



## **Introducing the subject of a sabbatical for ministry staff when no sabbatical policy exists:**

### Background:

In our experience, there are few more consistently controversial topics in a church than the issue of sabbaticals for staff. Generally, the topic is ignored until a staff member (often the senior pastor) comes to the governing board and requests an extended period of time away from the duties of the ministry role. By waiting until a specific need is expressed, the leader is forced into a position of *justifying* the need, and the board is constrained to evaluating the *legitimacy* of the need, all within the operational context of how and to whom the staff member's responsibilities will be covered during their absence. The discussion generally then devolves into a debate as to the merits of a time of "refreshment" for the staff member and the minimum amount of time necessary to accomplish this.

### Core Issue

In the absence of a developed policy on sabbatical, discussions by the board or appointed sub-committee on this topic may often be perceived as a request for an extended time off or vacation. This is partially a function of the people on committee (generally lay people with business-oriented or similar professional backgrounds) bring from their own career experiences, and partially a function of a lack of clear definition of the purpose and objectives for taking a sabbatical. Whether stated or not, by waiting to discuss this topic until a staff member makes a request the board puts that staff member in the somewhat humiliating position of having to request special treatment because they "need" it. Not surprisingly, that is a tough conversation for anyone to have with their "bosses".

### Our Perspective: "Sabbatical as Investment"

Sabbaticals are not vacations – they are a critical extension of the rhythm of Sabbath in our lives – in other words, the critical extension of work and rest. In this context, it is not just the ceasing of normal labors, but the positive obligation to "keep it holy" that form the foundation of both Sabbath-keeping and the place of sabbaticals in the life of a ministry leader.

- Functionally, a sabbatical should have clearly defined goals and a clearly articulated plan to achieve those goals.
- Ideally, a ministry organization should have some form of organizational consensus (generally in the form of a board-sanctioned written "policy") as to the nature, timing, objectives, oversight, and processes for staff sabbaticals long before a staff member is put in the position of requesting one.
- Once a sabbatical has been requested and approved according to such a policy, the board should put in place, in close consultation with the requesting staff member, an overview of the mutually agreed-upon goals of the sabbatical and resources available for achieving those goals.

Far from being a simple unstructured vacation time, it is critical that a Sabbatical be thought of as an *investment* by both the organization and the individual in the well-being of the ministry leader. In this sense, the process of sabbatical, from the policy development to its implementation with an individual, is part of a larger discussion on "soul care" – that is...caring for the soul of those in ministry leadership. Central to the idea of soul care is the concept of "meaningful rest", which incorporates how we can meaningfully tend to our souls (keep it holy) during the resting time, through the building/rebuilding of spiritual disciplines and practices. Our personal observations and experiences, as well as the discouraging statistics and anecdotes on pastoral departures from ministry all confirm the destructive effect of not incorporating the Sabbath rhythm of meaningful rest into our organizational responsibilities to staff members.



## Benefits of Sabbatical

### VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

- When there is a good match between the professional church worker and congregation or school, a long-term ministry is desirable. In such instances, a sabbatical is a wise investment.
- Sabbatical leave should be an ongoing intentional part of a congregation's ministry, not a reaction to a crisis. (i.e. burnout, ) An excellent time to incorporate a sabbatical policy is during the call process.

### Benefits for the local congregation

- An experienced professional church worker who returns from sabbatical with renewed energy and rediscovered zeal for ministry
- An opportunity to develop congregational leadership and to come to a greater understanding of the congregation's ministry by assuming some of the pastoral duties during the interim
- An occasion for the congregation to reflect and assess their partnership with the professional church worker and ways to strengthen and improve ministry
- An opportunity to show support and care for a beloved professional church worker and his/her family
- A time for congregational members to reconsider their commitment and to assess their relationship to the life and witness of the congregation

### Benefits for the professional church worker

- A time of rest: a needed break from long hours, high pressure, personal sacrifice, A time to let go and let others hold what you have been holding 24/7/365.
- A time for revitalizing and refreshment: a time for growing in a greater understanding of self and spiritual depth. A time for discovering and developing new rhythms for life, ministry, and staying present to God - bringing those rhythms and good practices back into the work of ministry. A time with family and friends, to renew and strengthen those relationships
- A time of re-visioning: A time to deepen and strengthen the call to ministry, a time to better understand the place of the worker within God's kingdom, and re-committing of self to serving.



## Sabbatical Support

### Gracebridge services:

#### **1. Sabbatical Governance – for the design and structure of a new policy**

- a. Building Board and congregational support
  - i. Provide background explanatory material, including the scriptural and statistical basis for sabbaticals
  - ii. Meet with governing board to discuss applicable principles of soul care for leaders and respond to concerns and objectives
  - iii. Integrate purpose of sabbatical with the discipline of soul care and spiritual direction
- b. Development of a sabbatical policy
  - i. Provide structured questionnaire to help board discern objectives, structural design, and limitations of a sabbatical policy
  - ii. Interact with board representatives and staff leaders to integrate responses to the questionnaire into a base policy template for board review and discussion
  - iii. Work with board to convert policy template into workable policy for implementation
  - iv. Provide support, if necessary, for board presentation of policy to the general congregation, if necessary.

#### **2. Sabbatical Implementation and Coaching**

- a. Preparing the leader and the organization for a specific sabbatical time.
- b. Helping set appropriate and achievable expectations for all involved
- c. Providing spiritual direction (prayer, active presence, rendering a service of sensitivity in support of another's spiritual growth) to the leader during the sabbatical period, as requested, through
  - i. Assessment
  - ii. Adjustment
  - iii. Accompaniment
- d. Provide external encouragement and accountability to ensure the agreed-upon values and purpose of sabbatical are faithfully pursued
- e. Work with leader and board to effectively transition back into ministry from sabbatical
- f. Assist leader in providing "after-action review" of sabbatical time to the board to ensure conformity with stated objectives

While ideally Gracebridge Alliance would be involved in both these services sequentially in any given organization, each service can be offered independent of the other.