



Sabbatical Leave:

How Is It Working?

The Sabbatical policy entitles ministry personnel to a three-month sabbatical leave after each five-year interval of ministry in the same pastoral charge. The policy came into effect January 1, 2006, in response to a proposal passed by the 38th General Council. When a significant new policy is introduced by the General Council, the effectiveness of the policy is reviewed after three to five years. The Permanent Committee on Ministry and Employment Policies and Services (PC-MEPS) formed a working group to study the effectiveness of the sabbatical policy. The results will influence the major pastoral relations policy review that is underway.

To provide a forum for feedback from ministry personnel and lay leaders in the church, an online survey was conducted this past spring, receiving over 700 responses.

The number of sabbaticals reported since 2007 indicates that taking a sabbatical leave has become more common. Overall, ministry personnel report that 24.2% have taken a sabbatical since 2007. Of those who have been in the same pastoral relationship for more than five years, nearly half (44.7%) indicate that they have taken a sabbatical since 2007 and a further 18% of ministry personnel indicated that they had taken a sabbatical before moving to their current pastoral relationship.



The survey also asked what challenges were perceived with the current policy, and hundreds of the respondents commented. The top three suggestions were to

1. make the sabbatical policy more flexible so that it meets a broader spectrum of needs,
2. make the policy more affordable for pastoral charges and ministers, and
3. ensure that the purpose and intended outcomes of each sabbatical leave are clearly understood by all involved.

The results of this research will now become part of the review of pastoral relations policies as the church prepares for the 41st General Council.



Ministry Personnel Support
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Sabbatical Leave: A Building Block for Strong Ministry

The Alban Institute, a highly respected authority on congregations and ministry, has for many years promoted long-term pastoral relationships. Their research shows that congregations have a better chance of developing a clear mission and strong community life together when pastoral relationships last for several years. As a strategy to enable longer pastoral relationships, the Alban Institute supports the provision of sabbaticals in many of their publications and educational events.

A sabbatical can provide a time of renewal and refocusing of a minister's leadership goals. Ministers and members in United Churches that have experienced a sabbatical were asked in a spring 2011 survey if they thought the sabbatical had an influence on how long the pastoral relationship was likely to last. The answers revealed a significant difference between the opinions of ministers and lay members as shown in the graph *What Effect Did the Sabbatical Have on the Length of Pastoral Relationship?*

Lay members don't realize that ministers who take a sabbatical want to stay longer. Two out of three ordered ministers (61.3%) and half the designated lay ministers report that their sabbaticals have contributed to extending the length of their current pastoral relationship, even though this may not have

been expressed publicly. However, less than a quarter of lay members (23.1%) believe that the pastoral relationship will last longer because of the sabbatical.

The survey also revealed that lay members perceive sabbaticals as a financial challenge: 82.1% of lay members reported that the sabbatical was a financial challenge for their pastoral charge; only 42% of ministry personnel considered the sabbatical a financial challenge for the charge.

Considering these differing perspectives on the sabbatical period, the balance must be weighed between the costs of a sabbatical compared to the disruption a change in pastoral relationships can cause.

It is widely recognized, however, that communication is a key component of any sabbatical: clarifying roles and responsibilities is extremely important and leads to successful sabbatical outcomes for both the ministry personnel and the congregation.

A number of excellent resources about sabbaticals can be found on The Alban Institute website, www.alban.org.

The United Church's website has a great deal of information on process (roles and responsibilities) and financial aid available (see www.united-church.ca/minstaff/pastoral/leaves/sabbatical).

What effect did the sabbatical have on the length of pastoral relationship?

