Pastoral

When statisticians tell us that 1,500 pastors—from across denomination lines—leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches, that 50 percent of pastors’ marriages will end in divorce, and that 70 percent of pastors constantly fight depression, something certainly needs to be addressed. Have you considered that your pastor might need a time away from ministry for refreshment that could possibly extend his years of service to the Lord and His people? In my personal study and observations I am finding that Baptists are far behind some denominations in caring for a pastor’s physical and spiritual welfare.

Definition

The term “sabbatical” comes from the Bible word “Sabbath,” which means “to cease, to rest.” Genesis 2:2 states that “on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”

In the fourth of the Ten Commandments God said, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:8–11).

Many other passages of Scripture mention the Sabbath, or sabbatical. For example, Leviticus 25:1–5 and Deuteronomy 15:9 and 31:10 refer to a rest for the land every seven years, called the Year of the Release. Exodus 21:2 and Deuteronomy 15:12 establish the setting free of “Israelish” bondservants, and Deuteronomy 15:1–6 and 12–18 require creditors to release debtors. “Sabbath” principally means “a stopping or ceasing of what one is doing.”

Purpose

Primarily there are two types of sabbatical: one for study and the other for rest and renewal. A sabbatical associated with the academic world often allows for a year of private study with full recompense after seven years of teaching. Occasionally a congregation may allow its pastor to take a study sabbatical to pursue further education. But I want to concentrate on the sabbatical for the purpose of physical and spiritual rest and renewal, refreshment, and reinvigoration, a temporary “stop” or “ceasing” from his present ministry.

Many pastors experience what Elijah experienced after extended service for God. The victories, defeats, blessings, and burdens over the years take their toll on body, soul, and spirit. Elijah, exhausted from both serving God and running from the conflicts of ministry, found himself under a juniper tree, crying out to God to take His life. That was Elijah’s wish, but it was not God’s will. God’s will was to restore Elijah through rest and nourishment so he could finish the work God wanted Him to do. Elijah wanted God to take his life, but God wanted Elijah to go and touch a life. And that he did, when he called out Elisha to follow him and eventually take his place. God wants all of His servants to finish well. To do this, periodically they need times of rest and renewal, just as our Lord did (Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35), so they can fulfill the tasks of ministry.

Pastoral ministry is a full-time commitment to the care and nurturing of a congregation. The demands upon a pastor in today’s world are increasingly crushing. In the midst of such demands, it is easy for the Lord’s servant to lose focus, purpose, and even a sense of God’s leading in the affairs of the church. Despondency and discouragement can replace joy. Without a period to renew and recharge, a weary pastor may think that a change in ministry might be the answer. This
solution seldom works, for he will simply carry his "needy" soul to a different location. The pastor is a giver every day, and there comes a time when he must receive.

The primary intent of a sabbatical (Sabbath rest) is to abstain completely from everyday work. It is a time to relax mind, body, and soul and to be renewed, nourished, and free from worry about how things are going and what needs to be done next. It is not a time for running away from the problems and perplexities of life but is an opportunity to receive grace to face them, refresh fellowship with God, review past spiritual commitments, reshape commitments for the future, and restore the joy of salvation and the blessing of service to a holy, loving, and righteous God.

Timelines

How long should a sabbatical last?

A time of "Sabbath rest" for the pastor must fit his unique situation. No specific plan fits all. For this reason, it would be wise for the leadership of the church to establish a Sabbatical/Renewal Leave and make it a part of the church's constitution or by-laws. It might even be wise to appoint a Sabbatical Committee.

Everyone—pastor, deacons, and congregation—should decide upon the timeline. Often it will be determined by the number of years a pastor has served the church.

One denomination gives three weeks after four years, five weeks after five years, seven weeks after six years, nine to twelve weeks after seven years. This sabbatical does not replace the pastor's regular vacation time but supplements it. During this time the pastor's salary and benefits continue as usual. One church gave its pastor three months after he had pastored there for seven years and gave him another three months after twelve years. The longer one has been in ministry, the greater the need for respite. One report stated that after six years, both pastor and people start to get used to each other, and both need a time of refreshment!

Activities

What will the pastor do with all that time off?

Well, he certainly should have a plan to enrich not only himself but also his family and the church. Ecclesiastes 3:1 states that "to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven," and a sabbatical is a "time" for the pastor to think uninterruptedly upon such things. First and foremost, he should make it a time of rest and relaxation. He may choose to stay home or spend time traveling. He may wish to visit other churches for spiritual refreshment and to gain ideas for ministry.

He may wish to catch up on his reading and writing. It ought not to be a time for sermon preparation, though thinking about future series might be permitted! It should be a time to enjoy his family and do things he has had to put off. He might consider taking a mission trip he has wanted to take for a long time. He must have a time for "silence and solitude" in the presence of the Lord, a time for seeking spiritual direction, a time to enjoy the beauty of life, a time for personal Bible study and prayer, a time to renew vision, and a time to restore his joy and enthusiasm for continued service for the Lord.

Staffing

How will we get along without a pastor?

Actually, not having a pastor for a while can be a maturing experience for the church. If the church has an associate, some of the work will continue as usual, but the pastor's pulpit ministry, general oversight, and personal involvement in ministry need to be considered. If the church has only one pastor, his absence provides a wonderful opportunity for the members of the body to exercise their gifts. A Sabbatical Committee could list all the activities that need to be cared for in the pastor's absence and could assign members to assist in carrying

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<th>A Suggested Pastoral Sabbatical Policy</th>
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<td>1. All members of the full-time pastoral staff shall be eligible for a _______ month sabbatical leave after completing _______ years of service. After five additional years of pastoral ministry, each member of the pastoral staff shall receive another _______ month sabbatical.</td>
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<td>2. The time of the sabbatical leave and its funding must be approved by both the deacons and the congregation.</td>
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<td>3. Sabbaticals shall not be considered as part of the pastor's vacation time, and during the sabbatical the pastor will continue to receive his regular salary and benefits.</td>
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<td>4. The deacons will appoint a special task force to be known as the Sabbatical Committee with the following responsibilities: to meet with the pastor prior to his leave of absence to see how his duties will be fulfilled; to ensure that these duties are carried out; to assign a person to contact the pastor only in cases of emergency; to meet with the pastor upon his return to update him on congregational life.</td>
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<td>5. Within thirty days after the pastor's return from his sabbatical, he shall provide a written accountability report to the Sabbatical Committee, deacons, and congregation, recounting the beneficial impact upon his life and family and summarizing the things he learned while away. He may also mention some of his activities, as well as places he may have visited. The Sabbatical Committee should also evaluate how the pastor's absence affected the congregation.</td>
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<td>6. No major decisions will be made by the deacons or the congregation in the pastor's absence, unless they make the pastor aware of them first.</td>
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<td>7. On the Sunday before the pastor's sabbatical begins, the church family may wish to hold a special service acknowledging the pastor, his family, and their ministry. Upon his return, the church may want to hold a fellowship time welcoming him back.</td>
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<td>8. For the congregation to benefit from the personal renewal of its pastor, and out of respect for the congregation's kindness, the pastor should not consider a change in ministry for at least a year, and hopefully not for several years!</td>
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them out. Daily administration, hospital visitation, in-home calling, youth activities, prayer times, Bible studies, and many other areas of ministry can be filled by lay workers.

The pulpit ministry could be filled by a retired pastor in the area, a seminary intern, missionaries on furlough, associate pastors, or licensed laymen in the church. The GARBC Ministry Resource Center can connect a church with retired pastors seeking opportunities to serve the Lord on a limited basis. This "empty pulpit" time also provides an occasion for training people within the body, perhaps young people sensing a call to ministry.

One person, possibly an associate or chairman of the deacons, should be responsible for reaching the pastor in case of an emergency. Any worthy pastor wants to be informed of such situations while he is gone.

**Funding**

*How much will a sabbatical cost? How will we cover the extra costs? Where will the funds come from?*

Usually when finances are involved, regardless of the needs in a church, such questions are raised and need to be answered. As mentioned earlier, the pastor still receives his regular salary and benefits while on sabbatical.

It is best to plan ahead, because added expense will occur during the pastor's absence, primarily for pulpit supply. The best way to handle the expense is to establish in the annual budget a line item marked "pastoral sabbatical." Each year that amount could be placed into an escrow fund and even gain interest until needed. If a church decides upon the arrival of its new pastor to give him a sabbatical in five years, and they budget $100 per month, they would have $6,000, plus interest, in which to meet the need.

Other ways to obtain funds are through special offerings, designated gifts, or extra funds on hand. God will provide if the people will trust! We always seem to come up with the finances to meet emergencies both in our personal lives and in the church. As the saying goes, "Where there is a will, there is a way." The local body should demonstrate a "will" to care for the needs of their pastor; after all, he cares for them on a regular basis.

A large majority of GARBC pastors who have served a number of years in ministry have never had the privilege of a "pastoral sabbatical." Granted, God has blessed them and given them the needed strength and grace, but some refreshing times away could have made the journey so much smoother. In case you haven't noticed, in all of Paul's epistles to the local churches, he addressed them by saying, "Grace to you and peace," but to Timothy and Titus he wrote, "Grace, mercy, and peace [to you]" (emphasis added). Evidently, just grace and peace will not do for preachers; they also need mercy! I pray these words might encourage some church leadership to consider a sabbatical policy for their pastors, and I am sure that is their prayer too!

*Note:

[www.firststone.org/articles/pulpit/crisis_in_leadership.htm](http://www.firststone.org/articles/pulpit/crisis_in_leadership.htm)

*Next month's Baptist Bulletin will feature an article by a pastor who went on a sabbatical. Stay tuned.*

*For a resource on a related topic of Sabbath rest, see page 29 for a book review on Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest, by Lynne M. Baab.*

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