



The Presbytery of
DONEGAL

Sabbatical Policy

What is the Purpose of a Sabbatical Season for Pastoral Renewal?

We believe that pastors are called by God to service in a congregation or congregations. This call involves multiple roles and a multitude of tasks: preacher, caregiver, teacher, spiritual guide, vision-caster, worship-arbitrator, supervisor, administrator, strategic planner, media-savvy leader, contemplative role model, conflict mediator and more.

The Connecting Our Ministry Commission of the Presbytery of Donegal (COM) encourages pastors and congregations in healthy ministry. One measure of health is the development of rhythms in the life of the pastor and the congregation for effective engagement and for time and space for personal and family life. Every person benefits from balance in work and the rest of life. These practices promote wellness and resiliency. Pastors can be particularly susceptible to permitting the demands of pastoral ministry “taking over” the rest of life, and sometimes become enmeshed with the perceived needs of the congregation. This leads to stress and burn-out.

From the very beginning, God provided Sabbath as a gift to humankind. Jesus responded to the demands upon him by taking time away. Pastors and congregations benefit when pastors set boundaries for a regular, weekly sabbath time away from pastoral obligations. COM is available to provide training and support for congregations and pastors in equipping and coaching pastors and to help with realistic time expectations.

After a number of years in a pastoral position, it is common for pastors to start to feel that the “well is running dry.” Numerous studies and much practical experience point to the value of an extended sabbatical period for pastoral renewal after seven years of continuous ministry.

The Lilly Endowment National Clergy Renewal Program explains that a sabbatical program *“seeks to strengthen Christian congregations by providing opportunities for pastors to step away briefly from the persistent obligations of daily parish life and to engage in a period of renewal and reflection. Renewal periods are not vacations, but times for intentional exploration and reflection, for regaining the enthusiasm and creativity for ministry, for discovering what will make the pastor’s heart sing.”*

Is a Sabbatical Required for Pastors in the Presbytery of Donegal?

A sabbatical period is encouraged, but not required. The Presbytery of Donegal suggests that a sabbatical period be provided after a pastor has served for seven years in the congregation. The Presbytery also

suggests that a sabbatical be considered after five years of service, if the pastor served four years or more in a previous pastoral position without a sabbatical break.

What Should Be the Length of the Sabbatical Period?

COM recommends that a sabbatical period should be for three months. These three months should not include the required month of vacation but may include the required two weeks for study leave. This means the total time away in the sabbatical year would be four or four-and-a-half months. Longer time periods require special consultation and approval by COM.

What are the Categories of Sabbaticals in the Presbytery of Donegal?

Sabbaticals may include one or more of the following categories.

1. **Learning: Innovative Study, Focused Theological Reflection.**

Examples include: Learning about leadership, church transformation, missional engagement – to name just a few. A Learning Sabbatical might include attending a conference, crafting a sermon series, working on a book, or taking focused time to write a Doctor of Ministry Dissertation.

2. **Adventures: Travel, New Experiences**

Examples include traveling to new places. Learning to hike. Developing a photographic eye. Finding fodder for sermons and space for imaginative regeneration of the self.

3. **Sabbath Rest: Prayer. Contemplation.**

Examples include: Burnout/Pre-burnout rejuvenation. Focus on resiliency and "re-wiring" for wholeness. Working with a counselor or spiritual director or physical trainer.

4. **Endings and Preparation for New Beginnings**

This specialized form of sabbatical is available only when negotiated through a COM-defined process. A Sabbatical for Endings and Preparation for New Beginnings may be helpful when there has been a long-term pastorate and a break is needed. This type of sabbatical is often part of a severance negotiation and will not involve a return to the previous call. Pastors often benefit from engagement with a counselor and/or spiritual director, and a season to discern vocation and career path.

How are Sabbaticals Funded?

Congregations are required to continue all salary and benefits included in the Terms of Call during the Sabbatical period. Congregations are further encouraged, but not required, to allocate a sabbatical amount each year, so there is an accumulated fund to help with sabbatical expenses. Pastors may also seek sabbatical grants from the Lilly Endowment, the Louisville Institute, the Presbyterian Board of Pensions (for BoP members). The Presbytery of Donegal may have some pastoral renewal grants available.

What is the Sabbatical Proposal Process?

Pastors should obtain the Sabbatical Proposal Form from the Presbytery of Donegal. The proposal will include specific sabbatical plans, plans for funding, and plans for care of the congregation while the pastor is away. The proposal should be approved by the session at least six months before the start of the sabbatical. When the sabbatical proposal is approved by the session, it should be sent to the COM for approval. COM is available to help the session with planning for the pastor's absence and for communicating with the congregation about the purpose of the Sabbatical. Part of the proposal will include a plan for sharing the Sabbatical with the congregation upon return to service.