

Program Resources

Book

[Planning Sabbaticals: A Guide for Congregations and their Pastors](#) by Robert C. Saler

PC(USA) Sabbatical Advice

The following is a summary of guidance found across 11 different presbyteries' sabbatical policies.

1. A sabbatical has a clear purpose—and clear limits.

In the PC(USA), a sabbatical is usually defined as:

- An **intentional, planned season away from normal duties** for renewal, reflection, learning, and restoration
- **Rooted in biblical Sabbath theology**, not merely an academic or employment benefit
- **Not a vacation, not study leave, and not career transition time**

Equally important:

- It should **not be overly programmed**
- It should **intentionally disengage the pastor from daily ministry responsibilities**

Core takeaway: A sabbatical is spiritual, vocational, and communal in nature, not personal time off.

2. Eligibility is service-based and time-related.

As pastors plan sabbatical:

- Sabbaticals are ordinarily available after **5–7 years of continuous service** in a call
- Most presbyteries expect:
 - **At least six years between sabbaticals**
 - Sabbaticals are commonly encouraged around the **seventh year** of ministry in one place
- Some policies allow earlier eligibility if long prior service occurred **without a previous sabbatical**

3. The norm is three months.

Across the PC(USA), there is very strong convergence on length of sabbatical:

- **10–12 weeks (about 3 months)** is the standard sabbatical length
- The Board of Pensions requires **not less than four weeks** for the Sabbath Sabbatical Support Grant
- Vacation or study leave:
 - Is often **included within** the sabbatical, not added afterward
 - May be **attached**, extending total time away to 4+ months (policy dependent)
- Almost always, sabbaticals require **explicit COM approval**

4. Formal planning is critical—and starts early.

Presbyteries generally require **intentional advance planning**:

- A **written sabbatical proposal** must be submitted and approved by:
 - Session
 - Then by the Committee/Commission on Ministry (COM)
- Timing:
 - **At least 6 months prior** to the intended start date
 - Some guidelines allow a minimum of **3 months**, but six is the standard

Usual elements of the plan:

- Purpose and sabbatical focus
- Goals and expected outcomes
- Activities and locations
- How learning or renewal benefits the **congregation and pastor**
- Coverage plan for worship, pastoral care, program responsibilities, and moderation session meetings
- Funding approach
- Reentry and reporting plan

5. Salary and benefits continue. Coverage is a church responsibility.

Across the PC(USA), policies are unambiguous:

- During sabbatical, the church continues:
 - **Full salary**
 - **Housing allowance**
 - **Pension and benefits**
- The congregation is responsible for:
 - Paying pulpit supply or substitute pastoral leadership
 - Maintaining ministry continuity during the leave

Sabbatical-specific expenses (travel, retreats, tuition):

- Usually supported by the congregation, sometimes supplemented by the pastor
- Funding options include:
 - Study allowances
 - Other congregational funding
 - Presbytery funds
 - Lilly Endowment, Louisville Institute, or Board of Pensions grants

6. Boundaries during the sabbatical are critical.

Policies stress that:

- The pastor is expected to **refrain from all pastoral duties**, including:
 - Pastoral care
 - Worship leadership
 - Weddings and funerals
 - Ongoing congregational communication
- The Session is responsible for:
 - Protecting the sabbatical
 - Educating the congregation
 - Ensuring the pastor is not pulled back into ministry

This boundary-keeping is framed as:

- An **act of faith**
- A practice that benefits both pastor and congregation

7. A post-sabbatical commitment is expected.

Policies treat sabbaticals as an investment, not a prelude to departure:

- Pastors ordinarily agree to remain in the call:
 - **At least one year** after return
 - Sometimes longer (measured in multiples of sabbatical length)
- Some policies require **repayment of sabbatical salary** if the pastor departs early
- Sabbaticals are discouraged when a pastor is actively seeking another call

8. Reentry, reporting, and integration are required.

Presbyteries and congregations expect accountability and reflection after return:

- A **written report or reflection** usually must be shared with:
 - Session
 - Committee/Commission on Ministry
- Many policies encourage:
 - Sharing learnings with the congregation
 - Teaching, reflection, or testimony as part of congregational life

Common expected outcomes:

- Renewed pastoral energy and clarity of call
- Stronger lay leadership
- Reaffirmed shared ministry between pastor and congregation

The bottom line across the PC(USA)

To plan a sabbatical well, we recommend:

1. Treat it as **spiritually grounded and supportive of the vocation of pastor and congregation**
2. Begin **at least six months in advance**
3. Secure **Session and COM approval**
4. Make **clear financial and coverage plans**
5. Protect **firm boundaries during the leave**
6. Commit to **continued service afterward**
7. Plan carefully for **reentry and integration**

In the PC(USA), sabbatical leave is not just time away from ministry—but a **faithful practice that strengthens ministry for the long term.**

Special thanks to the following presbyteries, whose policies were used in compiling this document:

Beaver-Butler Presbytery, Chicago Presbytery, Huntingdon Presbytery, Mountain Laurel Presbytery, New Castle Presbytery, Presbytery of Donegal, Presbytery of Genesee Valley, Presbytery of Milwaukee, Presbytery of New Harmony, Presbytery of Northern Kansas, Presbytery of Philadelphia

Sabbaticals by Church Context

Core Principle

Sabbaticals are essential pastoral care. Regardless of church size or budget, every congregation can (and should) plan for rhythms of rest that sustain long-term ministry health. The difference lies not in whether sabbaticals happen, but how they are planned and resourced.

Across All Contexts

1. Plan early.

- Begin conversations years—not months—in advance
- Build sabbaticals into expectations, not emergencies

2. Communicate clearly.

- Among leadership (pastor and elders)
- With the congregation (set expectations about changes)

3. Use available resources (denominational grants, presbytery support, local networks).

4. Embrace temporary change.

- Slower pace, paused programs, shared leadership are healthy
- A sabbatical is not disruption—it is renewal

5. Reframe sabbaticals: They are not a break from ministry, but an investment in its sustainability.

Large, Well-Funded Churches

Make sabbaticals standard policy.

- Budget proactively: ~\$10,000–\$20,000 per staff member every 5–7 years
- Equivalent to ~\$1,500–\$2,800/year per eligible staff member

Plan coverage in advance.

- Existing clergy absorb responsibilities
- Pulpit supply is scheduled and funded ahead of time

Key posture: No improvising, this is normal operations, not an exception.

Treat sabbaticals like insurance or continuing education: predictable, planned, and built into church life.

Medium-Size Churches

Build a modest reserve.

- Set aside \$500–\$1,000 annually per staff member.
- Over time, creates a fund for sabbatical, education, or coverage.

Leverage external resources.

- Board of Pensions [Sabbath Sabbatical Support Grant](#): up to \$5,000
- Additional travel grant (up to \$5,000 in certain cases)
- Presbytery support may also be available.

Plan ministry continuity creatively.

- Use CREs, retired clergy, or local pastors.
- Expect some programs to pause temporarily (30–90 days).

Communicate early and clearly.

- Align elders, pastor, and congregation.
- Normalize slowed activity during sabbatical.

Under-Resourced Churches

Keep it simple but intentional.

- Sabbaticals may be shorter (e.g., 3–4 weeks)
- Even brief time away matters

Rely heavily on grants.

- [Sabbath Sabbatical Support](#) grant (\$5,000-\$10,000) or [Clergy Wellness Support](#) grant (\$5,000 for shorter/alternative programs)
- Lilly Foundation
- Presbytery partnerships

Lean into shared leadership.

- CREs, lay leaders, retirees, neighboring pastors
- Volunteers step into expanded roles

Normalize temporary pauses.

- Some programs may stop temporarily—and that's okay

Prioritize communication.

- Frame this as congregational care for their pastor

Clerk of Session Sabbatical Checklist

Support for Pastor and Congregation

The Clerk's ministry during a sabbatical is often quiet but deeply important. By helping maintain order, communication, and healthy boundaries, the Clerk supports both the pastor's renewal and the congregation's continued faithfulness in ministry.

Before the Sabbatical

Session Preparation

- ☐ Confirm Session approval of sabbatical dates and terms
- ☐ Form a Sabbatical Planning Team
- ☐ Educate yourself about sabbaticals
 - Resource: [Planning Sabbaticals: A Guide for Congregations and their Pastors](#) by Roberts C. Saler
- ☐ Review coverage plans for worship, pastoral care, and administration
- ☐ Clarify leadership responsibilities during the sabbatical
- ☐ Ensure emergency procedures are established
- ☐ Identify who will moderate Session meetings
- ☐ Coordinate with church staff regarding workflow and communication

Communication Preparation

- ☐ Assist in preparing congregational announcement(s)
- ☐ Ensure congregation understands:
 - purpose of the sabbatical
 - dates of leave
 - leadership coverage
 - communication expectations
- ☐ Prepare and produce a Congregational and Pastoral Plan overview for the congregation
- ☐ Help communicate healthy sabbatical boundaries
- ☐ Prepare contact lists for leaders and emergency response

Worship and Ministry Coordination

- ☐ Confirm pulpit supply schedule
- ☐ Confirm guest worship leaders and liturgists
- ☐ Ensure pastoral care coverage is assigned
- ☐ Review plans for funerals, weddings, and emergencies
- ☐ Coordinate with music staff and worship committees

Administrative Readiness

- ☐ Ensure office procedures are clear
- ☐ Confirm access to important records and passwords if needed
- ☐ Verify calendar coverage and building needs
- ☐ Coordinate with Treasurer regarding sabbatical-related expenses
- ☐ Ensure Session committees understand their responsibilities

During the Sabbatical

Session Leadership

- ☐ Regularly attend worship services
- ☐ Participate in church renewal activities and events
- ☐ Help maintain stability and continuity in congregational leadership
- ☐ Encourage shared leadership among elders and ministry teams
- ☐ Support staff and volunteers appropriately
- ☐ Keep Session informed of significant matters

Boundary Protection

- ☐ Refrain from unnecessary contact with the pastor
- ☐ Redirect routine concerns to appropriate leaders
- ☐ Discourage congregation members from interrupting sabbatical time
- ☐ Contact the pastor only in true emergencies according to agreed protocol

Communication

- ☐ Provide periodic updates to the congregation
- ☐ Communicate schedule changes or coverage information clearly
- ☐ Help maintain a calm and encouraging tone in church communications
- ☐ Encourage prayers for the pastor and congregation

Congregational Care

- ☐ Monitor congregational morale and concerns
- ☐ Ensure pastoral care needs are being addressed
- ☐ Support guest leaders and visiting clergy
- ☐ Encourage flexibility and patience within the congregation

Preparing for Return

Reentry Planning

- ☐ Coordinate return date communication
- ☐ Prepare Session for pastoral reentry
- ☐ Avoid scheduling overwhelming responsibilities immediately upon return
- ☐ Encourage a reasonable transition period
- ☐ Plan opportunities/events for sabbatical reflections

After Sabbatical

Congregational Welcome

- ☐ Coordinate welcome-back communication or event(s)
- ☐ Hold celebrations/events for sabbatical reflection and sharing for both the pastor and the congregation
- ☐ Express appreciation for leaders, staff, and volunteers who served during the leave

Reflection and Evaluation (for Pastor and Session)

- ☐ Schedule Session reflection conversations
- ☐ Possible discussion topics:
 - lessons learned
 - leadership growth
 - ministry strengths discovered
 - future improvements for sabbatical planning
- ☐ Update sabbatical policies or procedures if needed
- ☐ Ensure important learnings are reflected in Session records

Board of Pensions Resources

The Assistance Program of the Board of Pensions

The [Assistance Program](#) expresses our care for one another by helping active and retired members of the Benefits Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and their families in need with financial assistance.

Care navigation feature of the Medical Plan

[Care navigation](#) is available to members enrolled in the PPO, EPO, and HDHP as part of their medical benefits. When these employees have a question about medical benefits, Quantum Health's Care Coordinators are just a call, click, or tap away.

Employee Assistance Plan (EAP) by Spring Health

The [Employee Assistance Plan \(EAP\)](#) is provided by Spring Health in partnership with Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield at no cost to employees with access, including anyone enrolled in PPO, EPO, or HDHP medical coverage through the Board of Pensions, or in the Covenant Package. Through the EAP, employees have access to high-quality mental health care and support for all of life's challenges, from personal crises to health issues, to work-related problems.

Fidelity financial consultation reservations

If you participate in the 403(b)(9) Retirement Savings Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), visit fidelity.com/reserve to schedule an individual financial consultation with a Fidelity representative. Be sure to enter "The Board of Pensions PC(USA)" as the employer to meet with a representative familiar with our plans.

Lifelong Learning programs

The Board of Pensions provides educational programs for Benefits Plan members, their spouses and surviving spouses, employers, and seminarians. Explore all the [Lifelong Learning](#) opportunities — which include in-person and virtual programs, as well as e-learning content.