

A Guide to Sabbatical Leave

**For QB Ministers
and Churches**

**Assisting local QB churches
to facilitate healthy pastorates.**



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*Permission is granted for local QB churches to
reproduce this book in its entirety.*

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The Appendices and Resources referred to in this document are contained in a second document entitled *A Guide to Sabbatical Leave – Appendices and resources which* should be read in conjunction with this document.

1. WHAT IS A SABBATICAL?

Retirement in Western culture today is a goal that drives many people. We work hard for forty years and then we retire to “rest” and enjoy the fruit of our labour. But a better understanding of healthy rest is when rest is interspersed with work. There is a cycle or rhythm of rest and work which enables us to sustain our energy, perspective, and joy. Lose the rhythm and we struggle to be productive and effective.

The word “sabbatical” comes from the Hebrew word Shabbat (Sabbath), meaning “cease” and “rest,” and this concept is at the foundation of the Biblical understanding of Sabbath rest which will be unpacked in more detail below. Sabbath rest did not involve doing nothing, but rather, it was a period of time that was consecrated to God for His worship and service and which benefitted us, His people and wider creation as we ceased doing ordinary labour in order to rest, reconnect with God through worship and be renewed and blessed by His overwhelming goodness. Rest, reconnection and renewal are key Biblical principles for each of our lives.

Sabbaticals have long been used by churches to provide their pastors with the opportunity for rest, reconnection and renewal both personally and in their ministry. They are recognition that Pastoral ministry is taxing and that without regular sabbatical breaks, a pastor can quickly tire, become less effective and even burn out. Expecting a pastor to practice a habit of sabbath rest is part of our expectation that pastors are sheep of our Lord Jesus Christ, not just shepherds of a local church flock. As sheep, our Pastors can and need to experience regular rest and renewal under the caring hand of our chief shepherd.

Dallas Willard has written

I can state without wavering that the single greatest need of the church today is the restoration of ministers. What is required is a quite different approach to their life and work. It is a matter of leading them into a massive shift of the dynamics of their personality under God, and one that cannot be done by more books and conferences. They need to be taken out of the circulation for a sufficiently long time to re-vision and re-structure their lives in communion with Jesus and His kingdom.

We value and desire that the pastors within our QB movement are healthy, effective in their ministry and have longevity in their ministry. We therefore encourage every member church of Queensland Baptist to develop or adopt a sabbatical policy for all of our fulltime pastors that would help them stay healthy, effective and vibrant in their ministry calling.

What a Sabbatical is not

There are a couple of misconceptions about what a Sabbatical is.

A Sabbatical Is Not a Vacation While times of rest and even recreation can be a part of a sabbatical, a sabbatical differs significantly from a vacation in many aspects. Proper sabbaticals involve a specific and detailed plan, identifiable goals and clear lines of accountability.

It should be a time to truly and completely disconnect from routines, responsibilities and relationships in order to rest, reconnect with God and to renew your vision by rediscovering afresh God’s purposes for your life. This is important for all God’s children, but especially for those who are called to be pastors and shepherds of local churches and so giving sabbatical leave to pastors is an investment in their physical and spiritual health that will benefit the local church as well.

Sabbatical times therefore should be offered to pastors in addition to any earned vacation time.

A Sabbatical Is Not Academic Leave While we believe that Pastors need to be life long learners and would encourage the pursuit of additional formal studies, Sabbatical leave is not the time for this as Rev. Colin Buckland, Executive Director of The Claybury Trust (a “pastor to pastor” organization) explains:

Some people may well be looking for and needing a theological update but others are not. Some require a time of spiritual refreshment and a seminary may not be the best setting for this. This 'academic' view takes no account of the emotional 'burn' that may have been taking place in the life of the pastor, it makes no provision for it. The academic view takes little note of the need for wife and family to experience sabbatical as a 'living part' of the ministry, it does not allow for family renewal and my findings are that family life has been greatly strained by the ministry. The academic view may provide the pastor with an event that feeds only part of his real need and therefore fails to renew him thoroughly for his ongoing ministry.¹

Sabbatical leave should feature solitude with God, rest and respite as a way of improving one's physical, emotional and mental health. Theological education, while commendable, is strenuous work and not may well distract from the other important goals of having a sabbatical. Auditing a theological course for the purpose of spiritual input on the other hand, may be beneficial.

The Sabbatical Is Not Escape Sometimes, a pastor reaches a point where they need to escape the problems of ministry and take some time to recover from a burn out experience for example. While renewal and restoration are indeed valid goals within a Sabbatical, there is much more that should be sought than just this. Sabbaticals are times for intentional growth and revisioning.

In addition, sabbatical leave should never be sought to give an opportunity to seek out a new place of ministry as Sabbaticals are meant to strengthen and equip both the pastor and the church.

Therefore, sabbaticals are not recommended when significant conflict is present between pastor and the congregation. Taking leave in these instances will not help to resolve the issues that are causing the conflict, but just push them underground to resurface later.

The Sabbatical is not just for the benefit of the Pastor Both the pastor and the church congregation should benefit ultimately from a pastor taking a Sabbatical. For this reason, the timing of a sabbatical must consider the needs of a church and the needs of a pastor and find a time which is suitable for all parties. The financial position of the church, or budgetary constraints may also need to be considered as to when is the best time for a Sabbatical. We recognise that for some churches, finances are always going to be tight and ministry or financial needs should never be used continually as reasons why a Sabbatical cannot be taken.

The Sabbatical is not the same as a traditional sabbatical taken in academic or business settings.

In academic circles, sabbaticals are seen as rewards and opportunities to pursue detailed academic interests, research and development. In the Business world, sabbaticals are being seen as opportunities to train and retain valued employees by giving them leave to study, rest, travel or participate in other planned activities. Pastoral sabbaticals, however, are not focussed solely on learning but have at their core, the refreshment, renewal and redirection of the spirit and soul. Eugene H. Peterson states:

If we are going to take sabbaticals, let them be real sabbaticals: a willed passivity in order to be restored to alert receptivity to spirit - prayer; silence, solitude, worship. It is outrageous that we acquiesce to the world's definition of our word and let our unique, biblical sabbatical be put to the use of career advancement, psychological adjustment, and intellectual polish - with all the prayer

¹ Quoted in *Sabbaticals ... the Necessary Option*, by Pinnacle Ministries inc.

and contemplation laundered out. The original intent of Sabbath is a time to be silent and listen to God, not attend lectures; a time to be in solitude and to be with God, not "interact" with fatigued peers. If help is to be given to the pastor in midcourse, it is not going to come by infusion of intellect, but by renewal of spirit.²

2. WHY ARE SABBATICALS IMPORTANT?

The role of a pastor is one that requires continual sharpening and renewal. Our modern world is constantly changing and the demands of pastoral ministry, particularly in relationship to the governance and administration of church functions and to changing social and cultural dynamics is constantly shifting and placing great load on pastors. Pastoral ministry is also constantly changing in the day-to-day work of supporting people who are going through every manner of life's challenge and it can get very draining as the pastor juggles a broad variety of expectations and demands in order to minister into the great variety of lives they come into contact with.

One writer has characterised the challenges of the pastor's life well in the following lament ...

*I am appalled at what is required of me.
I am supposed to move from sick-bed
to administrative meeting,
to planning,
to supervising,
to counselling,
to praying,
to trouble-shooting,
to budgeting,
to audio systems,
to meditation,
to worship preparation,
to newsletter,
to staff problems,
to mission projects,
to conflict management,
to community leadership,
to study,
to funerals,
to weddings,
to preaching.*

*I am supposed to be "in charge"
but not too in charge,
administrative executive,
sensitive pastor,
skillful counselor,
dynamic public speaker,
spiritual guide,
politically savvy,
intellectually sophisticated.
And I am expected to be superior,*

² Peterson, Eugene H. "Sabbatical Is Not Study Leave." Leadership Journal, Winter 1988: 74-75.

or at least first rate, in all of them.

*I am not supposed to be
depressed,
discouraged,
cynical,
angry,
hurt.*

*I am supposed to be
up-beat,
positive,
strong,
willing,
available.*

*Right now I am not filling any of those expectations very well.
I think that's why I am tired.³*

Feeling constantly stretched, under the spotlight and regularly criticised, waiting for to next urgent demand to overtake the important things and the constant juggling of many balls leaves many pastors feeling very drained. Being overworked, always on the clock and constantly multitasking has a cumulative effect and this long-term stress can take a toll on a pastor physical, emotionally and spiritually. A tired, discouraged and worn-out minister is a poor advertisement for God's kingdom and they are more likely to make poor decisions, minister in ways that are ineffective or even damaging or create unnecessary conflict or offence.

While other professionals can readily control bookings and close their books or refer onto others when they are at full capacity, pastors are less likely to say "no" or "not now" or "I am fully booked, you will have to seek help elsewhere." A pastor is more likely to allow their margins to be eroded and "give sacrificially and take one for the kingdom" as they seek to be a shepherd to their flock. Yes, the pastor needs to be responsible for their time and set wise, appropriate and healthy boundaries, but this is incredibly difficult when you consider the unrealistic expectations and overwhelming demands of people whom they love and serve.

Yet is not just the pastor that is at risk, the demands of the role mean that many pastors struggle to find a healthy balance in regards the home and family life and ultimately it is their spouses and families that suffer also. We all know of Pastor's kids who have walked away from the faith because of the impact that ministry life has had on their parents and their family.

We know in our own denomination that at the last NCLS survey, done in 2016⁴, 26% of Australian Baptist pastors reported that they felt highly stressed in their role and only 22% of pastors are highly satisfied with life as a whole. The areas that pastors are least satisfied about are in the areas of health, current achievements, feeling part of their community, their future security and in their personal relationships. When evaluated on the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS), it was found that 15% of pastors experience some depression with 9% of pastors experiencing high levels of depression; 9% of pastors experience some anxiety with 4% of pastors experiencing high levels of anxiety; and 14% of

³ Gilbert, B. *Who Ministers to Ministers?* The Alban Institute

⁴ *Church Leaders Wellbeing Check*, snapshot from 3 June 2020 to 30 June 2020, Baptist Church Qld – NCLS.

pastors experienced some stress with 7% of pastors experiencing high levels of stress. Unfortunately, many pastors keep these tell-tale signs hidden until it is too late.

Other startling statistics that witness to the problem at hand include

- 44% of pastors do not take a regular day off⁵
- 31% do not exercise at all⁶.
- 80% will not be in ministry ten years later and only a fraction make it a lifelong career⁷. On average, seminary trained pastors last only five years in church ministry⁸
- 91% have experienced some form of burnout in ministry and 18% say they are “fried to a crisp right now”⁹
- 40% report a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month¹⁰
- 65% think their family is in a glass house¹¹
- 80% believe their pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families and 33% said it was an outright hazard¹²
- 21% spend less than 15 minutes a day in prayer – the average is 39 minutes per day¹³
- nearly half of the pastors reported working 50 or more hours a week, and 15.5% said they worked at least 60 hours a week on average¹⁴.
- 53% of pastors do not feel that seminary or Bible college prepared them adequately¹⁵

While a weekly sabbath and regular annual leave provides opportunity to rest and be refreshed, they do not provide space for the pastor to renew their vision, passion and plans for their ministry unless the pastor intentionally schedules annual leave to do these things. Sabbaticals are one way that provide leaders with a change of pace so there can be some breathing room, a chance to slow their activity level and step away from the detail, an opportunity to refocus and reflect on ministry to reconnect with their heart, mind and soul and even a complete rest that is long enough for them to be strengthened and healed from that what ministry has stripped away from them. This time away is most effective when it is included in a compensation agreement and when a caring congregation ask their pastor to take this time away for their personal benefit and that of the church.

3. THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF SABBATICALS

Part of God's good work of creation was to separate one thing from another: earth and sky, land and sea, day and night, work and rest. In the same way God in His grace has provided us with phases, cycles and rhythms to punctuate seasons of our lives. This is true of days and nights, weeks, seasons and years (See Genesis 1: 14). Consistent with this is the practice of Sabbatical seasons which follow longer seasons of life and ministry to facilitate rest, reflection, reorientation of our hearts, worship, thankfulness, hope and perseverance. While we are surely under no law relating to Sabbatical seasons, we can be confident that observing

⁵ Pastors at Greater Risk by H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, Regal Books 2003

⁶ Focus on the Family; 2009 survey of 2,000 pastors.

⁷ Fuller Institute of Church Growth research study in 1991 and other surveys in 2005 and 2006.

⁸ Francis A Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development research studies in 1998 and 2006

⁹ Leadership Journal poll of readers, 2013.

¹⁰ Fuller Institute of Church Growth research study in 1991, 2005, and 2006.

¹¹ Francis A. Schaeffer; Institute of Church Leadership Development research studies in 2005–2006.

¹² Fuller Institute of Church Growth research study in 1991 and other surveys in 2005 and 2006.

¹³ Gray Matter Research, 2005 scientific study of pastors from every city in America.

¹⁴ Focus on the Family; 2009 survey of 2,000 pastors.

¹⁵ Francis A Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development research studies in 1998 and 2006.

this principle is both wise and beneficial, resulting in greater maturity, fruitfulness and longevity in ministry.¹⁶

The Bible holds the key to understanding the concept of Sabbath rest. In Genesis 2:2-3, we read that God rested from His creative work on the seventh day of creation. His work was completed, and the seventh day was different with clearly a different focus for the creator. Although it is not identified as a Sabbath rest, this example set for us in Genesis is the basis of later teaching on Sabbatical rests. Here we see that God rested even though He obviously did not need to do so for physical, emotional or creative reasons. God rested and reflected on His work, presumably as a model for us to follow.

Later when God gives the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11, Deut 5:12-15), the fourth commandment is keeping the Sabbath day holy.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.¹⁷

Instead of doing the normal work of living and earning, producing and trading, the people of Israel were told to step aside and rest. The word "Sabbath" (*šabbāt*) means to stop, repose, cease, celebrate, leave, put down or away¹⁸. In Greek, the word is *sabbaton*, which refers to the seventh day of the week has its origins in the Hebrew word. Throughout Scripture the context of this word is that the seventh day of each person's life should be set aside for nothing but rest and recovery. Dale Wolyniak (2009) explains why this is important

Rest prepares one to do the work of life, of one's calling. Unless there is rest for individuals, work eventually becomes tedious and reluctant. Rest was intended to bring about a respite from the common, regular and relentless routines of living. An extended concept of sabbaticals gives special place to creating extended quiet times, reflective moments, along with new vision and passion for life in Christ. A sabbatical provides substantial time in which God is allowed to speak into our deepest spiritual recesses and bring cleansing, renewal and hope.¹⁹

There is a cycle of work and rest that is essential for our ongoing health and wellbeing, but also for our enjoyment and empowerment from God. It is a blessing that God wants to shower down on each of us as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us.

"There remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest."²⁰

¹⁶ Sabbatical Policy from Disciples Church, Springfield Lakes, Qld.

¹⁷ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. (2016). (Ex 20:8–11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁸ Strong, James, Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, word numbers 7673, 7676

¹⁹ Wolyniak D. 2009, Sabbaticals for Ministers : The benefits for Pastors and Congregations, Focus on the Family

²⁰ Hebrews 4:9–12, NIV.

The Sabbath rest is a blessing, but also an act of faith. For a society which was often a hand to mouth society, resting meant you needed to trust God. This was no better illustrated in the desert where people needed to trust God to provide double portion of their provisions the day before each Sabbath.

Jesus embodies for us the perfect example of the use of the Sabbath. We read that on the Sabbath Jesus, was normally found in the Synagogue, worshipping God or withdrawing to lonely places to rest, pray and meet with His Father (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16). Yet, we also read that Jesus regularly got into trouble for not keeping the rules of the Sabbath as dictated by the Jewish leaders by healing people on the Sabbath and walking through the grain fields. Jesus sought to reclaim the Sabbath as the “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:8). The “work” Jesus was accused of doing on the Sabbath, by His enemies, was simply to respond with compassion and love to people in need. His work was to minister God’s word and healing to them and in this, Jesus acted in perfect unity with His Father’s will and purposes. The Sabbath was made for the benefit of us as human (Mark 2:27) and Jesus invites us to enter and join him in His Father’s kingdom work. He describes this as a “yoke” but it is not a heavy or restrictive yoke. It is an easy and a light yoke that (Matt 11:25ff) brings us fulfillment and meaning.

The weekly sabbath cycle is extended in Scripture to Sabbatical years and to the Year of Jubilee. Every Seventh year was to be a Sabbatical year (Lev 25:1-13 and Exod 23:10-11) where God called the people to provide a rest for their land which required a step of faith in God to provide enough in the years preceding the Sabbath year to last for the duration of the year of rest (Lev 25:20-22).

The Sabbath year pushed the people’s faith even further in asking them to be generous to the poor and needy by giving them access to the produce of the land lying fallow. People who had sold themselves into servitude were given their freedom without any cost to themselves (Exodus 21:2-6) and all other debts were cancelled (Deuteronomy 15:1-6). It was an incredible blessing to help people be restored and renewed in the circumstances of life and forced them through a change in routine to connect with God in a new and fresh way.

The year of Jubilee occurred every 50 years (after 7 sets of 7 years) and it was a time when any property that had been sold was returned to its original owners and when slaves were set free.

It is probably not surprising that it seems as though throughout Scripture the people of God rarely practiced the practice of sabbatical years. Perhaps this was because of their lack of faith in God or because of their independence, thinking that they knew best and were able to cope without times of rest and renewal.

Traditionally the Christian Sabbath is observed on Sunday, “the Lord’s Day” in celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the death. Paul taught that we could celebrate the Sabbath on any day (Romans 14:4-6). What is important is not the specific day that it is practiced on, but that we actually do practice a sabbath on one day. This is especially important for pastors. Most pastors spend Sunday trying to help others have a Sabbath – a time spent seeking and worshipping God. Most pastors have a “day off” on another day, but this is often not a Sabbath that is devoted to the Lord. Without being legalistic, the concept of a Sabbath is that we set aside a day to do no work so that we can “pray and play” with the Lord as Eugene Peterson once expressed it. Most Christian pastors and leaders struggle to experience such a Sabbath consistently.

Sabbaticals are modelled on the concept of Sabbatical Years and provide just one opportunity for pastors to learn how to better keep a weekly Sabbath and live and work in the light of the Sabbath Rest that God desires for each of us.

4. THE BENEFITS FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH AND ITS PASTOR

As you read the literature, there are many identifiable benefits for pastors in taking a sabbatical. These include

1. **Times of Refreshment** - the chance to be physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually refreshed. In sabbaticals, “ministers have time to “decompress from the pressures, demands and expectations of ministry.”²¹ Times of solitude prepared and recharged Biblical leaders such as Moses, Elijah, Jesus, Paul and it is no doubt that God can do the same things for our pastors today.
2. **A Growing Trust in God** - forcing the pastor to lean into and trust God. When they step away from ministry, a pastor passes responsibility for Christ’s church over to God. They must learn to trust God for what they cannot control and learn that God is in control and able to keep ministry going without them.
3. **Intimacy with God** - taking time to intentionally spend with God and work on their relationship with God. Sabbaticals give pastors time to reflect and spend larger blocks of time creatively in their personal walk with God. This reinforces these essential habits in the life of a busy pastor and encourages them to minister out of intimacy with God rather than out of their own strength.
4. **Clarity about what’s important** - the ability to pause and reflect on what is truly important in the pastor’s life and the ministry of the church. When we stop being controlled by the urgent, we can give more of our time and energies to what is truly important. A pastor returning from a sabbatical will have a clearer picture of what is essential in their ministry.
5. **Being reminded of their calling** – having an opportunity to clearly evaluate their calling and their fit with the ministry context they are serving in. This allows opportunity for God to redirect or for God to refocus, retool and recommission. Often Pastors return from their Sabbatical with a stronger sense of call and a greater passion for the work God has called them to.
6. **A chance to grow** - having the opportunity to reflect on their ministries and how they can sharpen areas of strength and improve areas that are lacking. A sabbatical provides the opportunity for upskilling and identifying what resources may be needed or beneficial for the next stage of ministry.
7. **Longevity of service** - Increasing the longevity of a pastor’s ministry by providing an opportunity to refresh, refocus and relaunch.

And many of these benefits for pastors naturally overflow as benefits for the church congregation.

Benefits for congregations may include

1. **Discovery, development and appreciation of their gifts** - when a congregation has a time without their pastor, they must rely upon members to step up and cover the gaps. As they do this, we see individual gifts identified, stretched and developed, particularly among young and emerging leaders. Volunteer involvement typically grows because of pastoral sabbaticals.
2. **Resilience and interdependence** – They might become less dependent on their pastor in their absence. Ideally a congregation would see people increasingly ministering to each other as well as individuals drawing closer to God for sustenance and support.
3. **Appreciation of their pastor** – *absence makes the heart grow fonder* and with the increased responsibility required by the general congregation and leaders, a growing appreciation for our pastors and all they do will result. In many cases, the congregation will be surprised at how much the pastor does.
4. **Better understanding of how the church works** – this includes a greater appreciation of how the church as a body operates and.

²¹ Wolyniak D. 1009, Sabbaticals for Ministers : The benefits for Pastors and Congregations, Focus on the Family

5. **Longer and Healthier pastorates** – sabbaticals increase the longevity of pastors and churches benefit as a pastor is more likely to stay longer. The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth has consistently shown that "the most effective, growing churches are led by pastors with a long tenure. Pastors who 'stick with' a church through good times and rough times gain a level of credibility and respect that allows them to challenge the church to take risks necessary for growth."²² The ability for pastors to take time to dedicate to self-care and personal refreshment and renewal helps to ensure pastors are well placed to minister free of exhaustion, depression and high levels of stress. This provides the best environment for pastors to minister in grace without conflict or harm.
6. **Benefiting from Pastor's renewed vision** – A returning pastor who has had time to rest, revive, refresh, reflect, rethink, recreate, rework, renew, retool, revision, refocus and reconnect will come back better equipped to serve and lead a congregation into the next season. An investment into a Pastor in this way is an investment into your church.

5. POTENTIAL GOALS OF A SABBATICAL

There are many potential goals that may be considered when a pastor considers a Sabbatical including to rest, revive, refresh, reflect, rethink, recreate, rework, renew, retool, revision, refocus and reconnect. It will be helpful for a Pastor to think about what they are seeking to achieve in their Sabbatical and to seek to articulate how they think this is going to be achieved. It should be remembered that a sabbatical has multiple aims including to further the work of the church, to develop the personal ministry of the pastor, and to provide for physical, spiritual and relational renewal and refreshment.

But these can be summarised under three basic purposes that should exist for any Sabbatical ...

- 1) **Planned Rest** - It is important during the Sabbatical for the Pastor to step away from the pressures and demands of ministry and to have the opportunity to rest. This may be simply achieved by being released from the need to attend night meetings, respond to the ongoing demands and crises of pastoral work or be productive. Rest may also be achieved by recapturing a normal balanced rhythm of life. Rest, however, needs to be intentional and should be physical and spiritual. Rest will result in a minister experiencing healing in their body, soul and spirit. It will provide a space where the next purpose of a Sabbatical can be achieved.
- 2) **Connection to God** – The sabbatical leave provides the time and space for God to reconnect with the pastor and the pastor to reconnect with God. It is a time where God's still, small voice can be heard and His pillar of fire be recognised. It is where God can reveal His plans, purposes and directions. The pastor should therefore plan regular and extended times of reflect in God's Word and in prayer and relearn how to hear God's spirit speaking to them. The sabbatical is a time where God can renew a pastor's calling, re-establish their identity in Christ and reaffirm their purpose and commitment.

Some practices that may help with this may be

- Bible study & meditation. You may wish to consider what book(s) of the Bible will help you rest in God or what are you drawn to read.
- Prayer times, praying through Scripture.

²² Dr. Chuck Lawless, "Diagnose your church's health: Are leaders committed to the ministry of the church?" <http://www.churchcentral.com/article.php?id=2713>

- Practicing other Spiritual disciplines such as abstinence, memorization and other creative ways to pray²³.
- Times of Solitude and Silence where you can unplug from noise, exciting entertainment, responsibilities, ego gratification, social media and even people.
- Journaling your thoughts, learnings & prayers.
- Visit churches which embrace other expressions of Christian faith and join their worship (e.g. Charismatic, liturgical, evangelical, ethnic, house church, Quaker, etc)
- Go on a spiritual retreat (Prayer retreat, Emmaus walk, silent retreat, directed retreat, Ignatian retreat, visit a monastic community of prayer, walk a pilgrimage, get away by yourself on a personal retreat, go bush and camp alone).
- Reading some books on prayer, spirituality or spiritual growth²⁴.
- Seek out a Spiritual Director.
- Reflecting with another person on questions such as
 - How is your Sabbatical going for you?
 - How do you feel when you rest?
 - What is your relationship with God like?
 - How have you been sensing God speak to you?
 - What has God been saying to you?
 - How are you feeling about your life in general?
 - What are you learning about God, yourself, your relationship with God?
 - How has God reaffirmed your call? Are there any changes that need to be made?
 - What changes do you need to make after your sabbatical to maintain your spiritual life and vitality?

3) Activities of Renewal – A third basic purpose of a sabbatical is to seek renewal in the pastor’s personal and ministerial life. In the previous goal, stillness and solitude is key. In this third goal, meaningful activities will help to bring about renewal. There must be a balance between these two practices and it is highly encouraged that rest proceeds productive pursuits or activities. It should always be remembered that the “central purpose is to unplug from ministry, rest and be renewed by God to prepare for re-entry into ministry.”²⁵

Some practices that may help with renewal of a pastor’s personal life may include things such as

- Investing time in your marriage by going on a retreat together or participating in a marital enrichment course or marriage counselling together.
- Extended family time and one on one time with each of your children.
- Connect up with friends you have not had time to connect with in the past.
- Spending time establishing an exercise routine and build physical fitness
- Receiving counselling for healing and restoration
- Go to a doctor or psychologist for a health or psychological check-up
- Join a new community and become part of their life and ministry
- Learn a new skill or take up a new hobby, e.g. take up bush walking, photography, creative writing, music, woodwork, gardening, cooking, a craft, etc
- Finish unfinished tasks or create order out of disorder to reduce stress.

²³ Some good resources for spiritual disciplines are available from Bill Gultiere’s, Sabbatical Guide available at <https://www.christiancountybaptist.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Sabbatical-Guide-Soul-Shepherding.pdf>

²⁴ Some good classics are suggested by Bill Gultiere in his Sabbatical Guide available at <https://www.christiancountybaptist.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Sabbatical-Guide-Soul-Shepherding.pdf>

²⁵ Sabbatical Policy from the Disciples Church,

Some practices that may help with renewal of a pastor's ministry life may include things such as

- Attending specific conferences you normally would not be able to attend or might not be likely to attend to stretch your thinking.
- Receiving coaching
- Develop your understanding about personality, conflict resolution style, leadership style, teamwork behaviour, stress management style etc.
- Visiting other churches or even volunteering to minister at another church for a season
- Reading and studying. Sometimes reading can become too much like work. Focused study on a particular topic such as a specific area of leadership development, theology, Biblical studies, ministry or ecclesiology might be beneficial. However, it should follow times of refreshment and rest. A Sabbatical should not be a time for rigorous intellectual effort or pursuing additional qualifications.
- Do some reflective writing as you reflect on the previous season of your ministry.
- Write something that will be useful to others such as a Bible Study, article or series of sermons.
- Seek to articulate out your core values, your personal calling, your vision and mission. If you have these in place, consider how you have done following these.

6. FIVE STAGES IN A SABBATICAL

The *Sabbatical Guidelines - A Season of Renewal* document developed by the Navigators²⁶ outlines five different stages in the planning and outworking of a sabbatical.

6.1 Release and Relinquish

While initial discussion about the possibility of a Sabbatical should start 12 months prior to the proposed Sabbatical Date to allow the church to adequately plan for the pastor's absence. This first stage is focussed in the 3-5 months before the sabbatical begins. This stage requires the Pastor to disengage from their ministry and leadership responsibilities, seek appropriate funding and establish a plan for their sabbatical (see Appendix 3 & 4 in *A Guide to Sabbatical Leave – Appendices and Resources*). It could be likened to the On-Ramp to the Sabbatical.

It will be important in the preparation for a sabbatical for church leadership to determine who will lead the congregation during the Pastor's absence. Answering questions about who will preach, provide pastoral and crisis care, oversee ministries and the daily and weekly administrative tasks need to be answered. Ministry responsibilities should be delegated to others and important information transferred to those who will take these responsibilities. Additional support could come from volunteers, students, retired ministers or interim ministers. Additionally, the pastor should also seek to identify who they need to help them during their Sabbatical achieve their development goals. Congregations need to be informed²⁷ about this plan well in advance of the start of the Sabbatical and boundaries need to be agreed upon which define in what circumstances the pastor on leave might need to be contacted.

²⁶ The Sabbatical Guidelines developed by the Navigators can be found at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55708c37e4b02b5724e132be/t/5c9d3b741aba6600010bd6e1/1553808250702/Navs+Sabbatical+Guidelines+Feb+%2719.pdf>

²⁷ Some example letters that you could provide to your congregations about the planned Sabbatical are contained in Appendix 1 & 2. Note that the appendices and resources are contained in a second document entitled *A Guide to Sabbatical Leave – Appendices and Resources*.

Every Sabbatical has real costs that should be budgeted for. Funds may be needed to hire interim staff, pay honorariums for guest speakers or to cover travel and other activities the pastor is considering. Churches are encouraged to create a special fund that they contribute \$100 a month to as savings for Sabbaticals. It may be that external funding can be additionally sought or other creative ways of raising funds be found.

During this period, it is important to establish a plan for your Sabbatical which will direct and identify priorities and needs for the pastor throughout this period. While it is important to have a plan, this plan should have a certain amount of flexibility to allow the leading of the Spirit. However, this does not mean that the pastor should not be accountable to others during their Sabbatical.

It is strongly recommended that the Pastor taking the sabbatical identify a number of key support people who can help them during the course of a Sabbatical.

- A **Sabbatical Advisor / Mentor** is a person who can provide direction and oversight to the Pastor during the course of the Sabbatical. They can be a source of encouragement, ensure the pastor stays on track with their Sabbatical Plan and be an important person to debrief with about insights and learnings gained through the Sabbatical.
- A **Key Congregational Contact** should be selected to meet with several times through the Sabbatical. It is not recommended that the Pastor communicate with the whole leadership, but just a representative person. This key contact does not even need to part of the leadership team but should report back to the leadership. This provides transparency and accountability for the pastor as well as information to the church leadership that the Sabbatical is progressing well. It also provides the pastor the chance to feedback to the leadership how the pastor is feeling. They may for example need to communicate that further help is needed to isolate themselves from church responsibilities or members who are regularly contacting them for pastoral support.
- Pastors generally also have existing relationships with **Ministry Mentors** or **Professional Supervisors**. These people provide valuable independent perspectives that can help a pastor process Sabbatical learnings.

There should be a decision made about what level of reporting or communication is required during the Sabbatical to the congregational contact person to ensure that the Sabbatical is progressing as planned.

It is important for a Pastor on Sabbatical to be accountable for their leave and to provide a report on their return explaining how the time off was used and what were the benefits, discoveries, new vision and resulting state of mind that was achieved during their time off.

Some useful tools to complete in this stage as you prepare for your Sabbatical include

- The Burnout Inventory (refer Appendix 5 in *A Guide to Sabbatical Leave – Appendices and Resources*)
- The Personal and Marital Health Survey (refer Appendix 6 in *A Guide to Sabbatical Leave – Appendices and Resources*)

Some helpful questions²⁸ to consider in this stage include

- How are you feeling about disengaging from the ministry?
- How have other staff and friends reacted when they learned about your sabbatical?
- How does your spouse (children?) feel about your sabbatical?
- What excites you most about your sabbatical?

²⁸ Adapted from Foley, S. & Brown, S., 2019 *Sabbatical Guidelines – A Season of Renewal*, Navigators

- How will taking your Sabbatical impact your church? What needs to be put in place to minimise this impact?
- What will need to be put into place to allow you to disengage from ministry during your Sabbatical?
- Who would be a good person to act as a Sabbatical Advisor and a key Congregational Contact Person for me during my Sabbatical?
- What do you believe are your priority needs and desires that should be included in your Sabbatical plan?
- What are your thoughts about returning to your role after sabbatical? Are you seeking change?

6.2 Rest and Recovery –

The second stage in a Sabbatical is all about establishing margin and re-establishing and managing the pace of life. “Rest” in the second phase of the Sabbatical is not as much about inactivity as it is about stopping ministry activities and those things in everyday life that cause stress. This requires self-awareness and honesty.

Letting go and stepping out can be difficult for many pastors who often draw their identity from their ministry and the people they minister to. It is therefore important for the pastor to step out of ministry, but not out of fellowship with those who can refresh them.

The aim of this stage is to explore what it is that provides restoration and relaxation. Again, it is important to consider your life wholistically and consider what will restore and refresh you emotionally and spiritually. Appendix 7 in *A Guide to Sabbatical Leave – Appendices and Resources* includes some tips for planning your time of renewal.

As you step away from your normal ministry, it is tempting to entertain other invitations and opportunities for ministry. These should be considered carefully and with caution. The aim of your Sabbatical is the sabbatical itself and so putting down responsibilities to simply take up others risks sabotaging your rest and recovery.

Some helpful questions²⁹ to consider during this stage include

- How would you define or explain rest? What rests you?
- How are you sensing God’s presence? What are you learning about resting in God’s loving presence?
- What things are stressful for you right now? Can anything be done to remove or reduce their stress?
- How’s your relationship with your spouse? With your children?
- Is your sabbatical going the way you expected? How so? How not?
- Do you feel that you’re resting? Are you experiencing any obstacles to rest?
- Have you noticed significant changes in your eating or sleeping habits?
- Post Sabbatical, what adjustments do you need to improve your daily rhythm of life with Jesus, your spouse, your family or others?
- Have you given your supervisor an update recently?
- What are your priorities for the next two weeks?

6.3 Reflect and Refocus

²⁹ Adapted from Foley, S. & Brown, S., 2019 *Sabbatical Guidelines – A Season of Renewal*, Navigators

Once you have taken the time to rest and recover, you will be in a better place to hear with God. This next stage is where the real work of the Sabbath takes place. It is where you can focus on asking the question *“Lord is there anything You want to say to me?”*

As part of this process, it may be helpful to reflect on how God has called you and how God has equipped you for this calling. It may be worth reflecting on Gal 6:4-5 as you do this.

“Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don’t be impressed with yourself. Don’t compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.” Gal 6:4-5 (The Message)

A helpful framework of reflection is a directional approach which considers inward, outward, backward, forward the upward directions as shown in Table 1.

It is worth considering how God has spoken to you in the past and do what is required to position yourself so that you can hear His voice again. However, the pastor on the Sabbath should be prepared to hear from God in new ways.

During this stage, spending extended time with God in His word, in prayer and in meditation should be a priority.

Some things that may help you reflect and refocus may include

- Extended times alone with God.
- Getaway to a retreat centre.
- Seek the guidance of a Spiritual Director
- Focusing on Emotional Healing.
- Studying a Bible Character
- Read Devotional books of interest.
- Reviewing your spiritual gifts

Table 1 – A Framework for personal reflection.³⁰

	ADDRESSES THE QUESTION:	TOPICS FOR EXPLORATION	RESULTS
Inward	How has God designed me?	Preferences Personal Values Spiritual Gifts StrengthsFinder	Summary of Inward
Backward	How has God worked in the past?	Memorial Stones	Summary of themes or life lessons
Outward	How has God motivated me?	Global Concerns Ministry Values Community People	Summary of God-given burdens or concerns
Forward	How is God directing me?	Bucket List/Verses Life purpose/Vision	Summary of your Vision Statement
Upward	How is God speaking through the process?	Directed time alone With God	Seeking God to guide and direct

³⁰ Adapted from Foley, S. & Brown, S., 2019 *Sabbatical Guidelines – A Season of Renewal*, Navigators

Some helpful questions³¹ to consider in this stage include

- Are you aware of anything that would hinder God from speaking to you during this phase? (Busyness, unforgiving spirit, conflict, unconfessed sin, etc.)
- How do you feel about your prayer life? Your devotional life? What distracts you?
- How does God normally speak into your life?
- What do you sense God saying to you?
- What are you learning about yourself? God? Other people?
- Is God stirring in you a new vision or desire to change your ministry somehow?
- How are you feeling generally in your life? Fearful? Anxious? Discouraged? In Grief? Feeling Guilty? Overworked? Lonely?
- What things are currently stressful for you? Can anything be done to remove or reduce them?
- How's your relationship with your spouse/children?
- Is your sabbatical going the way you expected? How so?
- When did you last give your Sabbatical Advisor and your Key Congregational Contact person an update?

6.4 Realignment and/or Reassignment

The fourth stage of a Sabbatical is key to being re-equipped to re-engage with your ministry after the sabbatical ends. It is a chance to recapture your vision and calling to ministry (Realignment) or to develop a new vision as God reveals new things (Reassignment). The key question to ask is *“What changes in life and ministry should I make as result of hearing from God in the Reflection Phase?”*

It may be helpful to complete tools such as the Role Fit Inventory in Appendix 8 in *A Guide to Sabbatical Leave – Appendices and Resources* during this stage.

This phase is the opportunity to develop ministry skills and tools that will be helpful for the next season. It is when the activities of renewal can be undertaken that will provide personal and ministry development.

Some helpful questions³² to consider in this stage include

- With what you've learned in the last phases, do you see any adjustments you need to make in your life or ministry to more accurately reflect your design and desires?
- What do you sense God has for your future? Realignment? Reassignment?
- Do you need to consider letting go of any major responsibilities in your job in order to be fully aligned with God's call on your life?
- If you lack clarity about the future, what specific steps might you take to see more clearly?
- Can you describe your perfect job? Be sure to include elements or functions you consider essential. Also pinpoint those that should NOT be your primary responsibility.
- What needs to change in your future ministry to ensure you don't slip back into unhealthy work habits? What do you need to give up? What do you need to take up?

6.5 Re-Entry/Re-Engagement

The last stage of your Sabbatical is the preparation stage for returning to Ministry. As you return to your previous ministry, you can expect that there will be a return to the faster pace of life you

³¹ Adapted from Foley, S. & Brown, S., 2019 *Sabbatical Guidelines – A Season of Renewal*, Navigators

³² Adapted from Foley, S. & Brown, S., 2019 *Sabbatical Guidelines – A Season of Renewal*, Navigators

experienced in the past and so you need to consider how you create an on-ramp back to your ministry context. You can expect to be challenged by stress as you transition back into ministry, to struggle with re-finding an appropriate work-life balance, to experience spiritual attack, to experience a wide array of emotions and to wonder how you will be able to incorporate some of the desired changes in life and ministry you are hoping to achieve. This is normal, but so is the expectancy of your renewed vision and good things to come.

In addition, things may have changed while you have been away and people may have stepped up into new responsibilities. Some things may not have gone as smoothly as you may have hoped and may now be done differently. It will be important to recognise these changes and to not assume that things will be exactly the same as they once were. Instead, look for those who have led in your absence and thank them for their efforts.

It may be helpful to consider returning to ministry in a part time capacity initially or to assume responsibilities in a staggered way over the first few weeks. Some will not plan to take on any major responsibilities for the first few months after their return.

Continuing your accountability relationships and even engaging a coach can be helpful to keep you focussed on the changes you desire to make in your life and ministry.

It is important in this stage of your Sabbatical to prepare a report for the church and the leadership group recapping how you spent your time during the Sabbatical and what lessons were learnt in the process.

A pastor could for example share with their leadership and congregation

- Some things that were beneficial or helpful to them.
- Their appreciation for those who covered for them during their absence and for the church for gifting them a sabbatical
- Some of their new insights and understandings into their own personal spiritual life and their identity in Christ
- Share some of vision for the future as revealed by God but recognise that it may require time and a process for people to grasp and accept your new vision.
- Share what they have decided to do to maintain their health and balance.

Likewise, it will be important for the leadership of the church to bring the Pastor up to speed with what has been happening in their absence and what was beneficial for the church in this process. Mutual sharing is important as is a review of the Sabbatical process and what could be improved next time. A sabbatical is a chance for the leadership to recognise that ministry is a “team effort” and to continue to seek ways to work with their returning pastor on the ministry in the church.

Some helpful questions³³ to consider in this stage include

- What changes and challenges have you experienced as you’ve re-engaged into ministry?
- What accountability do you need to ensure to maintain the positive changes you desire in your life and ministry?

7. A FINAL WORD ON SABBATICALS FOR QB PASTORS

Queensland Baptists are committed to enabling and equipping the healthy ministry of its pastors and as a result, the healthy ministry and operation of its member churches. We believe that Sabbaticals play a part in achieving the longevity and long term health of our pastors.

³³ Adapted from Foley, S. & Brown, S., 2019 *Sabbatical Guidelines – A Season of Renewal*, Navigators

While it is a local church decision to grant Sabbatical leave to their pastors, we would encourage all churches to consider this question seriously and to develop their own policies and procedures around this matter. To support churches to this end, we have provided this guide and a policy template that can be modified to suit local contexts.

Our prayer is that churches will see Sabbatical leave as an investment into their minister's health and wellbeing and therefore an investment into their local church and wider kingdom ministry.

Queensland Baptists would like to acknowledge the excellent work done by others, particularly by the Navigators, Focus on the Family and Bill Gaultiere on whose work a lot of the material in this guide was based.

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Miscellaneous resources on Sabbaticals are available from the following websites

9Marks – www.9marks.org

Soul Shepherding – www.soulshepherding.org

The Pastor's Soul – <https://pastorsoul.com>

Vanderbloemen Search Group – www.vanderbloemen.com