about sabbaticals, will be developed and made available to the church by the Office of Ministry. In that regard, the Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee has developed two papers: “Guidelines for Continuing Education” and this paper on “Guidelines for Sabbath Rest.”

The term *sabbath rest* was chosen as the title of this paper rather than sabbatical, because the latter is frequently limited to academic pursuits. While sabbath rest may include academic studies, it actually has a broader meaning than the term *sabbatical* when applied to ministerial leadership. Sabbath rest conveys the concept this paper wishes to promote in the Church of the Brethren.

The term sabbath comes from the Hebrew verb *shabbat*, which means primarily to cease. A second meaning is rest. God “rested on the seventh day from all his work,”<sup>2</sup> implying that those whom he created in his image should do the same by ceasing to work and resting on the seventh day. The people of Israel understood it that way. Observing the sabbath was a special celebration for them.<sup>3</sup> One of the Ten Commandments is about the sabbath.<sup>4</sup> This Exodus passage goes on to say the entire family, the servants, and even the animals are to observe the sabbath.

The sabbath is a time to abstain completely from everyday work. It is a time to relax mind, body, and soul in order to be filled, nourished, and freed from worry about how one is doing. Like the biblical sabbath, sabbath rest is not running away from life and its problems; it is an opportunity to receive grace to face them. It is a time to rely on God, a time to let God be God in one’s living. Life becomes meaningless and humdrum without God at the center. The hectic daily pace affects the lives of everyone, including pastors, causing people to lose contact with their core values and commitments. Tensions drain away when one is able and willing to commit all things into God’s

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1. See page AC10.12, footnote 36.

2. “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work he had done in creation” (Gen. 2:2-3).

3. “. . . all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer (Isa. 56:6b-7a).

4. “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work . . .” (Exod. 20:8-10).

hands, especially during the time of a special sabbath rest. As the pastoral leader spends time immersing him or herself in God's love, he or she can return to work with a renewed sense of joy about ministry.

## **II. PLANNING IN ADVANCE**

The current "Congregational Structure" paper defines the role of the Leadership Team in the congregation. Part of the responsibility of the Leadership Team is "for program, long-range planning, initiation or discontinuation of programs, and the setting of goals and objectives."<sup>5</sup> The Leadership Team<sup>6</sup> can be extremely helpful by placing a sabbath rest experience within a congregational cycle of long-term planning and envisioning. In short, a pastor's time of sabbath rest should not be done in isolation from what is happening in the life of the congregation.

## **III. SEVERAL GOOD REASONS FOR A SABBATH REST**

### **A. Sabbath Rest Is Biblical.**

As mentioned earlier, God created and rested on the seventh day. Jesus observed and honored the sabbath day. He was not rigid, however. On the actual seventh day, Jesus sometimes felt it necessary to heal the sick and pick grain for sustenance. Work on the sabbath, however, did not negate the fact that Jesus found it necessary to withdraw to the lake, to the mountain, or beside the road to be alone with God. He needed rest and renewal in order to go back among the throngs of people. Even the land and the animals of the people of Israel were to be allowed to rest. Ministerial leaders have the same need and the same direction from God.

### **B. The Pastor Needs a Sabbath Rest.**

Pastors, who work on nearly every sabbath (Sunday)—the resurrection celebration, can observe sabbath on another day on a regular basis. The hope of this paper is that a longer sabbath rest can become a pattern for the pastor's life as well. It becomes very important because of the long hours, continuous fast pace, and the constant demands of meeting the needs of the congregation. The pastor's work does not end when he or she goes home at the end of the day. The phone still rings, there are emergencies to care for, calls to be made, and evening meetings to attend.

It is easy to lose focus and purpose and become unable even to hear God's calling or sense God's guidance in leading the church. The pastor may even lose the sense of caring and excitement that was so evident in the beginning of ministry. Demands on pastors are becoming more urgent in today's world. Life is more complex for everyone. Pastoral care becomes a strain. Without sabbath rest, the daily experiences may lead to depression or burnout.

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5. Annual Conference statement on "Congregational Structure," p. 12.

6. The planning group hereafter will be identified as a Leadership Team. The congregation, however, may identify the planning group with a different title.

Paul reminds the Christians in Romans that they have a new life in the Christ.<sup>7</sup> The Holy Spirit works through a renewed mind and body. People need to pull apart from their work and find rest if they are to serve well. When one relies too much on the strength of the flesh<sup>8</sup> alone, one runs the risk of falling back into the ways of the flesh, the ways of the world around them.

### **C. The Church Needs Renewal and Vision.**

Dynamic, alive, and meaningful ministries require constant renewal of vision and passion. As stated previously, the sabbath rest experience should be placed within a cycle of long-range planning and envisioning. When the congregation is involved with planning and creative discernment with the pastor for an extended sabbath rest, the excitement of the pastor spills over into the congregation. A congregation involved in this sabbath renewal cycle shares the pastor's passion and energy for mission and ministry. It is a time to recharge, to regain perspective, to become refreshed in body, mind, and soul. Keeping sabbath rest is essential to the well-being and vitality of the pastorate and the congregation.

Another benefit is the new interest and energy that emerges in the congregation because members take on new leadership opportunities and perform some of the ministry roles during sabbath rest. Lay leaders develop new skills and begin feeling more of a partnership in the ministry of the church. Lay leaders usually express gratitude for the opportunity to serve in this way. This new partnership role between pastor and lay people may result in a new definition of ministry for everyone in the congregation.

The sabbath rest of the pastor is a good model for the congregation. The pastor can share experiences and emphasize the importance of rest and renewal in the rhythm of their own lives.

Without a period to renew and recharge, the weary pastor may feel the need for a pastoral change. With periodic times of sabbath rest, longer, more vibrant pastorates usually result.<sup>9</sup> The church saves time and money and avoids the disruption that follows frequent pastoral changes and the stress of pastoral searches. More importantly, the entire congregation moves forward in regularly renewed missional efforts, building healthy relationships to strengthen their witness to the good news of Christ Jesus.

The first reaction of a congregation is often financial in nature. They may feel they cannot give any extra money toward the pastor's continuing education expenses and also provide the extra salary for an interim pastor. A sabbath rest, however, often proves to be a wise congregational investment. A rejuvenated pastor and new directions for the congregation are often just the tonic the church needs. After trying a sabbath rest once,

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7. This note of renewal and rebirth is prominent in the 12th chapter of Romans. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (12:1-2).

8. Romans 8:8.

9. Bethany Theological Seminary, Roy Oswald, Alban Institute/Lilly Foundations seminar on Sabbath and Congregational Renewal, September 1999.

churches are usually very responsive to granting this type of growth experience in the future.

#### **IV. THINGS THE PASTOR SHOULD THINK ABOUT<sup>10</sup>**

No one plan fits all. A sabbath rest must fit each unique situation. The pastor and the Leadership Team of the congregation must ask what it is that God would have them do as a community of faith. What are the opportunities God is providing for the mission of the church, and how can the pastor be readied to lead the congregation into the future? The Leadership Team's role is to think about the whole mission of the congregation, and sabbath rest should be seen as part of the congregation's total vision and mission. This discernment process is critical to the fulfillment of any sabbath rest. The congregation's understanding of the pastor's need for renewal and rest is tied directly to the long-term planning process and total health of the congregation.

The pastor should dream and ask questions about travel, new challenges, likes and dislikes, and how the family is involved in the plans. Will the family be able to travel with the pastor? Does the pastor need to be near home during this time? The family situation may determine the time of the year when the sabbath rest is taken. Here are some other ideas to ponder when considering a sabbath rest:

##### **A. A Time to Receive**

The pastor is a giver every day; now it is time for the pastor to receive. It is a time to be nurtured, a time to dig deeper into one's life and being and into one's relationship with God. It is a time to think about roots, the faith journey, and one's own stories. A growing congregation has a growing person at the center.<sup>11</sup>

##### **B. A Time to Stay Home**

The sabbath rest can be spent at home, at least a portion of it. More time can be spent with the family, a treat for all. The pastor can spend some time with their activities. If the sabbath rest is done at home, it is essential that the regular working tools be kept out of sight. The pastor should not even think about the normal schedule.

##### **C. A Time to Study and Write**

Academic pursuits may well be incorporated into a sabbath rest. There is a time and place for reading, studying, doing research, writing, and concentrating on new subjects and new interests. This is not the time, however, to work on sermons for the first two months back in the pulpit. The "Guidelines for Continuing Education" (see pp. AC140.5-6) provides eight focus areas<sup>12</sup> during the five-year interval between ordination reviews. One or more of those focus areas should be part of sabbath rest. Other types of academic studies may be obtained from the Office of Ministry. The possibilities are almost unlimited. While academic pursuits may be an important component of a sabbath

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10. In consultation with congregational leaders.

11. Bethany Theological Seminary, Roy Oswald, Alban Institute/Lilly Foundations seminar on Sabbath and Congregational Renewal, September 1999.

12. Biblical studies, spiritual hardiness, pastoral leadership, preaching and worship, evangelism and church growth, pastoral care, special ministry areas, and general enrichment.

rest, the pastor must be careful, however, not to overlook the other components listed below.

**D. A Time to Play and Help Serve**

Some playtime should be a part of sabbath rest. Playtime might include long hikes, participation in an enjoyable sport, unstructured playtime with the family, and trips to historic locations. It could also include an outreach work project, such as an emergency disaster project or a workcamp in another culture. Playtime is defined by interests and needs.

**E. A Time to Be Quiet**

Silence and solitude are important for a sabbath rest. It is difficult to really experience sabbath rest in the midst of the constant noise and activity surrounding everyday living. In order to hear God's voice, there may be a need to get away from all the usual working tools and get into places where silence and quiet times can be experienced. Silence is needed in order to pay attention to the still small voice of God, nudging the conscience, clarifying thoughts, and bringing God's peace into the soul. Ecclesiastes speaks clearly to this need.<sup>13</sup> Silence in sabbath rest enables leaders to receive deeper insights into their own calling, a better understanding of their calling, and new enthusiasm for their ministry. The result is better sermons when they return to work, better communication, and better pastoral care.

**F. A Time for Spiritual Direction**

Many ministerial leaders identify with the need to work with a spiritual director. A spiritual director should have good listening skills and have the willingness and ability to provide good feedback. Again, pastors spend much of their time providing spiritual direction to others, and rightfully so, but there is also the need for pastors to receive spiritual direction and guidance from a trusted colleague in ministry.

**G. A Time to Enjoy the Beauty of Life**

Beauty in nature offers many benefits. Very beautiful scenes are often in quiet places. Beauty stimulates the senses. In such a setting, it is easy to get in tune with the Creator. An awareness of the presence of God fills the soul at such times. Enjoyment of nature is a worshipful experience, but it also makes a person feel better physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Isaiah describes the need to return and rest.<sup>14</sup>

**H. A Time for Bible Study and Prayer**

This is a very important part of sabbath rest. It can take place along with some of the other experiences at times (as in nature). This is a time to read those things that focus on praising God: inspirational books, poems, and hymns. This is a time to spend in meditation and reflection.

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13. "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind" (Eccles. 4:6).

14. "For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15).

**I. A Time for Travel**

Travel can be an important aspect of sabbath rest. Travel takes one away from home base, away from the everyday reminders and to inspiring and energizing new places. Travel depends on one's own interests, needs, budget, and family schedule.

**J. A Time for a Retreat**

Time spent at a retreat center may be a good choice for sabbath rest. The pastor is accustomed to being the leader, being in the center of things, and being the one who gives to others. A retreat center allows the pastor to be fed and nourished, to examine his or her calling and spiritual journey, and it provides a supportive community. Just as quiet times are important in the sabbath rest, so is some time with other people, especially with a spiritual director.

**K. A Time to Dream and Choose**

Dream and choose a sabbath rest that fits the need. The greatest benefit is usually not the accomplishment of a paper written; rather, it is the renewal and the personal growth. Through personal Bible study, reading, prayer time, and meditation, the stage is set for greater ministry.

**L. A Time to Return**

There is excitement in sharing the experiences after the sabbath rest. This is a time to offer thanks and to give something back to the congregation for its investment, such as a renewed sense of ministry. The enthusiasm will encourage the congregation to support sabbath rest opportunities in the future. Plan to set aside those times in the life of the congregation for sharing, reflections, and learnings.

**V. PASTOR AND THE PLANNING TEAM**

- A.** The pastor needs to work with a planning team, such as a Leadership Team described previously. The planning team working with the pastor gives the church more ownership and results in better relationships.
- B.** Begin planning at the time the agreement is being written when going to a new church. The congregational/pastoral agreement could include a sabbath rest. The District Executive<sup>15</sup> plays an important role in the process. If already in a church, begin planning now for a future sabbath rest.
- C.** Dream. Post a list of dreams on church bulletin boards for everyone to see. These are dreams for the congregation and its ministries, not merely the pastor's personal dreams for his or her time of renewal. Invite members to add to the list. The pastor might consider keeping a personal journal.
- D.** Plan well. Cover all the bases. Ask questions: When? How long? Cost? What's the source of income for expenses? Identify potential leadership during the sabbath rest. There are

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15. Hereafter, the term Executive will include District Executive, District Pastor, District Executive/Minister, Associate District Executive, or any other term used by the districts to identify district executive staff.

many key questions: Who will preach during the sabbath rest? Who will visit? Who will administer the daily activities? Make a list of all the activities that need to be covered during the sabbath rest. Will the congregation hire an interim pastor to cover preaching and pastoral care? There may be an associate who will assume these duties. There may be ministers invited to preach Sunday by Sunday. Lay people in the church may fill most of the roles, including preaching. There may be a need to name the individuals who will care for funerals, weddings, hospital visits, etc.

- E. Spend some time training people who will fill congregational roles during the sabbath rest.
- F. Designate one person who can reach the pastor in case of an emergency.
- G. Wrap-up. Write a summary of sabbath rest experiences, learnings, stories, and reflections. The summary is more than memories. This is an opportunity to focus on the experiences and to discern how the benefits of the sabbath rest will be integrated into life and ministry. Share the summary with the congregation. The summary may also include a photograph album or video.
- H. The pastor should not jump back into the routine too quickly upon return; he or she should not over-schedule appointments and meetings for the first several weeks. This is a good time for the pastor to read the mail, visit with other church staff and all who helped with the sabbath, express appreciation for everyone's help, share the experiences, and get re-acquainted with the congregation. This is also a time to meet with the Leadership Team to share ideas for implementation of new ministries or revitalization of existing programs.

## **VI. COST**

Planning ahead and identifying options for covering the cost is important. The congregation should seriously consider setting up a savings account for the sabbath rest. Some pastors may save all the extra income received from weddings and other pastoral services. Most churches will want to help. Some set aside an amount in the budget each year and build on it until time to use it. Some churches plan special fundraising events for the pastor. Districts and the Office of Ministry of the General Board are urged to provide financial support for the sabbath rest.

## **VII. DISTRICT**

The Executive can help convey the importance of sabbath rest to the congregation. It is helpful, for example, when the Executive encourages churches and pastors to include a sabbath rest in their long-term planning, especially at the time of pastoral placements. The decisions about a sabbath rest should be included in the congregational/pastoral agreement.

## **VIII. SABBATH REST POLICY FOR THE CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN**

### **A. When Is a Sabbath Rest Taken?**

Seven is a biblical number and historically it has been a pattern to give sabbaticals every seven years. Today churches and other institutions provide this form of continuing

education following shorter intervals of service. Under the past seven-year policy, many pastors are never eligible for a sabbath rest because they do not stay in one congregation that long. Therefore, this paper offers additional options.

**B. Length of the Sabbath Rest?**

The pastor may be granted a sabbath rest following four, five, six, or seven years of continuous ministry in the same congregation. The pastor's salary and benefits will continue during the sabbath rest. The congregation will provide for the ministry of the congregation while the pastor is away.

The sabbath rest is for three (3) weeks<sup>16</sup> after four years, five (5) weeks after five years, seven (7) weeks after six years, nine (9) weeks after seven years. In addition, the pastor is entitled to his or her normal vacation annually. In many cases, the pastor may want to combine sabbath rest and vacation into one total period of time away.

**C. Part-time and Bi-vocational Pastors**

These leaders are also eligible for a sabbath rest. It may be more difficult for these pastors and their congregations to agree on a sabbath rest, but it is well worth the effort. Their sabbath rest will need to take into account the congregational/pastoral agreement and be prorated to satisfy the agreement.

**D. Chaplains**

The sabbath rest policy is also recommended for chaplains recognized in the 1999 "Ministerial Leadership" paper. Agencies and institutions in which chaplains serve are encouraged to follow these guidelines as closely as possible.

**E. Pastoral Service Following the Sabbath Rest**

The pastor is expected to remain with the congregation for at least one year following a sabbath rest.

**F. Congregations**

Congregations who grant a sabbath rest are expected to follow these guidelines as closely as possible.

**IX. CONCLUSION**

The purpose of sabbath rest is for renewal of body, mind, and soul. It is an important component in long-term planning and implementation of new ministries for growing pastors and missional congregations. A sabbath rest requires careful planning, and the goal is for it to be beneficial to both pastor and congregation. A fitting conclusion to this paper comes from the pen of Martin Luther:

*The spiritual rest which God especially intends in this commandment (to keep the sabbath holy) is that we not only cease from our labor and trade but much more; that*

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16. A week is the normal seven-day time period; Sunday through Saturday.



*we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers do we nothing of our own.*<sup>17</sup>

**Developed** by Pastoral Compensation and Benefits Advisory Committee and the Office of Ministry in consultation with Ministry Advisory Council, Council of District Executives, and Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership.

**Action of the 2002 Annual Conference:** David Wysong, a Standing Committee member from Northern Indiana, presented the Standing Committee recommendation that the guidelines be accepted. The delegate body adopted the Standing Committee recommendation.

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17. Quotation from Marva Dawn's book, *Keeping The Sabbath Wholly*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989, 56.

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