Southwestern Washington Synod

Sabbatical Guidelines

Preface

The concept of wholeness and wellness in ministry is an important principle in the life of the church. Healthy congregations and healthy pastors, associates in ministry, diaconal ministers and deaconesses are keys to effective ministry. It is our belief that sabbatical leaves for rostered persons are an expression of mutuality and care for one another. To help promote health and wholeness in the church, the Southwestern Washington Synod has developed sabbatical leave guidelines. These guidelines apply principally to rostered clergy; however, they may also apply to lay rostered associates in ministry, diaconal ministers and deaconesses, depending on the nature of their responsibilities in a parish or specialized ministry setting.

A sabbatical leave is understood to be a time of release from normal duties in order that a rostered person may devote time to spiritual reflection, study and renewal. A sabbatical leave provides an opportunity for a rostered person to reflect on the call to ministry and her/his relationship with God and God’s people. The sabbatical leave is expected to be beneficial to the congregation/institution, to the wider church, and to the rostered person. While continuing education provides regular short-term opportunities for growth in learning, a sabbatical leave provides not only rest from labor, but also opportunities for more in-depth learning and renewal. A sabbatical leave should be holistic, in that it includes time for prayer, reflection, rest, and care of the body, as well as developing gifts for ministry.

A sabbatical leave is part of an overall continuing education plan. The centerpiece of the continuing education process is the Continuing Education Covenant, a tool by which the rostered person and the key leaders of the congregation/institution can assess and plan ministry together. The Continuing Education Covenant was developed as part of ELCA Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit to encourage rostered persons to participate regularly in continuing education. The Covenant is developed through conversation with key leaders: Executive Committee, Mutual Ministry Committee, supervisor, or any group that can relate the rostered person’s continuing education needs to the ministry emphases of the congregation/institution. The conversation is intended to identify ministry highlights, to give thanks for ministry accomplished, to determine the ministry priority that is most affected by the rostered person’s special leadership, to explore how the rostered persons can become an even more effective leader through continuing education, and to develop a continuing education plan.
Sabbatical Leave Guidelines

1. A sabbatical leave of 3 months may be granted to rostered clergy, ordinarily in their fifth year of serving in a ministry site. This recommendation may also apply to lay rostered Associates in Ministry, Diaconal Ministers and Deaconesses depending on the nature of their responsibilities.

2. Congregations/institutions are encouraged to provide the rostered person full pay and benefits during the sabbatical leave. Auto reimbursement is ordinarily not included but may be negotiable.

3. Expenses incurred during the sabbatical leave will be borne by the rostered person (i.e., tuition, books, supplies, travel, living expenses, etc.), unless the congregation/institution chooses to contribute to these. These expenses may be covered by continuing education funds.

4. Expenses of pulpit supply and coverage while the rostered person is gone, if needed, will be covered by the congregation. Assistance from the synod bishop may be possible. The rostered person and the congregation are encouraged to communicate with the synod bishop as part of the sabbatical planning.

5. The rostered person is normally expected to serve the congregation/institution for at least one year following completion of the sabbatical leave. (In some cases, it may be counterproductive for the rostered leader and/or the congregation/institution to require further service upon completion of the sabbatical leave.)

6. The rostered leader will submit a report to the congregation/institution within a mutually agreed upon period of time following completion of the sabbatical leave and a copy of this report will be sent to the synod bishop.

7. It is understood that the sabbatical leave and the terms of it are a mutually negotiated agreement (covenant) between the rostered person and the congregation/institution. A Continuing Education Covenant will be completed and filed with the Synod Office.

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Questions and Answers
1. **Is there a biblical basis for taking a sabbatical leave?**
Yes. The very root of the word is the same as that of “Sabbath.” Throughout the Old Testament God instructs people to work six days and rest on the seventh.

**Ezekiel 20:12**
And I gave them the Sabbath, a day of rest every seventh day, as a symbol between them and me, to remind them that it is I, the Lord, who sanctifies them, that they are truly my people.

**Leviticus 25: 1-7**
The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a Sabbath to the Lord. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a Sabbath of rest, a Sabbath in the Lord. Whatever the land yields during the Sabbath year will be food for you—for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.”

2. **When is a sabbatical leave appropriate?**
According to the ELCA Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit, it is recommended that a sabbatical leave be provided at regular intervals in a particular ministry setting. Normally, any accrued time from a previous setting of ministry is not credited to continuing education and/or sabbatical leave in a new setting. However, if a pastor or Associate in Ministry has served at least five years in a previous ministry setting without the opportunity for a sabbatical, it may be wise to consider granting a sabbatical leave prior to completion of five years in the new setting, as a benefit both to the church professional and to those whom she/he serves. For fewer years of service, a shorter sabbatical leave may be offered.

3. **What is the length of a sabbatical leave?**
The length of a sabbatical leave will normally be three months. Vacation time should not be included as sabbatical leave time, but may be considered negotiable, along with any accrued continuing education time, if a longer sabbatical leave is desired and/or appropriate.

4. **What is the purpose of a sabbatical leave?**
There are several objectives to be considered by the church professional and the congregation/institution as they plan the sabbatical leave together:
   a. Will this be a time of renewal that will help ‘recharge” the church professional spiritually and professionally so that she/he will return with new energy for ministry?
   b. What are the learnings and insights that can be shared upon return? How will this benefit the congregation/institution?
c. How will this help the church professional grow as a person and as a professional? How will it enhance his/her ministry skills?

5. **What are some examples of sabbatical leave?**
   a. Taking a personal spiritual enrichment retreat.
   b. Traveling to observe other ministry settings in this country or overseas.
   c. Working on an advanced degree at a seminary or university.
   d. Concentrated reading in a self-designed study project.
   e. Serving in a clinical setting (clinical pastoral education).

6. **What is the cost to the congregation or institution?**
   It is recommended that full salary and benefits continue to be provided during the sabbatical leave, excluding auto allowance. Auto allowance may be a negotiated item. The pastor or lay rostered leader may use accrued continuing education funds. The congregation/institution would need to contract for interim ministry and/or supply preaching. It would be wise to budget for this several years in advance, if possible, or even put it into your annual budget. Setting aside $60 per month for five years in a designated Sabbatical Fund typically covers the congregation’s costs during a three month sabbatical. After educating the congregation on the need and purpose of the pastor or lay rostered leader’s sabbatical, the congregation may take special offerings for this.

   There are various grants that congregation/institutions may apply for to help cover the cost of the sabbatical leave. In particular, Southwestern Washington Synod congregations initiating a sabbatical program for the first time may apply for a Sabbatical Seed Grant. The synod bishop will have information on this.

7. **What is involved in planning for a sabbatical leave?**
   A sabbatical leave is to be a mutually negotiated agreement between the pastor or the lay rostered leader and the congregation/institution. Planning for how the sabbatical leave time will be used will be done by the pastor or Associate in Ministry, in consultation with the local governing body (church council, parish executive committee, agency board, etc.) and the Southwestern Washington Synod office. It is recommended that planning begin at least one year in advance of the sabbatical leave. When designing the sabbatical leave program, the Southwestern Washington Synod recommends that it include a combination of various elements: for example, one month of quiet reflection for the sake of spiritual deepening, one month of learning or preparation that will directly benefit the local congregation/institution, and one month of rest and renewal. To help emphasize this ministry as a partnership, a mutual covenant will be filed with the synod outlining plans for the sabbatical leave.
**Definition of Terms:**

**Sabbatical Leave:** A leave normally three or more months in duration for the purpose of reflection, learning and renewal.

**Continuing Education:** Any specialized instruction in ministry-related subjects that is offered to church professionals. Some examples include summer theological institutes, synod workshops, Bishop’s Convocation, etc.

**Rostered Person:** A Pastor under call, an Associate in Ministry commissioned to serve a congregation or institution, or a consecrated Diaconal Minister or Deaconess serving a congregation or institution, who are on the roster of the Southwestern Washington Synod.

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