PLANNING A MEANINGFUL
PASTORAL SABBATICAL

Congregation Master Planner

A Shared Working Guide
for Pastors and Congregations

Planning, Renewal, Separation, and Re-entry

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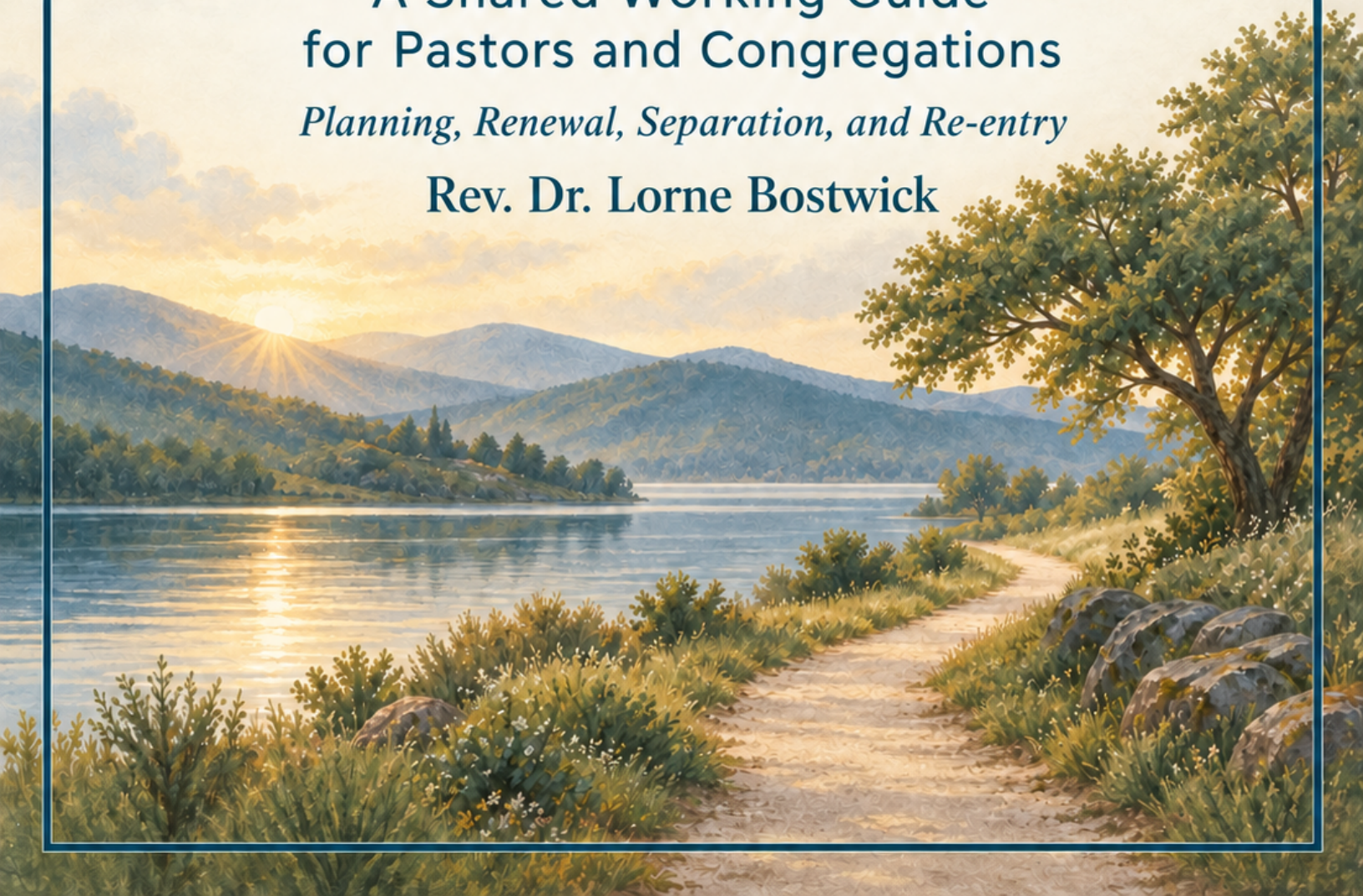

Table of Contents

Beginning Here **6**
- A Good Sabbatical Begins Long Before the Pastor Leaves 6
- Why Sabbatical? 6
- A Sabbatical Does Not Have to Be Grand 7
- How to Use This Working Guide 7
- Keep a Master Planning Copy 8
- The Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion 8
- The Sabbatical Journey at a Glance 8
- Planning Dashboard 9

Part One — Plan Long Before the Sabbatical **10**
- 1.1 Establish a Sabbatical Policy 10
- 1.2 Begin With the Money 10
- 1.3 Estimate the Real Cost 11
- 1.4 Establish a Sabbatical Reserve 12
- 1.5 The Pastor's Financial Preparation 13
- 1.6 Grants and Other Funding 14
- 1.7 Annual Sabbatical Financial Review 15
- 1.8 If the Sabbatical Needs to Be Postponed 15

Part Two — About a Year Before: Begin Planning Together **17**
- 2.1 Form the Sabbatical Team 17
- 2.2 Establish the Planning Timeline 17
- 2.3 Two Renewal Journeys 18
- 2.4 What Do We Already Know? 19
- 2.5 What Is Still Open? 19
- 2.6 First Working Budget 20

Part Three — The Pastor's Sabbatical Plan **21**
- 3.1 From Personal Discernment to Shared Planning 21
- 3.2 What I Want the Team to Know 21
- 3.3 Give the Sabbatical a Rhythm Before an Itinerary 21
- 3.4 Family and Significant Relationships 23
- 3.5 Travel, Study, Recreation, Retreat, and Rest 23
- 3.6 Protecting Unscheduled Time 24
- 3.7 Draft Sabbatical Calendar 25
- 3.8 Pastor's Renewal Budget 26
- 3.9 Alternatives and Contingencies 26
- 3.10 Current Pastor Sabbatical Plan 27

Part Four — The Congregation's Sabbatical Plan **28**
- 4.1 The Congregation Has a Sabbatical Too 28

4.2 What Might Be Renewing for the Congregation?....28
4.3 A Parallel or Complementary Experience....29
4.4 Leadership Opportunities....29
4.5 What We Do Not Want to Turn Into More Work....29
4.6 Congregational Renewal Budget....30
4.7 Current Congregational Sabbatical Plan....30

Part Five — Preparing for the Pastor's Absence....31

5.1 Release Requires Transfer....31
5.2 Pastoral Responsibilities Inventory....32
5.3 Planning Coverage in Smaller Congregations and Part-Time Settings....33
5.4 Preaching and Worship....34
5.5 Pastoral Care and Emergencies....34
5.6 Governance and Administration....34
5.7 Staff Leadership....34
5.8 Weddings, Funerals, and Sacraments....35
5.9 Denominational and Community Responsibilities....35
5.10 Coverage Plan....36
5.11 Compensation and Support for Additional Responsibilities....36
5.12 Who Has Authority?....36
5.13 Remember Those Who Carry More....37
5.14 Preparing Emotionally to Be Apart....37

Part Six — Protecting the Separation....39

6.1 Why Genuine Disconnection Matters....39
6.2 Communication During Sabbatical....39
6.3 What Counts as an Emergency?....39
6.4 Who Decides Whether the Pastor Is Contacted?....40
6.5 Outside Support While the Pastor Is Away....40
6.6 Contact Covenant....41
6.7 Communicating the Boundary....42

Part Seven — Preparing to Leave....43

7.1 Sabbatical Readiness Planner....43
7.2 Pastor Ready to Leave?....44
7.3 Congregation Ready to Release?....45
7.4 Sending One Another Well....46

Part Eight — While You Are Apart....47

8.1 For the Pastor: Let the Plan Serve the Renewal....47
8.2 For the Congregation: What Are We Noticing?....47
8.3 If the Congregation Struggles While the Pastor Is Away....48
8.4 When Plans Change....48
8.5 Preparing for the End Without Ending Too Soon....48

Part Nine — Coming Home **50**
9.1 Re-entry Deserves as Much Care as Departure 50
9.2 Protect the End of the Sabbatical 50
9.3 Returning Home Is Not Returning to Work 50
9.4 The Pastor Prepares Privately 51
9.5 The Congregation Prepares Before the Pastor Returns 51
9.6 Does Our Re-entry Need Outside Help? 52
9.7 Information Triage: What Does the Pastor Need to Know? 53
9.8 Protect the First Weeks Back 54
9.9 Welcome First 54
Part Ten — Coming Back Together **56**
10.1 The First Substantial Conversation 56
10.2 Listen to the Pastor 56
10.3 Listen to the Congregation 56
10.4 Tell the Truth Without Creating an Ambush 57
10.5 Resist Simple Blame 58
10.6 What Did We Discover? 58
10.7 What Should Return—and What Shouldn't? 59
10.8 Do Not Force Resolution 59
10.9 Working Re-entry Agreements 60
10.10 Sharing the Sabbatical 61
Part Eleven — Three Months Later **62**
11.1 Why Come Back to This Conversation? 62
11.2 What Has Lasted? 62
11.3 What Has Slipped Away? 63
11.4 What Remains Unresolved? 63
11.5 What Have We Learned About Sustainable Ministry? 64
11.6 What Should Change Before the Next Sabbatical? 64
11.7 What We Want to Remember 65
A Final Word **66**

Quick Links

Planning Dashboard

1.3 Estimate the Real Cost

2.1 Form the Sabbatical Team

3.7 Draft Sabbatical Calendar

3.8 Pastor's Renewal Budget

5.2 Pastoral Responsibilities Inventory

5.10 Coverage Plan

6.6 Contact Covenant

7.1 Sabbatical Readiness Planner

9.7 Information Triage: What Does the Pastor Need to Know?

10.9 Working Re-entry Agreements

11.7 What We Want to Remember

Beginning Here

A Good Sabbatical Begins Long Before the Pastor Leaves

It may begin five or six years earlier, when a congregation decides that extended renewal should be a normal part of sustaining a long pastoral ministry.

It becomes more than a good intention when sabbatical is written into the pastor's terms of call or employment agreement.

It becomes financially possible when the congregation begins setting aside money year by year rather than waiting until the sabbatical is approaching and wondering how it can possibly afford it.

But money and policy only make a sabbatical possible.

They do not make it meaningful.

A pastoral sabbatical is an unusual season in the life of a congregation. For a time, pastor and congregation release one another from the ordinary patterns of their life together.

The pastor steps away from responsibility for leading and caring for the congregation. There is room to rest, become curious again, spend unhurried time with people they love, travel or stay home, read, play, pray, learn, create, explore, or simply live for a while without being responsible for what happens next at church.

The congregation continues being the church.

People worship and care for one another. Leaders make decisions. Members exercise gifts that may not have been needed in quite the same way before. The congregation hears different voices and discovers both its capacities and its vulnerabilities.

For a season, they live apart.

Then they come back together.

This guide is meant to help pastor and congregation prepare for that whole journey—not only for the pastor's time away, but for the congregation's life during the separation and for the sometimes tender work of finding one another again afterward.

Why Sabbatical?

Pastoral ministry is a peculiar vocation.

The work is public and private, scheduled and unpredictable, spiritual and administrative, deeply relational and sometimes lonely. A pastor can move in a single day from preaching to budgeting, from a hospital room to a personnel problem, from teaching Scripture to responding to a family in crisis.

The boundaries between vocation and life are rarely clean.

Vacation and days off matter. Study leave matters. They are part of healthy ministry.

But sabbatical offers something different.

It provides enough time for the ordinary patterns of responsibility to loosen. The pastor has time not merely to recover from a difficult week but to live for an extended period outside the rhythms that have shaped daily life for years.

That distance can make room for rest, relationship, curiosity, prayer, learning, recreation, play, beauty, family, and experiences for which ordinary pastoral life rarely leaves enough space.

The congregation also receives something unusual: an extended period in which it must live more fully from the gifts and leadership already present within it.

Sabbatical is therefore not simply a benefit given to the pastor.

It is a season in the life of the relationship between pastor and congregation.

A Sabbatical Does Not Have to Be Grand

Some pastors receive grants that make extensive travel, study, retreats, family experiences, or other unusual opportunities possible.

Apply for them.

A grant can make possible experiences that pastor and congregation could never otherwise afford.

But a grant should expand the possibilities of sabbatical, not determine whether a meaningful sabbatical is possible at all.

A pastor does not have to travel internationally.

A congregation does not need an elaborate renewal program.

A sabbatical does not have to produce a book, curriculum, research paper, strategic plan, or impressive presentation.

A pastor might spend part of the sabbatical at home, walk every morning, read novels, garden, visit family, camp, take a class, make music, worship without leading, spend several days on retreat, or follow a curiosity simply because it has become interesting.

Another pastor may travel extensively.

Another may immerse themselves in art, history, theology, nature, music, or a place they have long wanted to know.

Another may discover that what is most needed is rest and an uncluttered calendar.

There is no ideal itinerary.

The purpose is not to create an impressive sabbatical.

It is to create conditions in which renewal can occur.

How to Use This Working Guide

This is a working document.

It is meant to change.

Write in it. Revise it. Add to it. Move dates. Change the budget. Abandon ideas. Record new ones. Return to decisions as circumstances develop.

Something that sounds wonderful twelve months beforehand may prove too expensive, too complicated, or simply less interesting six months later. A conversation with a spouse, family member, church leader, or Sabbatical Team may reveal something new. A grant may expand the possibilities. A declined grant may require a simpler plan. Congregational circumstances may change. The pastor may also change their mind as they gain clarity about what would actually be renewing.

That is not failed planning.

It is the planning.

Throughout this guide, it may help to think of decisions in four ways:

Possibility — something worth exploring.

Working Plan — what currently appears most likely.

Confirmed — something actually arranged, funded, or authorized.

Revisit — a question intentionally left open for another conversation.

The purpose of those distinctions is not to make planning more bureaucratic.

It is to give pastor and congregation permission to change their minds without losing track of what has actually been decided.

Keep a Master Planning Copy

Designate one person to maintain the current digital copy of this guide.

During meetings, someone may type directly into the document or take notes elsewhere. Afterward, the recorder updates the Master Planning Copy.

The purpose is simple: keep decisions, questions, assignments, budgets, coverage plans, and revisions in one place instead of scattering them through email, meeting minutes, notebooks, and people's memories.

For major changes, enter a revision date.

Save earlier versions when that would be helpful.

The Master Guide belongs to pastor and congregation together.

The Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion

This Master Guide is shared.

It is not the pastor's journal.

A separate **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion: A Private Guide for Discernment, Renewal, and Re-entry** provides confidential space for the more personal work of sabbatical: depletion and desire, spiritual life, relationships, hopes and fears, what gives life, what has been lost, what is being rediscovered, and what the pastor is learning about vocation and ministry.

At several points this guide will invite the pastor to reflect privately there first.

The pastor then decides what is appropriate and useful to bring into the shared planning process.

Private discernment belongs to the pastor.

Information necessary for shared planning belongs in the Master Guide.

The Sabbatical Journey at a Glance

SAVE → DISCERN → PLAN → PREPARE → RELEASE → RENEW → RECONNECT → DISCERN TOGETHER → INTEGRATE

The movements overlap.

Do not worry about completing one perfectly before beginning another.

The sequence is meant to orient you, not control you.

Planning Dashboard

Use:

Not Started | Exploring | Working Plan | Confirmed | Complete | Revisit

Planning Area	Current Status	Responsible Person	Next Step	Revisit By
Sabbatical policy				
Sabbatical dates				
Congregational reserve				
Pastor’s renewal plan				
Pastor’s budget				
Grant applications				
Congregational renewal				
Worship coverage				
Pastoral-care coverage				
Governance				
Staff leadership				
Emergency procedures				
Contact covenant				
Departure				
Re-entry				
Three-month review				

Part One — Plan Long Before the Sabbatical

1.1 Establish a Sabbatical Policy

A sabbatical is much easier to support when it is part of the congregation's ordinary understanding of pastoral ministry rather than something negotiated from scratch every time.

A good policy answers basic questions before a particular sabbatical is on the horizon.

How often is a pastor eligible?

How long is the sabbatical?

Is regular compensation continued?

What benefits continue?

What expenses does the congregation expect to cover?

How will pastoral coverage be funded?

What happens if the sabbatical must be postponed?

What denominational approval, if any, is required?

If your congregation already has a policy, review it.

If it does not, begin there.

Our Current Policy

Date adopted: _____

Pastor becomes eligible after: _____

Normal sabbatical length: _____

Compensation arrangements: _____

Benefits arrangements: _____

Congregational financial commitment: _____

Coverage expectations: _____

Approval required from: _____

Next policy review: _____

Questions Our Policy Does Not Yet Answer

1.2 Begin With the Money—Because Waiting Makes Sabbatical Harder

Conversations about sabbatical often begin with dreams.

Where might the pastor go?

What might they study?

What would be renewing?

Those are wonderful questions.

But if the congregation waits until sabbatical is a year away to ask how it will pay for pastoral coverage, there may be very little freedom to dream.

So begin with something less exciting but deeply enabling:

Save.

A congregation that sets aside a manageable amount every year gives a future congregation and pastor choices they would not otherwise have.

The money is not merely paying for several months away.

It is creating the conditions in which pastor and congregation can actually release one another without financial panic.

Do not wait until the sabbatical year to discover what sabbatical costs.

1.3 Estimate the Real Cost

FOR PASTOR, SABBATICAL TEAM, AND FINANCIAL LEADERS

A sabbatical has more than one budget.

Keeping those budgets separate makes planning clearer and avoids two unhelpful assumptions: that the congregation must pay for everything the pastor hopes to do, or that the pastor must personally finance the sabbatical.

Think in three categories.

Congregational Continuity

What will it cost for the congregation to continue its ministry while the pastor is away?

Pastor Renewal

What will the pastor’s desired sabbatical experiences cost?

Congregational Renewal

What, if anything, does the congregation want to do during the sabbatical season that requires additional resources?

Some expenses may eventually be covered by grants. Some may come from congregational reserves. Some may be personal expenses the pastor chooses to assume.

At this stage, estimate.

Precision comes later.

Preliminary Cost Estimate

Expense	Estimated Cost	Congregation	Pastor	Grant/Other	Undecided
Pastoral coverage					
Pulpit supply					
Additional staff compensation					
Administrative coverage					
Congregational renewal					
Pastor travel					
Pastor retreat					
Study/classes/books					
Family experiences					
Recreation					
Spiritual direction/coaching					
Re-entry expenses					
Contingency					
Other					

Current estimated total: $_____

Amount currently available: $_____

Estimated funding gap: $_____

Last revised: _____

1.4 Establish a Sabbatical Reserve

FOR CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

Once you have a rough estimate, ask how the congregation will accumulate its share.

A sabbatical reserve works best when it is treated as a normal long-range ministry expense rather than money that might somehow be found later if circumstances permit.

A modest annual contribution over several years is much easier to absorb than a large expense suddenly added to one year’s budget.

Our Savings Plan

Target congregational reserve: $_____

Current balance: $_____

Years until anticipated sabbatical: _____

Annual contribution needed: $_____

Amount currently budgeted annually: $_____

Change needed: $_____

Where will the money be held?

Who will review the fund annually?

Annual review month: _____

1.5 The Pastor’s Financial Preparation

FOR PASTOR, WITH ONLY WHAT IS NEEDED BROUGHT INTO THE SHARED PLAN

The pastor also has financial preparation to do.

That work belongs primarily in the **Pastor’s Personal Sabbatical Companion**, where the pastor can consider personal savings, family priorities, study-leave or continuing-education resources, grants, and the amount the pastor and family are comfortable contributing.

The congregation does not need access to the pastor’s private financial planning.

What the Sabbatical Team eventually needs to know is simply what resources the pastor chooses to include in the shared sabbatical plan.

Pastor has completed personal financial planning:

☐ Yes
☐ In process

Amount the pastor currently chooses to include in the shared plan, if any: $_____

Eligible study or continuing-education resources expected to be available: $_____

Other pastor-controlled resources included in this plan: $_____

Still uncertain:

Revisit by: _____

For the fuller personal planning process, see **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion, §9 — Making Room Financially**.

1.6 Grants and Other Funding

FOR PASTOR AND SABBATICAL TEAM

Apply for grants.

A grant may make possible experiences that neither pastor nor congregation could otherwise afford.

But do not make receiving a grant the condition for having a sabbatical.

Build a sabbatical you can reasonably support.

Then let additional funding expand its possibilities.

Potential sources may include Lilly Endowment clergy renewal programs, denominational benefits organizations, presbyteries, dioceses, conferences, synods or other regional bodies, denominational foundations, local or regional foundations, clergy renewal funds, and educational or study grants appropriate to a particular component.

Grant programs change. Eligibility changes. Deadlines change. Funding amounts change.

Always verify current information directly with the granting organization.

The Sabbatical Team should track grant opportunities that affect the shared plan. The pastor may also want to work privately through grant-supported and no-grant versions of the sabbatical in **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion, §9**.

Grant Possibilities

Grant/Funding Source	Amount Possible	Deadline	Requirements	Responsible Person	Status

Our Base Sabbatical

If no outside funding is received, what meaningful sabbatical can we still make possible?

If Additional Funding Becomes Available

What possibilities would we most like to add?

Build a meaningful sabbatical first.

Let additional resources make it larger if they become available.

1.7 Annual Sabbatical Financial Review

FOR CONGREGATIONAL FINANCIAL LEADERS

Once each year, review the sabbatical reserve, anticipated date, projected costs, annual contribution, likely coverage expenses, available grant programs, and relevant terms of call or employment agreement.

Annual Review Record

Date	Reserve Balance	Projected Need	Annual Contribution	Changes Needed

1.8 If the Sabbatical Needs to Be Postponed

Sometimes a carefully planned sabbatical cannot happen when expected.

A significant illness, family circumstance, congregational crisis, staff transition, financial emergency, or other unexpected event may make postponement necessary.

Postponement, however, should mean **rescheduling the sabbatical—not quietly losing it**.

If postponement becomes necessary, pastor and congregational leaders should establish a new target date as soon as reasonably possible. Funds already designated for sabbatical should remain designated for sabbatical unless extraordinary circumstances require another decision.

If We Need to Postpone

Reason for postponement:

Original sabbatical dates:

New target dates or planning window:

Financial implications:

Reservations, grants, or other arrangements affected:

Decisions that remain in place:

Decisions that need to be revisited:

Date we will resume active planning:

Last revised: _____

Return to Table of Contents

Part Two — About a Year Before: Begin Planning Together

Long-range preparation has made sabbatical possible.

Now the planning becomes particular.

This pastor.

This congregation.

This season.

About a year before the anticipated leave, pastor and congregational leaders should begin meeting intentionally.

Do not begin with airline tickets or preaching schedules.

Begin with people and purpose.

2.1 Form the Sabbatical Team

FOR PASTOR AND CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

The Sabbatical Team should be small enough to work well and broad enough to understand the congregation.

It is not simply a committee charged with approving the pastor's plans.

Its work is to accompany two journeys: the pastor's renewal and the congregation's experience during the pastor's absence.

Over the coming months, the team will help coordinate finances, coverage, congregational communication, boundaries, departure, and re-entry.

Sabbatical Team

Name	Role/Reason for Inclusion	Particular Responsibility

Primary coordinator: _____

Master document recorder: _____

Financial contact: _____

Congregational communication contact: _____

2.2 Establish the Planning Timeline

FOR SABBATICAL TEAM

The following is a guide, not a rigid schedule.

At roughly twelve months, form the team, establish tentative dates, begin the pastor's private discernment, review the preliminary budget, identify grant possibilities, and begin congregational reflection.

By nine months, the pastor’s broad hopes should be taking shape, grant applications should be underway where appropriate, congregational possibilities should be under discussion, and the team should begin identifying pastoral responsibilities and possible coverage.

By six months, major reservations can be confirmed where appropriate, coverage should be developing, the congregation should know more about the sabbatical, and budgets should be becoming more realistic.

By three months, coverage and staff responsibilities should be substantially settled, contact boundaries should be clear, communication should be underway, and the re-entry period should already be protected on the calendar.

During the final month, the work becomes handoff and release.

Our Actual Timeline

Task	Target Date	Responsible Person	Status

2.3 Two Renewal Journeys

FOR PASTOR AND SABBATICAL TEAM

Pastor and congregation will experience sabbatical differently.

They do not need matching programs.

They do need to understand that both have something to receive from the time apart.

For the pastor:

What would make this time genuinely renewing for me?

For the congregation:

How might we inhabit this season in ways that are meaningful and life-giving for us?

And together:

What might we learn through being apart that could enrich the ministry we share when we come back together?

The First Sabbatical Conversation

Before discussing logistics, talk about meaning.

What does the pastor hope sabbatical will make possible?

What does the congregation hope this season might make possible?

What do we hope the time apart might give to the ministry we will share afterward?

These are current hopes, not promises.

Revisit by: _____

Last revised: _____

2.4 What Do We Already Know?

Some things may already be settled.

Record them so the team does not repeatedly reopen decisions that have actually been made.

Established Decisions

Sabbatical dates: _____

Length: _____

Compensation arrangements: _____

Current sabbatical reserve: _____

Known family considerations: _____

Known congregational considerations: _____

Known denominational requirements: _____

Other decisions already made:

2.5 What Is Still Open?

Healthy planning distinguishes decisions from possibilities.

Question	Who Needs to Be Involved?	Information Needed	Revisit By

2.6 First Working Budget

Bring forward the estimates from Part One and update them with what you now know.

Do not wait until every cost is known.

Current estimated congregational cost: $_____

Current estimated pastor renewal cost: $_____

Current estimated congregational renewal cost: $_____

Funds currently available: $_____

Grant applications pending: $_____

Current funding gap: $_____

What could change this budget?

Next budget review: _____

Return to Table of Contents

Part Three — The Pastor’s Sabbatical Plan

3.1 From Personal Discernment to Shared Planning

FOR PASTOR

Before completing this section, work through any portions of **Pastor’s Personal Sabbatical Companion, Parts One–Four** that are useful to you.

Those reflections are private.

You are not expected to share them.

The purpose here is narrower: help the Sabbatical Team understand enough to support a sabbatical that is actually renewing for you.

Bring into this Master Guide only what would help the team support the sabbatical you are shaping.

3.2 What I Want the Team to Know

What seems most important for my renewal right now?

Experiences I would like to make room for:

The kind of pace I think I need:

Things I do not want this sabbatical to become:

Ways the team can help protect the kind of sabbatical I need:

3.3 Give the Sabbatical a Rhythm Before You Give It an Itinerary

There is a temptation, especially when several months suddenly appear on the calendar, to fill them.

Resist it for a while.

Before deciding where to go and what to do, think about the kind of life you hope to inhabit during this season.

Do you need long stretches of rest?

Time with family?

Solitude?

Physical activity?

Beauty?

Study?
Worship in which you are responsible for nothing?
Travel?
Home?
Play?
Friends?
Time to follow a curiosity simply because it interests you?
You do not need all of them.
Sabbatical is not ordinary pastoral life with more interesting appointments.
Give yourself enough space to live differently.

First Sketch

Period	Primary Rhythm or Experience	With Whom?	Intensity: Low/Medium/High	Notes
Beginning				
Final period				

Look at the Whole Plan

Where is the rest?
Where is the fun?
Where is meaningful relationship?
Where are you alone?
Where is there nothing scheduled?
Where will you recover after demanding travel or activity?
Does the beginning allow time to decompress?
Does the ending allow time to prepare for return?
Where might you be trying to do too much?
When you look at the whole plan, does it make you want to enter it—or recover from it?
What does that tell you?

3.4 Family and Significant Relationships

Sabbatical affects the people closest to the pastor.

Do not plan their participation for them.

Have the conversation.

What would we enjoy doing together?

What ordinary time together have we been missing?

Are there family events or obligations that should shape the calendar?

How much travel together sounds enjoyable?

How much does not?

What does the pastor need to experience alone?

What do other family members need that has nothing to do with the sabbatical?

What We Currently Want to Share

Time the Pastor Expects to Spend Separately

Family Considerations That Affect Planning

Revisit by: _____

3.5 Travel, Study, Recreation, Retreat, and Rest

A meaningful sabbatical does not require all of these.

Use this page to make choices rather than accumulate activities.

Possibility	Why It Appeals	Approximate Time	Approximate Cost	Keep/Maybe/ Release

What seems most life-giving?

What are we tempted to add simply because we have sabbatical time?

What could be removed to create more space?

3.6 Protecting Unscheduled Time

Unscheduled time is not a planning failure.
It may be one of the most important things you plan.

Dates/Period	Why We Are Leaving This Open

3.7 Draft Sabbatical Calendar

This calendar will change.

Week	Main Plans	Location	People Involved	Confirmed?	Notes
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					

Last revised: _____

3.8 Pastor’s Renewal Budget

Expense	Estimate	Confirmed Cost	Funding Source	Paid/Reserved?
Travel				
Lodging				
Retreat				
Study				
Recreation				
Family				
Spiritual direction				
Other				

Total: $_____

3.9 Alternatives and Contingencies

Good planning includes permission for things not to work.

If funding is less than expected, what would we keep?

What could change?

If travel becomes impossible, what remains possible?

If family circumstances change, what might need to change?

What parts of this plan matter most regardless of circumstances?

3.10 Current Pastor Sabbatical Plan

In a few paragraphs, describe the plan as it exists today.

Still unresolved:

Next decisions: _____

Last revised: _____

Return to Table of Contents

Part Four — The Congregation’s Sabbatical Plan

4.1 The Congregation Has a Sabbatical Too

The congregation’s task is not simply to endure the pastor’s absence.

For a season, familiar patterns will change.

That can be inconvenient.

It can also be fruitful.

New voices may be heard. People may exercise gifts they have rarely used. Members may care for one another differently. Leaders may discover capacities that ordinary patterns of ministry have not required them to exercise.

But congregational renewal does not mean creating twelve weeks of programming.

One of the healthiest decisions a busy congregation might make is to do less.

Do not begin by asking:

What should we do while the pastor is gone?

Ask:

How do we want to inhabit this season?

Perhaps there is something the congregation has wanted to study.

Perhaps different voices can lead worship.

Perhaps elders, deacons, committees, boards, or other leaders can exercise gifts more fully.

Perhaps the congregation wants to explore something related to the pastor’s sabbatical.

Or perhaps this is simply a season to worship, care for one another, welcome different leadership, and discover what happens when the familiar pattern changes.

Renewal does not have to look busy.

Nor is this season an experiment designed to determine whether the congregation “needs” its pastor.

The discovery of new gifts and stronger shared leadership is not a verdict on pastoral leadership.

It is part of being the church.

4.2 What Might Be Renewing for the Congregation?

Possibilities could include a congregational study, guest preachers, lay testimonies, a worship theme, a retreat, shared meals, arts or music, neighborhood exploration, spiritual practices, community engagement, intergenerational experiences, something connected to the pastor’s sabbatical, something completely different—or deliberately less programming.

Ideas We Want to Explore

Ideas We Are Releasing

What Sounds Life-Giving?

What Sounds Like More Work?

4.3 A Parallel or Complementary Experience

The congregation does not need to reproduce the pastor's sabbatical.

Sometimes, however, a shared theme creates a meaningful connection between the two experiences.

Is there a natural connection?

☐ Yes

☐ Maybe

☐ No—and we are comfortable with that.

Possible connection:

4.4 Leadership Opportunities

Who might be invited to exercise gifts during this season?

Person/Group	Gift or Opportunity	Support Needed

Do not assign people merely because the pastor is unavailable.

Ask.

Invite.

Support.

4.5 What We Do Not Want to Turn Into More Work

A congregational sabbatical should not become twelve weeks of special programming that exhausts everybody.

We Give Ourselves Permission Not To:

4.6 Congregational Renewal Budget

Activity	Estimated Cost	Funding Source	Responsible Person

4.7 Current Congregational Sabbatical Plan

What we currently intend to do:

Why this seems meaningful to us:

What remains undecided:

Last revised: _____

Return to Table of Contents

Part Five — Preparing for the Pastor’s Absence

5.1 Release Requires Transfer

Eventually all the planning comes to this:

The pastor has to leave.

And the congregation has to let the pastor leave.

That is harder than arranging pulpit supply.

Pastors know things about congregations that are difficult simply to stop knowing. They know who is grieving, which staff relationship is strained, which family is approaching a crisis, what decision the governing body has been postponing, and which member will probably call if something goes wrong.

Congregations are accustomed to calling their pastor.

A real sabbatical asks both to practice something unfamiliar.

The pastor entrusts the congregation to other capable people and, ultimately, to God.

The congregation accepts that for this season its pastor is not responsible for what happens there.

The congregation offers release. The pastor practices receiving it.

Good coverage makes that trust possible.

Before assigning people to tasks, ask what actually needs to continue.

For every responsibility consider four possibilities:

CONTINUE — PAUSE — DELEGATE — END

Sabbatical may reveal that something does not need coverage at all.

5.2 Pastoral Responsibilities Inventory

Responsibility	Continue?	Pause?	Delegate To	End?	Cost	Confirmed?
Preaching						
Worship planning						
Sacraments						
Hospital visits						
Homebound care						
Funerals						
Weddings						
Counseling/pastoral care						
Governing body						
Staff supervision						
Administration						
Committee support						
Denominational work						
Community responsibilities						
Other						

What Can Simply Rest During the Sabbatical?

That question may be as important as the coverage assignments.

5.3 Planning Coverage in Smaller Congregations and Part-Time Settings

A sabbatical should not be available only to pastors serving congregations large enough to have associate pastors, multiple program staff, and substantial financial resources.

Smaller congregations may need to begin planning earlier precisely because fewer people are available to absorb pastoral responsibilities.

Do not assume every task the pastor ordinarily performs must be assigned to someone else.

Some ministries must continue.

Some can happen less frequently.

Some can be shared with lay leaders.

Some can rest for a season.

And the congregation may discover that something it has been doing simply does not need to continue.

Coverage possibilities may include neighboring pastors, retired pastors, commissioned or otherwise authorized pastoral leaders, denominational or presbytery leadership, temporary pastoral leaders, trained congregational members, shared arrangements among nearby congregations, or different people covering different pastoral functions.

The goal does not have to be finding **one person to replace the pastor**.

Ask instead:

What actually needs to happen during this season, and who is best able to do each part?

Our Coverage Resources

Pastors or congregations with whom we might cooperate:

Retired, commissioned, or other authorized leaders available to us:

Congregational members who could assume particular responsibilities:

Responsibilities that could happen less frequently:

Responsibilities that could pause:

Responsibilities we may discover no longer need to continue:

5.4 Preaching and Worship

Primary worship leadership: _____

Preaching plan: _____

Communion/sacramental arrangements: _____

Worship planning responsibility: _____

Special services during sabbatical: _____

5.5 Pastoral Care and Emergencies

Primary pastoral-care contact: _____

Hospital coverage: _____

Homebound care: _____

Crisis response: _____

Funeral coverage: _____

How members will know whom to contact:

5.6 Governance and Administration

Governing-body leadership: _____

Meeting moderation: _____

Administrative decisions: _____

Check/signature authority: _____

Who handles an unexpected decision? _____

5.7 Staff Leadership

Who supervises staff?

Who handles personnel concerns?

Are staff members assuming additional duties?

What ordinary responsibilities will be reduced if significant new responsibilities are added?

How will additional work be compensated or supported?

A sabbatical should not be purchased through the exhaustion of everyone left behind.

5.8 Weddings, Funerals, and Sacraments

Clarify these before departure.

Weddings already scheduled: _____

Funeral coverage: _____

Baptisms/communion/sacramental responsibilities: _____

What congregation members need to know:

5.9 Denominational and Community Responsibilities

Responsibility	Pause?	Substitute/Contact	Notes

5.10 Coverage Plan

Bring the preceding decisions together.

Area	Primary Person	Backup	Dates	Compensation	Confirmed
Worship					
Pastoral care					
Governance					
Staff					
Emergencies					
Administration					

5.11 Compensation and Support for Additional Responsibilities

Do not assume people will absorb substantial additional work without recognition, compensation, or adjustment elsewhere.

Person	Additional Responsibility	What Will Be Reduced?	Compensation/Support

5.12 Who Has Authority?

During sabbatical, somebody other than the pastor must be able to decide.

Pastoral matters: _____

Administrative matters: _____

Personnel matters: _____

Financial emergencies: _____

Congregational emergencies: _____

Final authority if responsibility is unclear: _____

5.13 Remember Those Who Carry More

The pastor’s renewal should not come at the cost of someone else’s depletion.

Staff members, lay leaders, temporary pastors, and others may carry responsibilities beyond their ordinary work during the pastor’s absence.

Plan for what they will need not only during the sabbatical but afterward.

Someone who has carried an unusually heavy workload for three months may need time away after the pastor returns.

Staff may need responsibilities returned gradually.

Volunteers may need a break.

Temporary leaders need to know clearly when their responsibilities end.

People Carrying Significant Additional Responsibility

Person	Additional Responsibility	Support During Sabbatical	What Might They Need Afterward?

5.14 Preparing Emotionally to Be Apart

Pastor and congregation are not only transferring responsibilities.

They are temporarily changing a relationship.

Several months are different from a week’s vacation or a few days of study leave.

People accustomed to the pastor being present will experience the pastor’s absence.

The pastor will experience not being responsible for people and ministries that may have occupied daily attention for years.

There may be excitement and gratitude.

There may also be anxiety, guilt, apprehension, relief, sadness, or uncertainty.

A pastor can be eager for sabbatical and still have difficulty letting go.

Congregational leaders can enthusiastically support sabbatical and still wonder what will happen without the pastor.

Members can understand why sabbatical matters and still feel the pastor’s absence personally.

None of those responses necessarily means something is wrong.

Naming them before departure may keep them from becoming unspoken expectations or resentment later.

Have This Conversation

What are we looking forward to about this season?

What concerns do we have about being apart?

Is there anything we are afraid might happen?

Are there expectations we have not yet said aloud?

What would help us release one another well?

Do not promise one another that nothing will change.

The pastor will have experiences the congregation does not share.

The congregation will have experiences the pastor does not share.

People may grow, struggle, succeed, fail, discover gifts, become frustrated, or see familiar things differently.

The promise is not that nothing will change.

The promise is to return to one another with honesty, curiosity, generosity, and respect for what each has experienced.

Return to Table of Contents

Part Six — Protecting the Separation

6.1 Why Genuine Disconnection Matters

A sabbatical cannot provide genuine release if the pastor remains psychologically on call.

The congregation’s gift is not merely time away.

It is release from responsibility.

The pastor also has a responsibility:

Receive the release.

This requires more than good intentions. It requires coverage, authority, boundaries, and trust.

6.2 Communication During Sabbatical

Decide this before departure.

Pastor will check church email:

☐ No
☐ Other arrangement: _____

Pastor will receive church texts:

☐ No
☐ Other: _____

Pastor will monitor worship online:

☐ No
☐ Other: _____

Church-related social media: _____

Mail: _____

The point is not to create an artificial wall between people who care about one another.

It is to prevent ordinary congregational responsibility from following the pastor into sabbatical.

6.3 What Counts as an Emergency?

Not everything painful or unexpected requires the pastor.

Discuss specific examples before leaving.

Would the pastor be contacted for the death of a member?

Death of a close personal friend in the congregation?

Major building damage?

Serious staff crisis?

Congregational conflict?

National or community disaster?

Other?

The answer may appropriately be no to almost all of these if adequate coverage and support are in place.

6.4 Who Decides Whether the Pastor Is Contacted?

Do not allow every member to make that decision independently.

Designated gatekeeper: _____

Backup: _____

The pastor should not have to decide whether to respond to information that should never have reached them.

6.5 Outside Support While the Pastor Is Away

Most congregational difficulties that arise during sabbatical can be handled by the leadership and coverage arrangements already established.

Sometimes something more serious develops.

A staff conflict escalates.

Leadership breaks down.

Congregational conflict grows.

Persistent complaints begin becoming organized opposition.

Essential pastoral coverage fails.

A significant decision arises that could affect the pastor’s ministry upon return.

The answer is usually **not to pull the pastor back into the system from sabbatical**.

Instead, identify beforehand an appropriate outside person whom congregational leaders can consult.

In a Presbyterian setting, that may be an Executive or General Presbyter, Stated Clerk, Commission on Ministry representative, or another person designated by the presbytery. Other traditions will have comparable judicatory, diocesan, conference, denominational, or associational resources.

Their first role may simply be to help leaders understand what is happening, contain unnecessary escalation, clarify authority, and decide what needs attention now and what can wait.

Our Outside Support During Sabbatical

Name/role: _____

Contact information: _____

Circumstances in which leaders should seek consultation:

Who is authorized to make contact?

6.6 Contact Covenant

During the sabbatical:

The Congregation Agrees To:

The Pastor Agrees To:

If an Extraordinary Circumstance Occurs:

Approved by: _____

Date: _____

6.7 Communicating the Boundary

Members should not have to guess whom to call.

How will the congregation know?

- ☐ Worship announcements
- ☐ Newsletter
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Website
- ☐ Voicemail
- ☐ Office autoresponder
- ☐ Printed contact sheet
- ☐ Other

Who communicates it? _____

When? _____

Return to Table of Contents

Part Seven — Preparing to Leave

The final months should not require four separate planning systems.

Use one readiness planner and update it as departure approaches.

The purpose is not to create a perfect checklist.

It is to make it possible for the pastor actually to leave.

7.1 Sabbatical Readiness Planner

Use:

Not Started | Working | Confirmed | Complete | Revisit

Planning Area	6 Months	90 Days	30 Days	Final Week	Responsible	Notes
Final sabbatical dates						
Pastor renewal plan						
Pastor renewal budget						
Congregational budget						
Travel/reservations						
Congregational renewal plan						
Preaching/worship coverage						
Pastoral-care coverage						
Funeral/wedding coverage						
Governance/moderation						
Staff supervision						
Administrative authority						
Financial authority						
Emergency procedures						

Planning Area	6 Months	90 Days	30 Days	Final Week	Responsible	Notes
Additional compensation						
Outside support contact						
Contact covenant						
Congregational communication						
Email/phone arrangements						
Handoff meetings						
Re-entry dates protected						
Sending worship						

Questions Still Unresolved

What Could Prevent the Pastor From Leaving Freely?

What Are We Doing About It?

Next review date: _____

Last revised: _____

The final month before sabbatical should not become an attempt to leave the congregation with twelve weeks of completed work.

At some point, unfinished work has to become somebody else's responsibility—or remain unfinished.

7.2 Pastor Ready to Leave?

FOR PASTOR

☐ I have handed off the responsibilities we agreed I would hand off.

☐ The people assuming those responsibilities have the information and authority they need.

☐ I know who will handle matters that would ordinarily come to me.

☐ I am not carrying church work into sabbatical "just in case."

- [ ] I am not planning to finish sermons, reports, projects, or administrative work after sabbatical begins.
- [ ] I understand the contact covenant.
- [ ] I am prepared to let other people make decisions differently than I might make them.
- [ ] I am prepared to let other people lead.

If something is still difficult to release, take that reflection to the **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion**.

7.3 Congregation Ready to Release?

FOR CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

- [ ] We know who is responsible for worship.
- [ ] We know who is responsible for pastoral care.
- [ ] We know who is responsible for governance and administration.
- [ ] Staff members know who supervises and supports them.
- [ ] People assuming responsibilities have the authority they need.
- [ ] Members know whom to contact.
- [ ] We have defined what would constitute an extraordinary emergency.
- [ ] We know who decides whether the pastor should be contacted.
- [ ] We know whom to consult outside the congregation if serious difficulty develops.
- [ ] Additional work is appropriately supported and compensated.
- [ ] We will not routinely send church information to the pastor.
- [ ] We are prepared for the pastor not to know what is happening here.
- [ ] We are prepared to be the church without our pastor for this season.

7.4 Sending One Another Well

Departure deserves more than an announcement.

A sending ritual allows pastor and congregation to acknowledge that something meaningful is happening.

The congregation releases the pastor from pastoral responsibility.

The pastor entrusts the congregation to its leaders, members, and ultimately to God.

This is not goodbye.

It is a blessing for a season apart.

Sending Worship Planning

Date: _____

Who participates: _____

What should be named or celebrated:

Congregational renewal plans to introduce:

A sample liturgy may be added during final production.

Return to Table of Contents

Part Eight — While You Are Apart

The planning guide should become quieter here.

You have planned.

Now live it.

8.1 For the Pastor: Let the Plan Serve the Renewal

If an activity you planned no longer feels life-giving, reconsider it.

If you need more rest, rest.

If curiosity takes you somewhere unexpected, pay attention.

If you discover that you enjoy something you had not anticipated, make room.

The sabbatical does not succeed because you completed the itinerary.

The itinerary exists to support renewal.

Private reflection during this period belongs primarily in the **Pastor’s Personal Sabbatical Companion**.

8.2 For the Congregation: What Are We Noticing?

FOR CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

Do not spend three months evaluating the pastor’s absence.

Notice the congregation.

What is going well?

What has been harder than expected?

Who has surprised us?

What gifts are emerging?

What did we assume required the pastor that we are discovering we can do?

What do we miss about our pastor?

What are we learning about ourselves?

Do not turn every observation into a decision.

Notice first.

8.3 If the Congregation Struggles While the Pastor Is Away

Not every difficulty is a crisis.

Some disruption is inevitable when familiar leadership is absent.

But pay attention when ordinary difficulty begins becoming something more serious: unresolved staff conflict, significant leadership breakdown, escalating congregational conflict, persistent complaints becoming organized opposition, failure of essential pastoral coverage, or decisions being considered that could significantly affect the pastor’s ministry upon return.

Do not automatically call the pastor back into the system.

Use the leadership and denominational support established before departure.

Seek help early enough that a manageable difficulty does not become a crisis simply because everyone hoped it would resolve itself.

The goal is not to prevent conflict.

It is to care responsibly for the congregation while honoring the pastor’s release.

8.4 When Plans Change

Plans change.

Record only what needs to be remembered.

What changed?

Why?

Does this affect budget, coverage, safety, or re-entry?

Who needs to know?

Date: _____

8.5 Preparing for the End Without Ending Too Soon

Several weeks before sabbatical concludes, make sure the return plan is still intact.

Do not begin sending the pastor accumulated material to “help them catch up.”

Do not ask the pastor to begin preparing for ordinary congregational responsibilities from afar.

The pastor may begin personal reflection about return.

The congregation may begin its own reflection.

But the separation is not over yet.

Let it finish.

Return to Table of Contents

Part Nine — Coming Home

9.1 Re-entry Deserves as Much Care as Departure

Leaving may turn out to have been easier than returning.

Before sabbatical, pastor and congregation spent months preparing to be apart. Responsibilities were transferred. Plans were made. People knew that the separation was temporary.

Returning can feel as though it ought to be simpler.

The date is on the calendar.

The pastor comes home.

Everyone welcomes one another.

Ministry resumes.

But several months are long enough for things to happen.

The pastor has lived a life the congregation did not share.

The congregation has lived a life the pastor did not share.

Some of what happened may be wonderful.

People may have discovered gifts they did not know they possessed. Leaders may have grown in confidence. The pastor may return rested, curious, grateful, and eager to reconnect.

Some of it may be harder.

Someone who promised to carry a responsibility may have dropped it.

Staff may be exhausted.

A decision may have gone badly.

Conflict may have surfaced.

People may have discovered that they missed the pastor more than they expected—or that they enjoyed doing some things differently.

None of this means the sabbatical failed.

It means pastor and congregation now have something more important to do than simply put everything back where it was.

They need to find one another again.

9.2 Protect the End of the Sabbatical

Do not begin re-entry while the pastor is still away.

Avoid sending accumulated church news, meeting minutes, unresolved problems, or lists of matters requiring attention during the final weeks.

The pastor does not need to “get caught up” before returning.

Let sabbatical end before ordinary pastoral responsibility begins again.

9.3 Returning Home Is Not Returning to Work

Whenever possible, preserve some space between returning home and returning to pastoral responsibility.

The pastor may need to unpack more than luggage.

Re-entry can involve gratitude, excitement, apprehension, grief, changed perspective, and the simple physical and emotional work of coming home.

Do not schedule the pastor's return flight on Saturday and expect normal pastoral leadership Sunday morning.

Our Re-entry Buffer

Pastor returns home: _____

Pastor returns to work: _____

First worship leadership: _____

First staff meeting: _____

First governing-body meeting: _____

9.4 The Pastor Prepares Privately

FOR PASTOR

Use the **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion** before re-entry.

Some of what emerged during sabbatical may be deeply personal.

Some may still be unclear.

Not everything belongs in the first conversation with congregational leaders.

The Master Guide asks only what you are ready to bring into the shared relationship.

What I Am Ready to Bring Back

Something from sabbatical I would like congregational leaders to understand:

Something I hope to carry into ordinary life and ministry:

Something I would like us to talk about as we resume ministry together:

The pastor decides what is ready to be shared.

9.5 The Congregation Prepares Before the Pastor Returns

FOR CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

Meet before the pastor returns.

This is not a meeting to construct a report about everything that happened.

It is a chance to reflect together.

What went well while the pastor was away?

What was harder than we expected?

Who discovered or exercised new gifts?

What responsibilities were handled differently?

What did we learn about ourselves?

Were there disappointments, tensions, conflicts, or unresolved concerns?

If there were, resist two temptations.

Do not bury them in order to protect the pastor’s sabbatical experience.

And do not save them up to deliver to the pastor upon return.

Decide what actually needs attention and what kind of conversation it requires.

9.6 Does Our Re-entry Need Outside Help?

Most re-entry conversations will not require an outside facilitator.

Some will.

Consider seeking denominational or other skilled assistance if significant congregational conflict developed during sabbatical; substantial criticism of the pastor emerged or became organized; leaders are seriously divided about what happened; staff conflict developed; important responsibilities were not carried out and resentment resulted; decisions were made that may substantially affect the pastor’s ministry; trust appears damaged; or pastor or leaders are approaching the conversation feeling angry, blamed, defensive, betrayed, or afraid.

If those conditions are present, do not wait for the first re-entry meeting to discover whether the conversation can be handled constructively.

Seek consultation beforehand.

In a Presbyterian setting, an Executive or General Presbyter, Commission on Ministry representative, or another person designated by the presbytery may be appropriate.

The facilitator is not present to prevent difficult things from being said.

Difficult things may need to be said.

A good facilitator helps them be said in ways that can be heard.

They can slow a conversation when anxiety accelerates it, ask for specificity when accusation becomes vague, distinguish one person's experience from claims about what "everyone" thinks, and help pastor and congregation determine what requires immediate attention and what requires continuing discernment.

Asking for help is not evidence that sabbatical failed.

Sometimes it is simply how pastor and congregation care for the relationship they are returning to.

Our Outside Resource, If Needed

Name/role: _____

Contact: _____

Who will make contact: _____

9.7 Information Triage: What Does the Pastor Need to Know?

During sabbatical, the congregation may accumulate weeks or months of stories, decisions, concerns, changes, joys, frustrations, and unfinished business.

The returning pastor does not need all of it at once.

Some information is necessary before pastoral responsibility resumes.

Some belongs in the first week.

Some can wait.

And some does not need to be passed on at all.

Needs to Know Before Returning	Needs to Know During First Week	Can Wait Until Later	Does Not Need to Be Passed On

Ask:

Does the pastor need this information to make a decision?

Does it affect someone's current care or safety?

Does it affect staff, finances, governance, or an existing commitment?

Is action required soon?

Or are we telling the pastor because **we have been carrying it and want to hand it back?**

That final question deserves attention.

Not everything the congregation carried during sabbatical needs to become the pastor's burden upon return.

Who Will Brief the Pastor?

Primary person(s): _____

When: _____

What will be covered:

What will deliberately wait:

9.8 Protect the First Weeks Back

The pastor does not need to resume every responsibility on the first morning back.
Neither should leaders continue carrying responsibilities indefinitely because nobody has discussed the handback.
Plan it.

Responsibility	Returns Immediately	Returns Later	Remains Shared	Does Not Return

Remember those who carried additional responsibility.
Who may need time off or reduced responsibility?

What responsibilities should be transferred back gradually?

Who needs appreciation or recognition?

The pastor’s renewal should not be purchased by the depletion of everyone who remained behind.

9.9 Welcome First

The pastor’s first Sunday back should ordinarily be a homecoming, not an accounting.
There will be time to talk about what happened.
Welcome one another first.

The pastor does not owe the congregation an immediate interpretation of the sabbatical.

The congregation does not need to summarize several months of congregational life immediately.

Let people be glad to see one another.

Welcome date: _____

Worship role: _____

Celebration: _____

Opportunity for congregation to share later: _____

Opportunity for pastor to share later: _____

Some things take time to understand.

Return to Table of Contents

Part Ten — Coming Back Together

10.1 The First Substantial Conversation

FOR PASTOR AND CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS

Schedule a separate conversation after the pastor has had some time to return.

Do not simply add it to the end of an ordinary business meeting.

If the preparation in Part Nine suggests that the conversation would benefit from a facilitator, have that person present from the beginning.

The purpose is not to decide whether sabbatical “worked.”

It is to hear what happened while pastor and congregation were apart.

Listen before evaluating.

Listen before solving.

Listen before deciding what everything means.

10.2 Listen to the Pastor

What would you like us to know about your sabbatical?

What gave you life?

What surprised you?

What are you still thinking about?

Is there something from this season you hope to carry into ordinary ministry and life?

The pastor is not required to disclose everything that occurred during sabbatical or everything being personally discerned.

10.3 Listen to the Congregation

What would you like the pastor to know about the congregation’s experience?

What gave life here?

What surprised us?

Who or what grew?

What was difficult?

What are we still trying to understand?

10.4 Tell the Truth Without Creating an Ambush

Re-entry should not require everyone to say only pleasant things.

If something went badly, say so.

If people were hurt, that matters.

If responsibilities were neglected, acknowledge it.

If leadership arrangements failed, learn from them.

If conflict emerged, do not pretend it did not.

But difficult truth is most useful when it is concrete.

Be cautious with statements such as:

“Everybody thought…”

“A lot of people were saying…”

“People were really upset…”

Those statements may point toward something important.

They can also make a concern almost impossible to understand or address.

Ask instead:

What did you observe?

What did you experience?

What specific concern needs attention?

Is this your concern, or are you bringing something someone asked you to raise?

What would help us understand how widespread the concern actually is?

The goal is not to suppress criticism.

It is to make concerns clear enough that people can listen and respond rather than defend themselves against an unnamed crowd.

10.5 Resist Simple Blame

When something went wrong during sabbatical, people may understandably want to know whose fault it was.

Sometimes responsibility does need to be named.

But begin with curiosity.

A volunteer promised to do something and did not.

What happened?

A staff member became overwhelmed.

What happened to the workload?

Pastoral-care coverage failed.

Was the arrangement adequate?

A conflict grew.

What allowed it to escalate?

People became resentful that the pastor was unavailable.

Were the boundaries understood?

Were people grieving the pastor’s absence?

Did coverage fail in ways that left people feeling abandoned?

These questions do not excuse harmful behavior.

They help the congregation understand what happened well enough to respond wisely.

10.6 What Did We Discover?

Only after both experiences have been heard should pastor and leaders begin asking what those experiences might mean.

What did we learn about the congregation?

What did we learn about leadership?

What did we learn about how responsibilities are shared?

What did we learn about our relationship as pastor and congregation?

What did we learn about ministry?

Is anything still unresolved that requires another conversation?

Would outside assistance help with that conversation?

10.7 What Should Return—and What Shouldn't?

Successful re-entry does not mean putting everything back exactly where it was.

Some responsibilities appropriately return to the pastor.

Some may not.

What Appropriately Returns to the Pastor?

What Did Someone Else Begin Doing Well?

What Should Remain Shared?

What Did the Congregation Discover It Can Do Without Pastoral Leadership?

What Could Simply Stop?

What New Boundary or Practice Might Support Healthier Ministry?

These are shared observations, not a new job description.

The pastor may want to return privately to **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion, §§23–24 — What Makes Your Heart Sing Now? and A Conversation Worth Initiating** before deciding whether there is a larger conversation worth beginning with congregational leaders.

Any deeper personal discernment by the pastor about vocation belongs first in the **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion**.

10.8 Do Not Force Resolution

Some matters will be clear.

Others will not.

Do not turn the Coming Back Together Conversation into a requirement that every concern be resolved before anyone leaves the room.

We Are Ready to Act On:

We Need More Conversation About:

We Need Help With:

We Are Deliberately Leaving Open for Now:

Leaving something open is not the same as avoiding it.

Name when you will return to it.

10.9 Working Re-entry Agreements

What We Want to Preserve or Change	First Step	Responsible Person(s)	Review Date

Next conversation: _____

Before finishing, consider naming gratitude.

Something the pastor is grateful for in the congregation’s life during sabbatical:

Something congregational leaders are grateful for in the pastor’s sabbatical experience:

Something we are looking forward to in our ministry together:

Successful re-entry does not mean putting everything back exactly where it was.

Pastor and congregation have each lived through something the other did not experience.

The task now is not to erase the separation.

It is to receive what each has learned from it.

10.10 Sharing the Sabbatical

The pastor may want to preach, teach, show photographs, tell stories, or share discoveries.

The congregation may be eager to hear them.

Make room for that.

But do not turn sabbatical into a report the pastor owes the congregation.

The sabbatical did not require a product.

Some experiences will be easily shared.

Some will take time to understand.

Some belong to the pastor and family.

Share what is ready to be shared.

Let the rest mature.

Return to Table of Contents

Part Eleven — Three Months Later

11.1 Why Come Back to This Conversation?

Three months after the pastor returns, sabbatical is no longer the most recent thing that happened.
Ordinary ministry has returned.
Calendars have filled.
Sermons have been preached.
Meetings have happened.
People have become ill.
Someone has probably complained about something.
Life has resumed.
That is precisely why this is a good time to return to the conversation.
Some things that seemed important immediately after sabbatical may matter less now.
Other things may have become clearer.
The question is no longer simply:
How did sabbatical go?
It is:
What are we learning now that we have lived together again for a while?

11.2 What Has Lasted?

Pastor

What practice, relationship, rhythm, or insight from sabbatical is still giving life?

What has been difficult to preserve?

Congregation

What practice, gift, or leadership pattern from the sabbatical season remains?

What did we discover while the pastor was away that has become part of our life?

Together

What have we been able to preserve?

11.3 What Has Slipped Away?

Ordinary ministry has gravity.

Old habits return easily.

Do not automatically treat that as failure.

Notice it.

What has slipped back toward the way things were before sabbatical?

Is anything worth recovering?

Or have we discovered that something we thought would matter does not matter as much as we expected?

11.4 What Remains Unresolved?

This question matters.

Are there shared concerns from sabbatical or re-entry that remain unresolved?

Has trust been restored where it was strained?

Are there conversations we have continued postponing?

Do we need denominational, facilitative, coaching, or other outside help?

By this point, significant **shared concerns** affecting the health of the pastoral relationship or the congregation's ministry should not simply remain unspoken.

They may not yet be resolved.

But they should be receiving appropriate attention.

This does not mean that private pastoral discernment must be disclosed before it is sufficiently clear. The **Pastor's Personal Sabbatical Companion** provides separate guidance for vocational questions that may still be developing.

11.5 What Have We Learned About Sustainable Ministry?

What has the pastor learned about what sustains pastoral life and ministry?

What has the congregation learned about its responsibility for sustaining healthy pastoral leadership?

What have we learned about shared ministry?

What should we continue doing differently?

11.6 What Should Change Before the Next Sabbatical?

The next sabbatical begins, in one sense, now.

What should change in our policy?

What should change in our savings?

What should change in coverage?

What should change in congregational preparation?

What should change in pastoral preparation?

What should change in separation and boundaries?

What should change in re-entry?

11.7 What We Want to Remember

Date of sabbatical: _____

Date of three-month review: _____

The Pastor Wants to Remember:

The Congregation Wants to Remember:

Together We Want to Remember:

A Final Word

A sabbatical does not have to be grand to be meaningful.

It does not require international travel, an expensive program, or a major grant.

It does not have to produce a book, curriculum, strategic plan, or even a particularly impressive story.

It requires something both simpler and harder:

Making room.

A congregation makes room financially by preparing years ahead.

Leaders make room by assuming responsibilities the pastor ordinarily carries.

The pastor makes room by relinquishing responsibility and resisting the impulse to fill every day.

Families make room for time together and time apart.

Pastor and congregation make room for one another to have experiences they cannot control and will not fully share.

And when sabbatical ends, they make room to listen before rushing to restore everything that existed before.

Something may have changed.

Someone may have grown.

A responsibility may have found a better home.

A gift may have emerged.

A relationship may need attention.

The pastor may understand more clearly what gives life to ministry.

The congregation may understand more clearly what it means to share ministry rather than simply receive it.

We cannot plan those discoveries.

We can prepare for them.

The purpose of all this planning is not to engineer a transformative experience.

Renewal cannot be scheduled that precisely.

The purpose is to create enough financial preparation, thoughtful planning, trust, freedom, distance, and openness that pastor and congregation can receive what the time apart has to give—and then bring what they have received back into the life and ministry they share.