Frequently Asked Questions about Sabbatical or Ministry Renewal Leave

1. What is a Ministry Renewal Leave or Sabbatical?

Ministry Renewal Leave or Sabbatical is an intentional, extended time for pastors and staff members to remove themselves from the regular responsibilities of ministry for the sake of refreshment, renewal, and rest. The purpose is to strengthen the individual to better serve the church in the future.

1. Why is it called Ministry Renewal Leave?

The term “Sabbatical” has its roots in the biblical concept of Sabbath rest. God rested on the seventh day after creation, and he instructed his people to keep the Sabbath or seventh day holy. In modern vernacular, sabbatical is often thought of as a time to work on academic pursuits like a formal degree. While Ministry Renewal Leave is still based on the biblical concept of Sabbath rest, it should not be thought of as simply an academic sabbatical. It is more about rest and preparation for the future than academic study.

1. Who is eligible to take Ministry Renewal Leave?

The church can determine the exact guidelines for this, but it is recommended that pastors and full-time staff members who have completed six to seven years of service should be eligible for Ministry Renewal Leave.

1. How often should someone be eligible for Ministry Renewal Leave?

The church has some flexibility here, but it is recommended that no one be allowed to take leave more often than every five to seven years.

1. Why should our pastor or staff members be given Ministry Renewal Leave?

The spiritual, emotional, and physical demands on a pastor or church staff member are extremely great. Most feel that they are on duty 24/7 with very little actual time off. When vacation is taken, it is often interrupted. Even when it is not interrupted, it usually takes pastors several days or up to a week to disengage his mind from the demands of ministry. Intentional, extended times of rest and renewal are necessary to be effective ministers for the long haul. It is our belief that granting Ministry Renewal Leave to a pastor or staff member will benefit not only that person, but the entire church.

1. How long should Ministry Renewal Leave last?

It is recommended that Ministry Renewal Leave last no less than four to six weeks and no more than three months.

1. What will the pastor or staff member do while on leave?

Every minister is different, so how this time is spent will vary. The easiest answer is that he or she should do something that fuels their interest and rejuvenates their ministry. For some this will take the form of a mission trip or conference. For others it may be a marriage retreat or time alone in the woods. Ministry Renewal Leave will often include reading and writing. Ministers are encouraged to visit other churches to see how others in their specific area of ministry serve. Some, but not all, of their time should be spent alone in prayer and reflection. There should also be some time spent with family.

1. Do we still need to pay our pastor or staff member while he or she is on leave?

The church is still responsible to care for the needs of the pastor or staff member while he or she is on leave. This includes all the salary and benefits they would normally receive.

1. Do we need to pay for what the pastor or staff member does while on leave?

Churches may choose to budget for Ministry Renewal Leave, but it is not necessary. Supporting a pastor or staff member while on leave can take various forms such as providing a cabin for quiet reflection or allowing the pastor or staff member to use budgeted conference funds for a personal conference or travel to visit other churches. There are ministries available who can help with this if churches cannot financially cover these kinds of expenses.

1. Who will take care of the church while the pastor or staff member is on leave?

The local association will help the church prepare for the leave by helping to arrange for preachers to cover regular times of preaching and teaching. We will also work with church leadership including staff, deacons, Sunday School teachers, etc. to create a plan for caring for members while the pastor or staff member is on leave. All of this can be in place prior to the beginning of the leave.

1. Why should we have a policy for Ministry Renewal Leave?

The benefits of having a policy in place are numerous. Having an existing policy demonstrates to your pastor and staff that you value their service and want to invest in their long-term ministry at your church. It also provides a framework for this process so that it is in place prior to when it is needed. A policy also communicates to the church as a whole that Ministry Renewal Leave is a normal part of caring for the pastor and staff, not an emergency measure to take care of a problem.

1. What do we do if there is an emergency while our pastor or staff member is on leave?

An emergency plan should be put in place prior to the beginning of a leave. Your local association can help create this plan for you. Every effort should be made to allow the pastor or staff member to completely disengage from the regular demands of ministry. In most cases, an emergency can be handled by other staff or leadership in the church. On the rare occasion that the pastor or staff member needs to be contacted, they should know ahead of time that this is a genuine emergency that demands their attention.

1. Does taking Ministry Renewal Leave mean the pastor or staff member has a problem?

Absolutely not. In fact, it should signal the exact opposite. Ministry Renewal Leave is the church intentionally caring for the pastor or staff member so that he or she can continue to be healthy and spiritual strong. The church leadership should take care to communicate this well to the congregation.

1. Can we use the Ministry Renewal Leave to search for a new pastor or staff member?

Ministry Renewal Leave should never be used as a time to search for a replacement for the one on leave. There should be an understanding that the one taking leave is not pursuing another position, either.

1. Should we grant Ministry Renewal Leave to a pastor or staff member who is dealing with a personal problem?

While a church can and should consider allowing a pastor or staff member time off when dealing with a personal problem, this should not be called Ministry Renewal Leave or Sabbatical. Communicating clearly with the church the purpose of a special leave such as that is extremely important. The local association can help provide guidelines if that situation arises.

1. When is the best time for a pastor or staff member to take leave?

The short answer is before he or she needs it. Ministry Renewal Leave should be planned out and expected to be part of the regular life of the church. Regarding the time of year, a leave should take place, each church is different. Care should be taken to only take leave during the time of year when others can step into necessary roles or when church ministry activities are at a minimum. For most the summer months tend to be better for this.

1. How long before the leave should the pastor or staff member request leave?

It is recommended that a formal request process be established and that the person making the request submit that request no less than four months prior to the planned leave.

1. Are there resources available to me to help my church understand the need for Ministry Renewal Leave?

There are plenty of articles available through Christian sources that speak to the need for Sabbatical, the process of establishing a policy, the process of planning a leave, and much more. In addition to that, the local association is happy to provide information, some of which is on the website.

1. How can the local association help me with Ministry Renewal Leave?

The local association can help with pulpit supply, resources related to Ministry Renewal Leave, helping pastors and staff create a plan, connecting churches and pastors to resources like books, conferences, retreats, and even free places to stay.

1. What makes Ministry Renewal Leave different from just a long vacation?

Ministry Renewal Leave should never count toward a pastor or staff members regular vacation time. The purpose of a Ministry Renewal Leave is completely different than a vacation. While both may involve some travel and time spent with family, the primary difference is accountability. When a pastor or staff member goes on vacation, there is no expectation that he will report back the church regarding what he did or why he did it. A Ministry Renewal Leave includes an element of accountability. The person must request the leave and present a plan before leave is granted. After returning, a report must be made regarding how the time was spent and what was learned or experienced. Another big difference is the stated purpose of the Ministry Renewal Leave – to be an intentional, extended time of rest and renewal. Vacation may be even busier than regular life. Ministry Renewal Leave will include some activity but will also include intentional times of rest.