

## PLANNING A SABBATICAL STUDY LEAVE

There is a growing interest on the part of our ministerial leaders to become involved in extended periods of learning and renewal. The purpose of the Sabbatical Study Leave is to provide such periods of learning and renewal so that ministerial leaders, and the churches they serve might more effectively continue the ministry of the church.

While such leaves are a part of the concern for continuing education, such extended periods of renewal are able to meet some long term needs that cannot be dealt with in the few days or week long events that are a part of the yearly cycle of continuing education. The Sabbatical Study leave will vary from one to six months and, when offered over a five to seven year cycle, provide relief from the intense ministry with its multifaceted demands. It provides the emotional space to reflect on past and future direction of ministry, to learn new skills, for spiritual and emotional renewal and to regain the creative energy for ministry.

While there is no set guideline regarding the frequency and length of such leaves, it has been suggested that one be given a two to three month leave every five to seven years. In promoting the concept of the leave, it is important that the value to the ministerial leader and the church ministry be shared:

1. The congregational leadership must share a greater responsibility of the daily ministry of the church in the ministerial leader's absence.
2. The church ministry is often revitalized upon the return of a renewed leader.
3. Long-term ministries within the church are often extended and become more creative and productive.
4. Stress may be reduced in a vocation where there are many conflicting role expectations by the laity and self.
5. There are learning and renewal experiences needed that cannot take place in the short blocks of time associated with the annual periods of continuing education.

The first stage in planning a Sabbatical Study Leave is for the ministerial leader and family to come to a clear and yet tentative understanding of what needs to happen during the leave and ways the needs can be met. A good place to begin is to assess the needs for learning and renewal. The Needs Assessment Inventory has been designed for ministerial leaders to help them determine the need for growth in ministry in these areas:

- Knowledge
- Skills for Ministry
- Personhood and Spirituality

This instrument can be used by the individual or by a group. Once the instrument has been completed and a list of needs assessed and prioritized, the ministerial leader and family will next need to consider the kinds of learning/renewal experiences needed. This will require a tentative selection of the most important needs and the examination of resources required and possible blockages to the leave.

It is critical that the family be involved in the early exploration stage, for a leave will influence the entire family. The plans for the leave will require commitment of the family, for without it, there will be family disruption. The other important factor in the early stage is not to assume that the

time and financial resources needed are too great. There are few ministerial leaders who can afford the time and monies needed to provide the learning/renewing experience desired. The amount of time and monies needed will require negotiation with the church (or other ministry setting) and exploration beyond for funding sources.

In the early stages it will be important to begin to look at the matter of learning/renewing objectives, the kinds of experiences that would be useful in meeting the objectives, funding, interim leadership needs during the absence of the ministerial leader and the next step in the introduction of the concept of the Sabbatic Study Leave to the church.

Before the idea is introduced to church leaders the ministerial leader must have some understanding of where she/he feels renewal/learning needs to take place and what the cost will be to self, family and church. If there has been no advanced thought in these matters, the church leadership may view the leave as an impractical idea and dismiss it as such. It is equally important that the ministerial leader and family not be so committed to their initial dreams that they refuse to negotiate the matter with the church.

Second, it is safe to say that in many churches the idea of a Sabbatic Leave is new. With the tentative planning done in the first step, it is important that one assess the climate for introducing the matter of a leave to the church. Begin the process by talking to key leaders who are broadminded and open, and who know the pulse of congregational life. Discuss not only tentative plans, but also why an extended leave is important to the ministerial leader and the church's ministry. The emphasis needs to be on the cost and the benefits to all parties.

It may be at this stage that the group responsible for ministerial leader/people relationships (the Pastoral Relations Committee, in many churches) become involved in the initial stages of the discussion. This is the critical stage where ownership must be shared by the laity. If they can be convinced that both parties will benefit, there is a strong possibility the congregation will be supportive.

Third, where there is a common agreement among leaders of the value and importance of the leave, the Pastoral Relations Committee will need to work with the ministerial leader and family in planning it - including the important matter of winning congregational support. It is important that a strategy for sharing information and securing congregational support be a part of the plan. This will reduce misunderstanding and provide a deliberate means of sharing the value of the experience for the ministerial leader and the church ministry.

The plan must have the input of the planning group and reflect the ownership of all parties. It is at this stage where the initial plans of the ministerial leader and family may undergo some significant changes. Again, look at the learning/renewal objectives using the Needs Assessment Inventory, but this time the planning group members assess the ministerial leader's needs in light of the priority needs of church ministry. The results may not look the same as those of the ministerial leader's. This is where negotiation will need to take place. When this list has been completed and prioritized, it is important that an examination of the types of learning/renewal experiences available are considered. It is in this phase that the matter of available time and monies will be considered. There is just so much that can be done in the light of time and money. Some tentative plans may be formulated.

It is the matter of monies that may be most important to both parties. It is recommended during the Sabbatic Study Leave that salary, housing allowance and health and retirement be paid. It should be assumed that out of pocket expenses for living will be covered by the ministerial leader, and that expenses related to the Sabbatic Leave (travel, tuition and housing rentals) will need to come from other sources. It is during this phase that estimates of such expenses be made and that the matter of personal, local church and national sources be explored. The value from the learning/renewal time will be experienced by the ministerial leader and family, the local church and national church, so that the expense needs to be borne by all three parties.

The question of interim leadership will be raised early in the process. Will the laypersons take care of the worship service, pastoral care and administration or will an interim be employed to provide a part or all of the leadership needs? This period of life in the church gives the lay leadership an opportunity for greater service and needs to be an important consideration in any final decision.

Then there is the matter of community celebration of the Sabbatic Leave as an opportunity for growth and renewal for ministerial leader and people. There should be events planned before and following the leave - celebrating what will happen to ministerial leader and people in the interim and rejoicing in the new creative partnership in ministry that will follow.

Finally, how will the Sabbatic Study Leave be evaluated and will it be followed by new directions for ministry? If the ministerial leader is renewed only, then the church has missed a creative opportunity for a closer walk in ministry with Christ. If the church simply receives a better skilled ministerial leader as a result, then the vision needed for leadership will be missing and the church leadership will operate in its own power. Evaluation is a key in bringing inner renewal and growth into the arena where the church is called to serve. The results of the Sabbatic Leave must be experienced beyond a few months during and following the leave.