

SABBATICAL RESOURCE PAPER

Approved by the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod Assembly—June 3, 2023

History—In 1990, the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod ELCA enacted sabbatical guidelines of 12 weeks paid leave for the rostered minister (deacon or pastor) after 7 years of service in a particular call. While admirable in nature and consistent with the Lutheran theological tradition, in the 33 years since adoption, those guidelines have become a document of aspiration rather than reality. The average call for a rostered minister is now between 5 and 7 years, so few qualify before they change positions. Three months away may also be a difficult obstacle, whether in the logistics of finding supply ministers or convincing leadership of a sabbatical's mutual renewal. This new reimagining aims to lower the barriers, thereby equipping the saints for ministry and building up the Body of Christ (*see Ephesians 4:12*).

Theology—Sabbath time, a time of rest, is crucial to being faithful servants of God. God commanded the Israelites to remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8-11). God calls to us through the Psalmist, saying, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). When Jesus saw his disciples weary and tired, he called them to “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). Indeed, Jesus called all God’s children to rest in him, saying, “come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). We are told that rest is so important that at the time of creation, God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2).

It can be difficult for many in our age to honor this blessing, indeed this command, to rest. Our culture encourages us to work harder and harder, to be available 24/7. Yet we know that constant work does not lead to good emotional, physical, or spiritual health (nor does it even yield the most productive work). The church is called to speak against this cultural trend, to boldly proclaim that God calls us to a healthy balance of work and rest, of busyness and sabbath.

Rostered ministers (deacons and pastors) in the church are not exempt from the challenge. Burnout is common. As deans, we see the struggles our colleagues face. The various needs of congregations and ministry sites, coupled with a sense of isolation, easily lead clergy to refrain from taking time off. It is crucial, though, that rostered ministers work to practice a regular Sabbath routine, for at least three reasons:

First, it is crucial for their own sake. Rostered ministers are first and foremost children of God, and God promises to take care of them and carry their burdens. As God’s people, rostered ministers need wholeness and healing.

Second, it is crucial for the sake of their ministry. A burned-out leader accomplishes less. The most effective leadership and ministry is done by leaders who are healthy, who work toward balanced self-care.

Third, it is crucial because rostered ministers are role models in the faith. By modeling self-care, leaders show and tell congregations that God desires a balanced life for all, a life which includes Sabbath and self-care. Many people need to hear that message, and rostered ministers can offer it through their choices and behaviors.

Therefore, we urge rostered ministers to nurture a healthy Sabbath lifestyle, to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them, and to set and keep appropriate boundaries. We also urge congregations and organizations who call rostered ministers to provide appropriate opportunities for Sabbath time, and to hold their leaders accountable to taking advantage of these opportunities.

In the church, we understand time as a rhythm, a series of concentric circles of days, weeks, seasons, and years. As such, we suggest that Sabbath time be rhythmic as well, with varying levels of rest. Some specific recommendations follow.

- **DAILY:** We encourage rostered ministers to make time for rest in each day, through daily prayer, devotion, and play.

- WEEKLY: The current “Compensation Guidelines for Rostered Ministers,” approved by the Northeastern PA Synod Assembly, encourages congregations to provide “One to two days off per week, and at least once a month, two consecutive days off.” We urge rostered ministers to take these days off, and not simply for sermon writing.
- YEARLY: “Compensation Guidelines for Rostered Ministers” encourages congregations to provide “four full weeks of vacation annually.” We urge rostered ministers to take these four weeks, including four Sundays.
- LONG-TERM: We encourage rostered ministers and congregations to seriously consider taking on a model of *Sabbatical*. This model suggests that when a leader has served in a particular place for a certain amount of time, that leader takes a substantial amount of time off for spiritual growth, reflection, and recuperation. This document outlines such a model for congregational consideration.

We commend these recommendations to all rostered ministers, Mutual Ministry committees, congregations and calling institutions throughout our synod.

Technology as Tool—Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, congregations embraced technologies that gave permission to experiment with worship. The use of Zoom, FaceBook, YouTube, and other online technologies enabled ministry sites and rostered ministers to continue worshipping throughout the pandemic successfully. An added bonus is that many congregations are reaching members and non-members who would normally not be able to participate in worship— those who have gone south for the winter, those who are homebound, far-flung family members, etc. – all of whom can now attend and participate in worship. This very same technology can now be deployed to provide Sunday worship coverage for congregations during a rostered minister’s sabbatical leave. While we anticipate technology to change and adapt over time, here are a few possibilities as of February 2023:

First, congregations whose pastor or deacon is on vacation could be linked in remotely with another local congregation each Sunday morning of a sabbatical. Projections of a worship service could serve any number of congregations locally or even at a distance.

Second, for those congregations that wish to use lay leadership for the worship service, but who might be struggling to provide meaningful sermon material, there are options. The Synod already has manuscript sermons available. Additionally, some pastors preach a sermon series at different times of the year. Some pastors may have developed a sermon series on the Ten Commandments or on the Articles of the Creed or on the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. Perhaps another pastor has developed a sermon series on discipleship highlighting a different disciple each week. We could also invite someone to develop a digital bank of downloadable sermons.

We encourage congregations to seek out other arrangements that work for them, such as:

- Temporary yoking with a local sister congregation for live worship; temporary pastoral sharing
- Highlight a different ministry partner each week (Bear Creek, seminary, Muhlenberg College, local Social Service agency)
- Inviting a Mission Interpreter (Synod Storyteller) to come preach
- Arrangements for pastoral care from a local pastoral colleague.

The world needs adaptive, nimble, curious, resilient, and courageous rostered ministers, along with the ministries they serve. Proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ through the Spirit in word and deed is life-changing, transforming, and saving work. The Lutheran emphasis on grace provides a powerful antidote to our status driven culture. We aim to make sabbatical leave possible, attainable, and beneficial for everyone, in every setting, no matter the size or configuration!

Your co-workers in the Gospel,

The Committee of Deans
February 2023

SABBATICAL PROVISIONS FOR ROSTERED MINISTERS (Deacons and Pastors)

Definition

A sabbatical *is* an intentional time for enrichment and renewal—whereby a rostered minister may focus on praying, studying, resting, reflecting, exploring, researching, writing, and preparing for future ministry; and, whereby the congregation or ministry site(s) may focus on gifts, leadership development, and holy imagination.

A sabbatical in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod *is not*:
solely a vacation;
time for routine work;
time for searching for a new call or a new career;
retirement planning;
or, for the rostered minister alone.

Sabbaticals encourage longer pastorates and calls, spur creativity and curiosity, contribute to the continued spiritual growth of faith leaders, allow ministry to be refreshed and refocused, help prevent vocational burnout, and strengthen a congregation's/ministry site's identity apart from the rostered minister.

Policy Details

Every four (4) years of a rostered minister's call, four (4) weeks are earned toward a rostered minister's sabbatical time. No more than twelve weeks of sabbatical time over the course of twelve years may be accrued. The rostered minister is expected to remain in the same call at least one year beyond any sabbatical time taken. The rostered minister may take their earned sabbatical time at any point after four years of service in conversation with the congregation's Council.

Year Four of Service in a Call = 4 Weeks Earned

Year Eight of Service in a Call = 4 Weeks Earned (8 Weeks accrued if a sabbatical was not taken earlier)

Year Twelve of Service in a Call = 4 Weeks Earned (12 Weeks accrued if a sabbatical was not taken earlier)

- * The sabbatical's focus will be developed in consort with the congregation council or calling institution (ministry site).
- * The congregation is expected to enter into a time of study and renewal concurrent with and possibly complementary of the rostered minister's sabbatical. Resources are available from the Synod for congregational use.
- * Sabbatical time is in addition to vacation and continuing education.
- * An appropriate amount of notification should be provided to the ministry site when scheduling the sabbatical.
- * Full salary, health, and benefits (normal compensation) will be paid during the rostered minister's sabbatical by the ministry site.
- * Arrangement of pastoral coverage during the sabbatical will be the responsibility of the congregation council (whether a supply pastor is invited, a lay minister is available, a local pastor is shared, or a resource supplied by the Synod is utilized).
- * Costs of the sabbatical (costs of courses, travel, and/or other sabbatical needs) will be paid by the rostered minister, or may be a shared expense in negotiation with the ministry site.
- * The rostered minister and the ministry site will notify the Synod when a sabbatical has been agreed upon.
- * Upon a sabbatical's completion, the rostered minister will provide an account to the congregation's Council/calling institution and to the Synod. This summary should address these questions:
 1. What was the nature of your sabbatical?
 2. What expectations did you fulfill during the sabbatical (including skills and knowledge acquired if applicable)?
 3. How is what you have gained during your sabbatical going to impact your ministry?
 4. What suggestions do you have for those who will take a sabbatical in the future?