

## **A Review of the Video:**

### **Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical**

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**Thesis: Pastoral sabbaticals are a way to retain congregational vitality.**

Oswald makes his case for clergy sabbaticals through appealing to the long-term self-interest of the congregation. In other words, the development of a sabbatical policy in a congregation is geared toward protecting the church's primary asset: its pastor. Studies continue to show that congregational effectiveness is increased through a long-term pastorate. Most lay people need to be educated with regard to the emotional, spiritual and physical demands of pastoral ministry. As Oswald says, "90% of what a pastor does is invisible to 90% of the people 90% of the time." Being on call 24 hours/day, 7 days/week, takes an enormous toll on the minister. The work is never done. Clergy often feel trapped living a life where they are constantly overextended, fearful that they are not going to make it, often opting either to leave a church early or to retire from ministry altogether. Compassion fatigue sets in: one's body, spiritual life and family take constant hits in pastoral ministry.

*"Even though ministry can be rich and meaningful, everyone in that role will eventually need some time to get out from under the never-ending pressure to be alert, compassionate, and present for any crisis or difficulty being experienced by any congregant at any time." ---Roy Oswald*

**Recommendation: Grant the pastor a three-month sabbatical every four years following a strategic planning process and an evaluation of ministry.** Following a planning process, clergy often end up as the point person, absorbing criticism for changes. If the strategic plan does not have any conflict-fueling items, it is probably not worth a whole lot. It is a natural consequence to this costly but important process that the pastor will fall out of favor with some. To have some real time away at this time (Matthew 14:13) is critical for the pastor to recharge, rest, prepare and come back to the congregation with strength, vision and vitality. The establishment of this rhythm is in the long-term interest of the congregation. Worn out clergy tend not to push ahead, take risks in advocating changes, or have the creativity and energy to advocate for and model spiritual growth to their congregations. As Oswald says, burned out clergy become "dull, hollow and uninteresting."

**A Sabbatical is not an extra vacation, but preparation for the next phase of ministry.** Visiting other congregations, spending time in spiritual retreat in silence and in prayer, and stepping

back from the constant demands of ministry will deepen and broaden the pastor's ministry, directly benefiting the congregation for the long-term.

#### **What is required of the congregation?**

1. Cover the pastor's salary during the time of the sabbatical.
2. Establish a fund for education and travel.
3. Manage the congregation during the time of the sabbatical.
4. Establish a sabbatical policy that applies to all staff. Such a policy works to build a climate that attracts, supports, and retains a competent pastoral staff.

#### **Reasons For a Congregation to Grant a Sabbatical to its Pastor**

1. **A sabbatical encourages longer and healthier pastorates.** It is very difficult to realize long-term goals with high clergy turnover. Short pastorates lead to parishioners remarking, "I'm never going to get close to another pastor again." It is extremely unlikely that a pastor will stay beyond five years unless he/she is "driven to the depths to be a growing person." Congregations with a sabbatical policy increase the probability that their pastor will stay long-term. (See Appendix A)
2. **The nature of the role of the spiritual leader is often not understood by congregations.** Spiritual deepening does not take place when one is consumed by a never-ending list of pastoral situations. Quality chunks of time are necessary to read, pray, keep a journal, study Scripture, and connect with other spiritual leaders.
3. **Personal and Professional Development.** An astounding array of skills is necessary in order to be an effective pastor. An effective pastor needs to know how to manage: group processes; conflict resolution; parish administration; supervising, coaching, supporting, and evaluating staff members; public speaking; pastoral counseling; as well as maintaining their own physical and emotional health. Pastors must keep pace with what is being written in the literature. Experiencing the successful implementation of new ideas and strategies for evangelism and church growth through site visits to churches and conversations with church leaders helps the pastor to find out what is working for others and what might be helpful in his/her own church.
4. **Preventing Burnout.** A sabbatical is a fire escape from the unending demands of ministry. It is impossible for an exhausted, cynical, and disillusioned person to be an agent of the Gospel.
5. **The Paradox of Pastoral Ministry.** Clergy are continually invited to overextend in the use of their time and energy. Often working long hours during the week, constantly "on call" meeting congregational demands, and unable to "get away" for long weekends to recharge, both clergy and their families are prone to a loss of emotional and spiritual vitality. A healthy rhythm between a "time of doing and a time of being" helps to keep us fresh and growing with balance in our lives. This is of utmost importance, especially in pastoral ministry where clergy often have such little control over their own lives. A sabbatical provides time for clergy to take a break from the pressure to overextend and perhaps to establish new patterns for ministry and self-care.
6. **Congregational self-sufficiency.** Some congregations become so clergy-centered that nothing happens without the pastor. An effective congregation exhibits a good balance between pastoral and lay leadership. The longer a pastor stays in the congregation, the

more responsibility he/she will accumulate, and the more the congregation will take him/her for granted. Granting a sabbatical leave to a pastor becomes a great way for parishioners to once again claim certain roles within the congregation that correspond with the gifts they have been given by God. When the pastor returns from the sabbatical, the congregation will have a much better understanding of their own ministry and the ways in which they take their pastor for granted.

**In summary, church leaders need to ask themselves which of the following would have the greatest positive, long term effect on the congregation:**

- a. Having a pastor go on a three-month sabbatical every four years and carry out an effective ministry within the congregation for twenty years? or
- b. Having effective clergy, without sabbatical leave, stay only five years in a congregation?

**Congregations must factor in the length of time it takes to find a new pastor and the effect that constant pastoral turnover has upon the church.**

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## **Appendix A**

**The Gap Theory:** The individual trust that people have with their pastor increases over time. This is the result of the development of the relationship: the ways in which the pastor has ministered to individuals and families, and the difference his/her pastoral presence has made in times of grief and loss, and in personal crises. It is often said, "The pastor has 'been there' for me."

However, during years 7 to 10 a gap begins to develop between pastor and congregation where the natural inclination of lay leaders is to believe their pastor is not offering sufficient "corporate" leadership. They love their pastor, but they lose trust that the pastor will be able to lead them on to "bigger and better" things. If this gap is not closed, a number of unhealthy developments may occur in the pastor/people relationship:

- a. The pastor gravitates to individual ministries, seeking to avoid the painful reality of dealing with church boards that have lost confidence in the pastor's ministry.
- b. The pastor gets tired and coasts.
- c. The last few years of ministry are ineffective, unproductive, and unhappy for all.
- d. The possibility exists that conflict and tension will go unresolved until the pastor leaves or is terminated.

**A Sabbatical recognizes the natural rhythm of the 'gap theory' and seeks to raise corporate trust through revitalizing the spiritual and the emotional energy of both pastor and congregation. It is a "win/win situation for all.**

*The video format is two 25-minute segments plus a leader guide. It is available from Alban Institute (1-800-486-1318, extension 244).*