SABBATICAL GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES
FOR PROFESSIONAL CHURCH WORKERS

South Dakota District – LCMS
September 14, 2026

"Those that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength:
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint." (Is. 40:31)

The South Dakota District – LCMS provides this document as guidance and encouragement to congregations and schools of the SDD that seek to develop their own sabbatical policies and guidelines. These guidelines were presented and approved at the September 2026 SDD Board of Directors meeting.

I. INTRODUCTION

What is a Sabbatical?
The word "sabbatical" is derived from the Biblical idea of "Sabbath." God himself sets the pattern for Sabbath in Genesis 2:1-4a and would later command the people of Israel (Exodus 20:8-11) to set aside 1/7th of their time for rest and renewal. Thirty-five times in the Gospels Jesus departs to pray in preparation for the work He is about to do. We should take note.

Historically, the giving of a sabbatical rest has most frequently been practiced in academia. The belief is that professors are so drained by six years of ongoing teaching and research that their continued academic work will greatly benefit from a time of rest, reflection, reading, writing, and reeducation for their field of endeavor.

Within the life of the church, international missionaries have regularly received sabbaticals in the form of furloughs which allowed them to be re-energized by relationships back home and also to gain perspective and knowledge to take back to their ministry. Other American Christian denominations have also seen the great benefit of providing opportunities for sabbaticals for their professional church workers and this has become part of their church culture.

Sabbatical leaves are designed to benefit the professional person through a dedicated time of refreshment in God's Word, a guard against burnout, refreshment of the spirit, engagement of the mind, and a gain of perspective, knowledge, and skills. The local church also reaps the benefit of re-energized leadership, clarity of mission, and a biblically based healthy model of the Christian life for others to follow in their own personal lives following our Lord's example to depart and pray.

Why Do Our Church Workers Need Sabbaticals?
Workers in the church need to recreate and restore what has been depleted by the day-to-day battle against the devil and his schemes. Nourishing one's body, mind, and spirit in the Lord and regaining perspective requires a change of place and pace. Jesus provides us an excellent example to follow. He actively nourished His whole person, body, mind and spirit—in prayer, in teaching, in travel, in time alone, in rest and in caring for people. By his example, the apostles who walked and worked with Him learned from Him and benefited as well. Jesus told His disciples in Mark 6:31: *"Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."*

That is what sabbatical is about—an extended pilgrimage away from the "normal" activities of life as we know it in the exercising of the roles, functions, and responsibilities of our church work vocations. By dedicating time to be refreshed by the worker's primary vocation as a baptized child of God, He will regenerate and renew the whole person in , body, mind and spirit. This is His Word of promise in

Holy Baptism. (Titus 3:4-6) It is a significant change of life and living for an extended period of time that ultimately benefits the person, his/her family and the ministry of Call.

What Does a Sabbatical Look Like?
Sabbatical typically includes time for prayer, meditation, reading, writing, resting, reflection, fasting or other diet management, traveling, visiting new places and engaging in new experiences and experiencing different cultures. Sabbatical times may vary but we suggest no less than forty days away from regular pace and expectations of the ministry.

II. VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS

A. Good self-care is proactive and preventative. A regular time off each week, regular usage of allotted vacation time, and a regularly scheduled sabbatical keeps a professional church worker healthy physically, spiritually, and emotionally, reducing the potential for burnout, compassion fatigue, and the negative effects of prolonged stress.

B. A professional church worker who practices good self-care remains healthier and may extend his or her life and ministry.

C. A sabbatical leave should be an ongoing intentional part of a congregation's/school's ministry, not a reaction to crisis (i.e. burnout, forced removal, etc.).

D. Sabbaticals are a way that congregations/schools can minister to their professional workers and to the worker's family.

E. Healthy professional church workers foster healthy congregations and schools. A sabbatical can rightly be considered an "investment" in your professional church worker in your local ministry.

F. The sabbatical time can open up new opportunities for members to grow in service and be a blessing for the congregation/school and church at large.

G. Every congregation and school has its own unique challenges and resources and therefore needs to develop its own sabbatical "policy" or guidelines.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL POLICY

A. Determine the time parameters

1. When?
    a. Schedule it to minimize disruption to the congregation/school yet provide for the worker's needs. Plan long in advance to prepare the congregation/school for a smooth transition. The professional worker and congregation/school will need about a year to plan the sabbatical.

    b. When scheduling the sabbatical, priority should be given to the desired activities of the professional worker—e.g., if a class is offered only in the fall, the sabbatical would necessarily take place at that time. With proper planning, any time can be appropriate for a sabbatical.

2. How long?
    a. The SDD along with numerous other LCMS districts (TX, NWD, KA, MI, MNS) recommends three successive months + vacation time (not in place of) every seven years of professional service to the church.

b. Clarify and distinguish vacation and sabbatical: a sabbatical is not simply a "reward" or vacation, but an important part of the working relationship between professional church worker and congregation/school.

c. Ask: Can the sabbatical purpose and goals be achieved in the time available? If not, either the sabbatical's goals need to be reduced or the schedule expanded.

B. Determine Financial Arrangements

1. A continuation of full salary and benefits during sabbatical (except car allowance) is advisable.

2. How will this be financed? Some options might include:
   a. Entirely financed by the congregation/school where this is possible. This could be provided for in the annual budget or through special gifts.

   b. The congregation/school and professional worker each contributing 3% of salary and housing to a sabbatical fund each year. After five years the professional worker would be able to take a three-month sabbatical, plus vacation, with pay. The funds accrued, plus interest, minus Concordia Plans expenses would be paid to the professional worker over the period of the sabbatical.
      NOTE: If a worker leaves the ministry of this setting before taking a sabbatical, the portion plus interest he/she contributed to the "sabbatical fund" should be returned to him/her as taxable income.

   c. Alternate financing may be available, depending on the nature of the sabbatical (e.g. LCEF, Wheat Ridge Ministries, Thrivent, Lilly Foundation, etc.)

3. What about additional costs? (e.g. supply preaching, pastoral assistance) If the congregation/school saved an additional 1-2% of the worker's salary, it should have sufficient funds to cover the cost of a replacement church worker during the worker's sabbatical.

4. Would the congregation/school assist with tuition costs, where it is applicable and feasible?

C. Make Specific Sabbatical Plans

1. Purpose
   a. Is it for rest, spiritual renewal, new experiences and relationships, intellectual growth, decision-making time, travel, and/or family time?

   b. What does the professional worker want (dream, hope) to happen to himself/herself personally? How would he/she like the congregation/school and his/her family to benefit?

   c. A sabbatical is a time to NOT DO what you normally do. The worker should not see this as another time to be as busy as he/she was before, just in another setting and on a different subject.

2. Design
   a. Sabbaticals are very individual. There is no right or wrong plan, though a plan should demonstrate some benefit to be derived by both the worker and the

congregation/school. There needs to be mutual agreement by the professional church worker and congregation/school on the sabbatical plan. It is useful to have a "mentor" (one who has done it) help develop the plan. Will the sabbatical be programmed or open-ended? For what purpose? Spiritual growth? Theological reflection? Pastoral concerns? Research in a given area? Writing a book or a manuscript? Prayer, reflection and meditation? Physical health restoration? Combinations of these? Other?

3. Physical setting
    a. This could be a retreat center, foreign travel, home, and/or university, etc. The potential settings are almost limitless and one sabbatical may involve a number of them.

    b. Boundaries are important and need to be established in writing and agreed upon. For example: a complete absence from the congregation/school, even when the worker is in town. Typically, the worker should not be contacted by the congregation except in the case of emergency—and what constitutes an "emergency" needs to be defined and agreed upon.

4. Other Considerations
    a. The congregation/school may want to appoint a Sabbatical Committee (three-five members, which would include the President, an Elder and a School Board representative if a person on sabbatical is in the school) to assist both the professional church worker and congregation/school in planning the sabbatical.

    b. Recognize that it may take at least two years of education to help the congregation/school leadership understand the value of the sabbatical the first time they offer it. Do not rush this. Gain the congregation's/school's ownership and support.

    c. Clarify sabbatical benefits to the professional worker and the congregation/school. A good sabbatical meets a mutual need. What does the worker want to happen to himself/herself personally? How would he/she like the congregation/school to benefit? What can be special for his/her spouse, children and friends? What is in it for them? What will they gain? What will it cost?

    d. What is the congregation's/school's plan for pastoral care and public worship during sabbatical? What is the congregation's/school's plan to replace the professional worker during his/her absence? What responsibilities need to continue and how will they be taken care of? (The sabbatical time should NOT be viewed by the congregation/school as a "holding period" while the worker is gone. Ministry should continue and grow during a sabbatical.)

    e. Are there any restrictions being placed on the professional worker following the sabbatical? (e.g. The worker agrees to remain for at least one year following sabbatical) The sabbatical is not a time for a worker to pursue another call or employment elsewhere. However, if during the sabbatical a worker prayerfully discerns that this call or professional ministry is not their calling, then the matter needs to be addressed in a forthright and God pleasing manner.

    f. What if multiple staff members desire a sabbatical at the same time or in overlapping times?

    g. Can the sabbatical be broken into two or three segments? Does it have to be three

months? Could it be more? Less?

5. Following The Sabbatical
    a. A "Reentry Plan" is crucial. There will be a need for the worker and congregation/school to reconnect. A feeling of being "out of touch" is not unusual. Both the pastor/professional church worker and congregation/school are in a different place following the sabbatical. It is helpful to "re-negotiate" roles and expectations as a part of the reentry process.

    b. A "welcome back" event, such as a congregational meal, may be used as a way to thank those leaders/workers who filled in during the sabbatical as well as to welcome the returning worker home.

    c. Submit a report to the congregation/school. This is a time for debriefing and reconnecting. Share with the congregation/school which sabbatical goals were met, what discoveries were made, what insights were gained. Recommendations for changes in future sabbatical planning would also be appropriate.

6. Additional activities that may be helpful to the professional worker between sabbaticals.

    a. Regularly visit with a father confessor to free the conscience and receive guidance.
    b. Take quarterly 48-hour retreats for spiritual renewal.
    c. Invest in continuing education opportunities.
    d. Engage in community activities outside the congregation.
    e. Take regular time off each week.
    f. Take full allotted vacation time each year.

IV. RESOURCES

Alban Institute
https://alban.org/?s=sabbatical

Bolick Foundation
https://bolickfoundation.org/how-to-apply/

Lilly Endowment
https://lillyendowment.org/for-grantseekers/renewal-programs/

Lutheran Church Extension Fund
https://lcef.org/grace-place-wellness/ministry-sabbatical-resources/
https://lcef.org/grace-place-wellness-sabbatical-scholarship/

V. SAMPLE SABBATICAL POLICY

Sabbatical Leave Policy for Full-time Church Workers
Walther Lutheran Church, Plainview, SD

The purpose of the Sabbatical leave is to provide time for professional church workers to gain perspective on ministry by stepping out of it for a specified length of time. During the Sabbatical, the church worker will engage in a special project, study, travel, mission, retreat, or other planned activities for renewal. This Sabbatical leave is a part of the ministry of this congregation, and the planning and implementation of the Sabbatical are part of our pastor's or church worker's job to maintain his/her professional skills and his/her spiritual growth.

I. Eligibility and Length of Sabbatical Leave

The full-time called church worker is eligible for a sabbatical leave after serving at Walther Lutheran for 4 years. The available time allowed is as follows:

Ordained Ministers:
_____ After 4 years — 1 month
_____ After 7 years — 3 months
_____ After 11 years— 1 month
_____ After 14 years— 3 months
_____ After 18 years— 1 month
_____ After 21 years— 3 months
_____ Etc.

Our pastor(s) is encouraged to take sabbatical leaves as scheduled; therefore there will be no banking of months.

Commissioned Ministers and Others:
Every 4 years the church worker is eligible for 1 month. Worker can bank and accumulate months up to 3 consecutive months.

The amount of time allowed and funds budgeted for annual education and study leave ordinarily provided continues, except in the year of the Sabbatical, when they are applied to the Sabbatical. Sabbatical leave time is not vacation time. More than one church worker can take a sabbatical leave in a given year, but not during the same period of time.

II. Procedure for Sabbatical Leave

Sabbatical leave procedures are to be considered flexible so as to accommodate unusual opportunities that may develop.

A. Before

1. At least 6 months prior, the church worker will submit a Sabbatical leave plan so that the church worker and congregation can continue planning together. The plan is to be submitted to the Sabbatical Review Committee. The Sabbatical Review Committee will consist of a representative(s) from the Board of Elders, Church Council, called staff, and the congregation. The plan is reviewed and discussed with church worker, with adjustments being made as necessary. The plan is then given to the President of the congregation who will recommend the plan to the Church Council and Board of Elders for approval.

2. The Sabbatical leave plan should include the following:

   i. Personal objectives and leave objectives.
   ii. A description of the major elements of the experience.
   iii. Proposed beginning date and end date.
   iv. Suggestions of how current job responsibilities will be handled during the leave.
   v. A description of any anticipated budgetary implications.

B. During

1. A complete break from all professional duties and parish responsibilities shall be in effect for the church worker during the entire period of the Sabbatical leave.

2. When possible the church worker will make a brief progress report to the Sabbatical Review Committee.

3. The members of the congregation will work together with remaining staff and/or professional replacement(s) to maintain and enhance the mission and ministry of the church.

C. After

1. Within a month of return from sabbatical leave, the church worker will submit a written report and evaluation of the leave to the Sabbatical Review Committee, Church Council, and Board of Elders, with a summary to be delivered to the congregation.

2. Ordinarily, the church worker will continue service at this congregation for at least one year.

III. Finances

A. Salary, housing, and benefits shall continue for the church worker while away on their Sabbatical.

B. The Sabbatical is a necessary part of our church worker's professional, spiritual, and business life, and expenses will be reimbursed for up to $500 per month. This amount is to be reviewed annually by the Sabbatical Review Committee. The church worker will present itemized billing for reimbursed business expense.

C. The congregation will establish a Sabbatical Fund in an interest bearing account with an annual budget allotment of $2,500 or more. Donations can be made by congregation members to be added to the account.

D. Sabbatical Fund monies will be distributed according to needs inherent in the Sabbatical plan. (Approximately one-third available monies would be used to provide for professional service replacement, if necessary, and two-thirds are available for reimbursement of Sabbatical expenses incurred by the church worker while on leave.) Ordinarily, only monies available from the Sabbatical Fund will be used to support Sabbatical related expenses.

VI. CONCLUSION

How can a Sabbatical help the congregation?

- A Sabbatical can be a great time to develop lay leadership that might otherwise not step up because "the church worker does that." A well-planned Sabbatical can be a great occasion for renewing and recommitting lay leadership.

- It can give the congregation and especially its leadership a much clearer picture of what actually happens in the congregation and what the church worker does.

- It changes the culture of the congregation to observe the sabbath rest and apply it in their own personal lives.

Notes to Church Worker about arranging for a Sabbatical

- First, assume that it will take at least 2 weeks to disconnect from parish life mentally and emotionally. You can begin whatever program or plans you have in mind right away, but it will take a while to adjust.

- Keep track of your time well before the Sabbatical and at different times of the year (e.g. one week in September, in July and in April). Use it to assess how you spend your time and as a reminder of tasks that need to be done. while you are gone. Also, this will provide specific evidence for the leadership and congregation of what you do and why you need a Sabbatical.

- Keep a journal before, during, and after your Sabbatical (what you are doing, learning, feeling). This will help you not only discover what the Sabbatical is doing for you, it will help when you report back to the congregation, and it will help planning the next Sabbatical.

- Plan to be gone completely. Do not return for official acts unless designated as an emergency. If the congregation is well aware of this before you go, you should not have any problems.

- Make specific plans for your Sabbatical, even if your plan is to sleep late and rest a lot, and discuss the plans with the Sabbatical Review Committee, Church Council, and Board of Elders.

- Include the congregation as much as possible in your Sabbatical planning. Communicate, communicate, communicate! Be sure they are "on board."

- Reflect on how you want to do your "re-entry" when the Sabbatical ends. Be sure to thank and recognize the lay leaders who helped you while you were gone. Be sure to report back—perhaps a written report mailed to all members of the congregation.

APPENDIX A

Sabbatical Planning Check List

Twenty-four Months Prior

- Review and discuss the upcoming sabbatical with the appropriate board chair.
- Review call documents and sabbatical policy.
- Draft potential dates on the calendar.

Twelve Months Prior

- Appoint Sabbatical Committee
- Seek input from congregation leaders and members regarding sabbatical plan.
- Update Congregational Operations Manual/"Who Does What" list.

Six Months Prior

- A Sabbatical Request, in cooperation with the Sabbatical Committee, is presented to the appropriate council or board within the congregation/school that includes the following information:
- Purpose of the sabbatical
- Plan and timing of implementation
- Compensation arrangements
- A plan for a report to the congregation/school after the sabbatical
- If not yet completed, arrangements for "covering" the professional church workers responsibilities

Three Months Prior

- Arrangements for "covering" the professional church workers responsibilities are completed.
- A daily log of parish/school happenings is assigned to an individual (for review when the worker returns.)
- Notify district office and Circuit Counselor of intended sabbatical and pertinent details.

Sabbatical Begins

- Interim staff arrives, is welcomed by the congregation, meets with congregational chair and sabbatical committee chair to review the Congregation Operations manual.

End of Sabbatical

- Celebrate the return of the worker.

One Month After

- A report of the sabbatical experience is presented to the congregation or appropriate board/committee.
- Communicate with the congregation about the sabbatical experience.

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONS FOR A PROFESSIONAL CHURCH WORKER TO CONSIDER WHEN DEVELOPING A SABBATICAL PLAN

- In what areas of my life do I need renewal of health and hope?
- How can I grow in Christ and His service during my sabbatical?
- What are my strengths, gifts, and competencies that I could build upon during this sabbatical time?
- What are the areas of greatest stress in my work and life?
- What are the most important things I hope to experience during the remaining years of my life?
- What are the things I would like to let go of?
- What are the things I have been praying for?
- What are my core values?
- What would I like to learn or experience during this sabbatical time?
- What changes would I like to make in my life or work?
- Can I envision what it would be like to move into a three-month sabbatical?
- What will I do initially?
- What will it be like to be released from ministry duties?
- How can I include my spouse and family in the sabbatical time?
- How will my home life be different?
- How will I transition back?