

# ACC Recommended Sabbatical Practices

Adapted from 2014 work by MCBC, adopted by ACC Ministerial Leadership Committee Nov. 2024

## A. Philosophical Underpinnings

MCUSA and ACC place high value on the pastors serving in congregational settings. It is recognized that after extended periods of service, pastoral staff and their congregations can benefit from an opportunity for renewal, revitalization, and refocusing to sustain and enhance the effectiveness of their ministry, extend their tenure, and augment personal health and growth. Such opportunities are included as recommendations within the yearly MCUSA compensation guidelines. These may include study, service, retreats, reading, writing, visiting the work of the church at home and abroad, time for refreshment and for renewing family relationships, attending events that are inspirational and educational, etc. Pastors are encouraged to plan a sabbatical that gives them an opportunity to retreat from their formal roles and duties in order that they might focus on personal renewal. [\*]

This document of good practices has been compiled to assist pastors and congregational decision makers think through sabbatical plans holistically. Recognizing that each congregational context is unique, it is suggested that congregational leadership groups and pastors consult with others in similar circumstances and/or their conference minister to discern the best fit. It is suggested that the pastor and her/his oversight group use this document to consider together which of the practices presented are relevant to their situation. Principles of integrity and justice will guide those responsible for working out the details with personnel considering a sabbatical leave.

## B. Eligibility and Length

The MCUSA compensation guidelines suggest the following for sabbatical consideration, *“for each year of completed service to this congregation (other than the year in which a sabbatical leave is received), one month of sabbatical leave may be granted.”* In general, the leave is not to be used until the fourth year of ministry in a given location though pastors and congregations may negotiate the length and frequency of a sabbatical leave. Factors being weighed might include: the needs of the pastor, financial capacity of the congregation, work context and timing, and the relationship between the pastor and the congregation. It is advised for all parties to maintain flexibility.

It is acceptable for pastors to negotiate to add annual vacation time to the sabbatical leave. It would be prorated to the amount of annual vacation time available, i.e. if the annual vacation leave is 4 weeks, 3 weeks could be applied to the sabbatical leave.

A sabbatical leave should not be a part of negotiation in a severance package.

## C. Application and Procedure

An application for a sabbatical leave should be submitted to the responsible leadership group in a congregation at least six months before the planned start date. This gives ample time for negotiation and preparation.

An outline providing: the proposed dates of the sabbatical leave, plus the additional vacation leave if requested; a description of objectives and the proposed activities; a statement of how these activities will be beneficial to the applicant and how they will contribute to enhancing his/her ministry.

It would be helpful to include a prioritized list of tasks, activities, obligations, and services that will need to be addressed while on leave and suggestions as to how they might be met. The list should include anticipated issues that might need to be addressed.

An application would be approved based on the merits of the plan, the timing, and benefit(s) to the pastor and the congregation. It is good practice for the congregational leadership group to inform the applicant, in writing, outlining the consensus reached and conditions of the sabbatical leave.

While not a part of the approval consideration, discussions should include whether or not a temporary replacement would be advisable.

Included in the proposal should also be plans for how the applicant intends to demonstrate accountability, e.g. a report, newsletter article(s), sermons, presentations, a blog, etc.

## **D. Remuneration, Expenses and Some Administrative Suggestions**

Remuneration plans may vary with expressed values and principles, the pastor's financial situation, the congregation's financial capacity and the sabbatical leave plan that emerges out of the discussions. Remuneration in general practice in MCUSA covers 100% of the pastor's salary during their sabbatical leave. Flexibility on both sides helps to come to an option that meets both parties' needs and obligations. If a percentage of the salary is offered as remuneration, one option may be to consider prorating, or spreading, the percentage of reduction over one year to make each month's reduction smaller.

As noted above, the entitled annual vacation leave could be added as determined by the employment contract. Benefits, if included, would continue during the sabbatical leave and sick leave credits would continue to accumulate but vacation credits would not for that year.

A portion of the professional development amount already budgeted in the fiscal year of the sabbatical leave could be requested for approved activities.

To assist in financial planning, the congregation may consider creating a budget line with an amount to cover unexpected expenses while conducting the pastor's tasks during the leave.

The pastor's routine operational budget may be used to meet routine expenses incurred during his/her absence.

It is understood that any/all of the recommended practices may be negotiated to align with the FTE agreements of pastoral staff.

## **E. Obligations**

It is helpful to spell out obligations of the pastor and congregation to avoid misunderstanding.

**Pastor:** It is generally accepted/expected that, after the sabbatical leave has been completed, the ministry obligation to the congregation is equivalent to one additional year of service i.e. the 5th year. It is reasonable to expect that should the pastor resign on his/her own initiative before the time of obligation has expired, the congregation may be entitled to recoup some of the compensation provided during the most recent sabbatical period.

**The congregation:** Should discuss the pastor's proposal in good faith, giving full credence to the well-being of the pastor with open communication. To maintain good faith the congregation will retain the pastor's position and not contemplate replacing him/her during his/her absence and not contemplate making any changes to the terms of the leave of absence agreement. Significant programming changes should also not be made in his/her absence.

*[\*] Severe stress leave and time for counselling and treatment should be maintained under medical leave and not be combined with sabbatical leave.*