

Sabbatical: A Testimonial

Kathryn Moase, St. Mark's United Church, Scarborough, Ontario, summarizes the pastoral charge's experience with a sabbatical period:

The minister at St. Mark's, Alan Hall, took his sabbatical in 2006; however, we started planning for it at least three years in advance. Alan proposed that the congregation embark on a three-year faith formation study, based on "A New Creed." This was to be followed by a four-month sabbatical, during which time the congregation would undertake to work through a Joint Needs Assessment process, as Alan would then have been with the congregation for 19 years. It was felt there was a need to discern the direction in which we wanted to move, and the sabbatical would give us the time and space to do so. There was no intention this would turn into an evaluation of our minister's leadership, and that did not happen.

Work on the details for the sabbatical started about a year in advance. The board appointed a three-member Sabbatical Coordinating Team to oversee provision of ministerial services during the sabbatical period. We worked with members of all of our ministry teams to determine where there were concerns and issues. The most helpful part of the process for members of the congregation was the clear and frequent communication from those who were making decisions about how tasks were to be completed. Questions were answered as best as possible, concerns were heard, and all members of the congregation were given an opportunity for input.

Things changed for us as a congregation, both during and after the sabbatical. We hired a pulpit supply who also assisted the Worship Ministry Team for the duration. Lay people already provide worship services at St. Mark's during the summer, and we wanted to take this opportunity to experience a different worship style. We decided that we would take on all of the other tasks usually done by a minister. There was no shortage of people willing to assume the added responsibilities. In fact, most people took it on with added energy, ensuring everything was done well.

Pastoral care was the biggest worry and challenge, but we made sure we lived out the words of "A New Creed" that remind us that "We are not alone." St. Mark's has changed dramatically over the last few years: many people have gained the confidence to make decisions in a faithful and welcoming way. The supervisor appointed by presbytery was helpful and supportive, and neighbouring clergy were quick to offer their services when the need arose.

We've learned a lot about what we can do, and how right it is to do so as part of a faith community. As we assumed more of the ministry roles within the congregation, we came to recognize the value of the work that is done on both a day-to-day and an ongoing basis. Congregations need to know about the benefits of a sabbatical: how much a congregation can grow when they take on the responsibility of being church, not just going to church.

I urge congregations to see sabbaticals as an opportunity to mature and grow as a community of faith. When members of the congregation are encouraged to take on leadership roles that are usually assumed by those in paid, accountable ministry, the results are enormous. When we understand that we're all in accountable ministry, paid or not, then the skills learned and leadership skills developed result in a deepened sense of community that will have lasting and unexpected benefits.