

## **Lancaster Mennonite Conference** **SABBATICALS FOR PASTORS**

This document summarizes Lancaster Conference's guidelines and recommendations on sabbaticals for pastors. It is written as a series of responses to Frequently Asked Questions and adapted from Lancaster Conference's *Sabbaticals for Bishops* guidelines as well as the pastoral sabbatical guidelines of Mennonite Church USA.

### **What is a sabbatical?**

In the Old Testament, God instructed the Israelites to give the land a sabbatical (a rest) every seven years, by which he meant that they should allow the land to remain fallow for one year (Lev. 25). In the academic world, faculty are often eligible for a sabbatical year after being awarded tenure and after fulfilling their regular responsibilities for at least seven years. The college or university usually provides full salary and benefits during a half year (or half pay for a full year) of release from teaching duties. In order to be awarded a sabbatical year, the faculty member must propose a study, research, or writing project that will enhance their understanding and skills in their area of expertise.

In the last several decades, pastors and church leaders have begun to realize that the unique emotional, psychological, and spiritual demands and burdens of church ministry leave pastors and overseers particularly susceptible to 'burnout.' Many pastors and overseers who leave Christian ministry do so in response to the weight and relentlessness of the demands placed on them or in response to an experience of feeling 'burned out.' Also, many pastors and overseers benefit from the opportunity for an extended break from their regular ministry responsibilities in order to learn new skills or to engage in deeper learning experiences.

For pastors, a "sabbatical" is an extended period of time during which they are released from their regular oversight duties and responsibilities, while being fully supported by their usual salary and benefits package. The expectation of this document is that all pastors—part-time and full-time as well as compensated and uncompensated—should receive a sabbatical.

### **Why should a pastor take a sabbatical?**

Sabbaticals for pastors are good for the pastor and his/her family and good for the congregation. Pastors are more likely to serve longer and to serve with greater enthusiasm if they have regular opportunities for study, service, or renewal leaves. Sabbaticals provide spiritual refreshment, new vision, strengthened skills, and wider perspectives on Christian ministry. Congregations benefit from the renewed vision, new skills, and wider perspectives that pastors gain from a time away from active ministry. Pastor sabbaticals should be seen by the congregation as an investment in future ministry rather than as an entitlement. The pastor's sabbatical is also an opportunity for the congregation to be self-reflective and to assess its ongoing journey as a people of God.

### **What results might a sabbatical produce?**

One important result of a sabbatical may be the renewal and restoration of pastors whose emotional wells have been drained over years of ongoing ministry.

Another result might be further equipping for ministry through a study leave that combines rest from oversight duties with structured study. For some pastors, a study leave provides an opportunity to complete a seminary degree or to pursue post-seminary studies. For others, specialized studies can develop skills in particular areas of ministry – areas in which the pastor has need or interest in developing new skills. Pastors can improve their effectiveness in ministry through additional training in oversight skills and in pastoral skills (e.g., organizational leadership, conflict mediation, theological reflection, family systems theory, spiritual formation, preaching). Many pastors would also benefit from studies that are not directly related to Christian ministry, but which provide a better rounded understanding of the world outside the church. Of course, pastors should be receiving ongoing continuing education through short-term seminars and workshops, but longer blocks of study time are also important for cultivating deeper learning.

A third result, usually from a service or exchange leave, may be the chance to learn and grow through serving in a different setting for several months. Many Christian leaders have gifts and interests that are not fully exercised in

any one ministry assignment. Sometimes a pastor's family can resent the amount of time and energy invested in pastoral work. One alternative to this type of situation is a short-term leave or exchange that reinvigorates the pastor and that opens new possibilities for the pastor's family.

It is clear from stories of LMC pastors, sabbaticals often fulfill multiple goals, and that it can be wise to package an number of different objectives together such as study, service and rest.

### **What kinds of sabbaticals exist?**

#### **A. Study Leave**

A study leave is not a vacation. It is undertaken to work on a particular learning goal. Usually it involves completion of a defined academic course or program, seminar or study tour. Occasionally a self-directed program of reading and study is appropriate, but the purpose should be clearly defined in advance and some form of reporting (e.g., publication of a document or presentation of a seminar) should be the result. The length of the leave could range from a few weeks to several months or a full year. Some study leaves take the form of a reduced work load while continuing in ministry, but the preferred model is a complete suspension of oversight duties during the leave.

Among pastors in Lancaster Conference who have taken a sabbatical, Dwight Groff, pastor of Kinzer Mennonite Church, took a sabbatical that included (along with a service component and visiting a friend) one month of study at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. While there, he studied I and II Corinthians and was surprised by the accompanying sense of retreat that he experienced. He strongly encourages congregations to make sabbaticals available to their pastor(s), noting that "elements of strength, renewal, and encouragement from my sabbatical continue to shape my ministry."<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Sam Thomas took a sabbatical that combined travel, visiting friends and family, fishing and reading with a project in which he committed to being part of a team working at implementing missional communities as a new expression of church. As part of this commitment he helped to plan and host, along with other leaders, a "Taster Event" for folks interested in and experimenting with missional church approaches. As part of this he also traveled to Ohio Synergy Edge for a related three day event in Ohio. He found this engagement with missional church and those involved significant and inspiring, and perhaps a tipping point for new initiatives in LMC and beyond. Bishop Thomas reflected that: "I discovered in the midst of my time away that I was in need of a sabbatical even more than I was aware. It was a new and refreshing experience to feel fully rested and not have significant engagements in front of me. It reminded me of the importance of being more diligent about taking time for renewal and refreshment...to work from rest rather than just rest from work."

#### **B. Rest and Spiritual Renewal Leave**

Spiritual renewal and rest should be planned as part of every leave, but sometimes a leave should be taken for this purpose alone. After an extended or particularly intense time of pouring themselves out for the church, pastors often need time (several weeks or more) to replenish their spiritual resources through prayer and reflection. Even Jesus needed to do this from time to time (see Luke 5:15-16). Such a leave will often include time spent at a retreat center and involve some combination of reading, rest, physical exercise, spiritual disciplines, journaling, spiritual direction, and worship. The pastor should articulate clear goals for such a leave and provide a concluding written report upon return.

Ron and Judy Zook, former pastors of New Holland Mennonite Church, took a sabbatical in which they traveled to Europe and with a Palestine-Israel MCC Learning Tour. Upon return they noted: "In Assisi, we learned from St. Clare to 'Gaze upon, consider, contemplate, and then imitate Christ.' This shaped our sabbatical and continues to shape us. We return with a new appreciation for the power of art and liturgy to help us gaze and contemplate Christ. We find ourselves seeking new ways to use art and liturgy in worship. The Daily Office has become a new part of a daily rhythm that nurtures and restores our souls as pastors. Our sabbatical experience has given us new lens to see the world and our own local community and church."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Shalom News*, August-September, 2012: 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> *Shalom News*, August-September, 2012: 13.

Joe Miller, pastor of Mellinger Mennonite Church also took a three month sabbatical that included multiple experiences--a 40-mile pilgrimage hiking the Jesus Trail in Israel as well as a month-long continuing education program at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, engaging in biblical studies lectures in the morning and day trips to historical sites in the afternoon.

After nine years of ministry, Lynn Parks of Oxford Mennonite Church took a sabbatical for renewal. Her sabbatical gave time to be with family, to rest without worrying about other responsibilities, and a break from the mental and emotional weight of ministry. The sabbatical enabled Lynn to step back and gain mental and spiritual energy that is drained by the constant demands that come with ministry. During Lynn's sabbatical she visited congregations of other denominations, read and reflected, and focused on her own spiritual needs rather than those of others. She found this time so refreshing that it felt difficult to think about coming back into ministry again.

Stan and Kathy Shantz, pastors at James Street Mennonite Church, took a sabbatical that like a number of other pastors, integrated renewal, rest, and play with training and retooling. That sabbatical was made possible by a Clergy Renewal Grant from the Lilly Foundation that allowed the Shantz family to visit South Korea (the birthplace of their daughters) and for Stan and Kathy to visit the faith communities of Iona in Scotland and Taize in France.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Zimmerman, pastor of Meadville Mennonite Church, took a study/rest and renewal sabbatical. As a bi-vocational pastor he has little time to study or research apart from sermon preparation. The sabbatical gave him space away from meetings and constant pressure, specifically space "in which I was no problem solving in my head all the time." During his sabbatical he visited a variety of churches in the local area in order to experience the expression of worship, theological ideas, practices, etc. of congregations around his own. His visits to other churches helped him to see the family aspect of the congregation and the fact that one is not expected to offer all services and programs as a congregation, but to worship and obey God and love each other.

### **C. Service Leave**

A pastor and another congregation or the broader church may benefit from a service leave when a pastor has particular expertise or experience that is needed for a time by another part of the church. Examples include overseas service or short-term service in another church agency or institution, such as interim teaching or administrative assignments, return trips to other countries previously served, or helping to start a new ministry. The form and length of such leaves varies greatly depending on the nature of the assignment.

### **D. Special Assignment Leave**

Pastors may be released by their congregations for short periods (usually not more than one month) to work on a special assignment. Examples include writing Sunday school curriculum or other teaching materials, visiting other churches and ministries, or assisting in the development of a local service ministry. A special assignment leave may be somewhat similar to a service leave, but it is usually shorter than a service leave.

### **E. Short term or Interim Pastor Leave**

Some pastors may welcome the opportunity to fill a pastoral role in a short-term assignment (often two to six months) to a congregation in another district, another conference, or another country. This sort of leave allows the pastor's family to experience another part of the church more fully since they are engaged in the life of a specific congregation.

### **How long are sabbaticals?**

Sabbaticals generally vary from one to four months. The length varies depending on the purpose of the leave, family circumstances, and financial considerations. The primary consideration is that the leave be long enough to achieve its goal. The most typical duration is three or four months.

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<sup>3</sup> See additional rich testimonies from pastors and bishops about their sabbatical experiences at the end of this document.

Based on experience with pastoral sabbaticals, it seems that longer leaves (e.g., six to twelve month leaves) are likely to lead to too much disengagement for both the pastor and the congregation and to consideration of making a permanent change.

### **How often would a pastor be “on sabbatical?”**

Congregations should expect sabbaticals to happen on a regular basis. Some congregations may plan for a leave (lasting two to four months) at the beginning of each new term of service (assuming terms of service are usually three to five years). In other cases, a longer leave (four to six months) may follow 7 or 10 years of ministry. Another approach would be to offer one month or one-half month of sabbatical leave for every year of service up to a maximum of four or five months, and to allow the pastor to schedule the sabbatical at their convenience. The Mennonite Church USA guidelines encourage 1 month of sabbatical for each full-time year of ministry. The expectation of Lancaster Mennonite Conference is that all pastors—bivocational, part-time, full-time, salaried, volunteer—will be eligible for regular sabbaticals.

For those pastors who are less than full-time, the congregation may want to pro-rate the amount of sabbatical time “earned” or “awarded” based on the FTE of the pastor’s appointment. Bi-vocational pastors may actually be in greater need of sabbatical time given the complexity of juggling multiple work commitments. In fact, congregations with bi-vocational pastors may want to consider providing additional compensation to allow the pastor to take a break from his/her other form of employment. A sabbatical from the congregation without a sabbatical from other employment is likely to leave the pastor feeling less renewed and more restrained in the opportunities that he/she may engage in during the sabbatical.

### **How much will a sabbatical cost, and who will pay?**

Some leaves are self-supporting. A short term or interim pastoral leave, for example, would include salary, travel, and benefit coverage for the pastor and family by the receiving congregation. The costs of a service leave or special assignment leave may be covered by the receiving agency or institution, or the pastor’s salary and other expenses could be paid by the congregation as a way of sharing in the larger mission of the church. Another possibility would be to negotiate a cost-sharing arrangement between the congregation and the receiving agency or institution.

A study leave or a leave for rest and spiritual renewal is not as likely to be funded by another organization. Typically, for a leave of one to four months, the congregation would continue to pay the full salary and the pastor would apply continuing education allowance to any tuition costs. For a longer leave, congregations may prefer to pay 66% or 75% of the pastor’s salary and 100% of benefits for months five and six. Many congregations, schools, and other institutions follow this practice with longer leaves.

Additional financial support for pastor sabbaticals may be available through Lancaster Conference’s Leadership Education Grants (for tuition costs), the Lilly Foundation’s Clergy Renewal Grants (for ministers with an M.Div. degree), or the Louisville Institute’s Sabbatical Grants for Pastoral Leaders.

### **Who will be our pastor during the sabbatical?**

Congregations may arrange for another pastor to cover pastoral responsibilities—perhaps another pastor from within the congregation or someone who comes in on an interim basis. The district Bishop will assist the congregation on coverage for the pastor’s responsibilities while the pastor is on sabbatical. Or, a congregation may cover pastoral responsibilities by calling on the gifts of others in the congregation—deacons, elders, Board members, former pastors, and others who might be able to share in preaching, pastoral care, administration and oversight, etc. Doing so has the potential to develop new leaders from within the congregation and to give others a new perspective of the opportunities and challenges that their pastor faces on an everyday basis.

### **Will our pastor come back afterward?**

A pastor usually returns from a sabbatical refreshed and eager to reengage in ministry and usually returns with renewed passion and enhanced skills, which contributes to longevity in the role. But congregations may want to include a statement in the sabbatical agreement that spells out an expectation that the pastor who takes a sabbatical will complete the contract term after the leave or will serve at least one year after returning.

On the other hand, sometimes a pastor (or a congregation) will realize during the pastor’s sabbatical that it is time for a permanent change. In these cases, there is little to be gained by insisting on the fulfillment of the contract

term when there is no enthusiasm for it. This is one reason to consider scheduling sabbaticals at the end rather than at the beginning of a contract term.

Congregations that see their ministry as part of the larger work of the church sometimes provide financial support for a pastor to take a shorter (two to three months) study or spiritual renewal leave at the end of a term of service to that congregation, especially if the ministry has been more than 10 years long. This enables the pastor to make a better transition to the next assignment and may be less disruptive for the congregation than expecting the pastor to return briefly after a sabbatical before moving on to a different ministry assignment.

### **What happens to the pastor's family?**

Family considerations are very important in deciding the timing, length, location and focus of the leave. A well-planned leave that involves the pastor's family in the planning will renew family life and encourage the pastor's spouse and children to support a return to ministry with enthusiasm. Congregations should help pastors ensure that a sabbatical does not place excessive financial or other burdens on the family.

### **What should the congregational leaders do?**

- Consider the benefits your congregation will enjoy as a result of a well-planned leave for your pastor.
- Talk about your approach to pastor sabbaticals before your pastor asks for one.
- Develop a sabbatical policy that specifies frequency, length, expectations, options, and coverage of costs to guide your discussion of specific proposals. Include enough flexibility to respond to the particular needs and circumstances of your pastor.
- Be open to adjustments to the policy if circumstances warrant—e.g., if an opportunity or invitation for a service leave or exchange arises, or it becomes evident that the pastor needs a spiritual renewal leave before the policy calls for one.
- When you renew your pastor's contract or call a new pastor, add a paragraph to the covenant of understanding that spells an approach to sabbaticals.
- Consider including some set aside money in each year's support budget for your pastor, so there will be a fund available after six or seven years to cover the costs of a leave.
- When you receive a proposal for a leave from your pastor, negotiate details that benefit everyone concerned. Then write up an agreement that specifies the type of sabbatical to be taken, its duration, a budget, coverage of the pastoral needs of the congregation while the pastor is on sabbatical, and accountability for the pastor during the sabbatical period.

### **What should the pastor do?**

- If you are considering a call to a new oversight assignment or renewing a contract, negotiate a policy (or at least a commitment to work at a policy) to be included in your memorandum of understanding.
- Talk with your congregational leaders about formulating a policy on leaves. If there is no such policy, begin working on one within the usual decision-making structures of your congregation.
- Once a policy is in place, consider when you might benefit most from a leave. It is best to plan a year in advance—longer if it is your congregation's first experience with pastor sabbaticals.
- Talk with your spouse and children, if appropriate, and pray about the opportunities for you and the congregation. Get counsel from colleagues, your Bishop, and others who have experienced a sabbatical regarding the best way for you to use sabbatical time.
- Develop a specific proposal to present to congregational leaders. Define what kind of leave you want, what you and the congregation stand to gain from it, how you will be accountable for the results, when and where it might happen, and so on according to your congregation's policy requirements.
- After your sabbatical, report to your congregation about how the experience has impacted you and your continuing ministry.
- After a longer leave, expect some awkwardness around returning to your congregation. Prepare yourself and your family for this. Consider what kind of celebration or reacquainting time might be appropriate for you and your congregational leaders as you begin working together more closely again.

### **Where can we get more information on planning a leave for our pastor?**

Contact Lancaster Conference's moderator or district Bishop.

For reflections on the value of sabbaticals, see:

- February 2, 1998 issue of *Canadian Mennonite*, the February 1997 issue of *Clergy Journal*
- Chapter “Desert and Harvest: A Sabbatical Story” in Eugene Petersen’s *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Word, 1989)
- <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/clergysabbaticals.aspx>

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### **Sabbatical reflections from LMC leaders**

I have been blessed to have had several sabbaticals. In one case our family spent a month of my three-month respite in Immokalee Florida. We worked with Habitat for Humanity, me in construction and my wife Mary Lou in the office. During a second sabbatical years, later our congregation enabled us to travel to Peru for one month of my three-month sabbatical. There we assisted EMM missionaries with a medical clinic and other teaching/preaching assignments. In both cases our children were greatly impacted in positive ways by those trips. And in both cases I spent the remainder of my time resting, reading, and doing other things. While some enjoy academic sabbaticals, what I needed were those varied breaks, doing things far from my normal routine, and spending lots of time with my family.

Were my sabbaticals worth what they cost the congregation? What I know is that at 56 years of age, having served in pastoral ministry for more than 34 years, I love pastoring now as much as ever. Instead of feeling like I’m trying to hang until I can retire, I’m excited about the future and believe I have more to offer now than ever. Certainly not the only reason but one of the reasons why I have not been a pastoral “casualty” is that the congregation was willing to care for me by periodically giving me a sabbaticals. It has helped me to stay energized.

Joe Sherer  
Willow Street Mennonite Church

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I took a sabbatical in the summer of 2000 for thirteen weeks. I brought the idea to the leadership of the church five years before it happened and they opened up a fund putting a set amount (\$36) in each month to prepare to pay speakers for each week. We are a small body of believers and the amount did not stress our budget in any way. When the time came we had the money available. The goal was to have this happen every seven years, and continue to put in the set amount. During the sabbatical my family and I visited thirteen different churches from thirteen different denominations and vastly different expressions of faith. The idea was to get a pulse on what the Spirit of the Lord was doing in the body of Christ. It was a very rewarding experience for me, and great family time as some of these included visiting churches up to two hours away on a Sunday morning trip, i.e. The Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City. In addition to learning what the Spirit of God was up to, I was incredibly blessed with messages that spoke directly to where I was at in a great time of need in my ministry. Only God could have orchestrated this blessing. I would highly advise all pastors to set up a similar situation for yourself. It is not very costly, and it is highly rewarding.

David Pegarella  
Nanticoke Christian Fellowship

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I was given a three month sabbatical the summer of 2012 after having been serving as pastor at Pilgrims Mennonite Church for twelve years. This was the first time Pilgrims has offered a sabbatical.

I pieced together a variety of things for these three months—

- I began and ended my sabbatical with a week "silent retreat" alone on the Appalachian Trail
- one week service project with each of my two daughters at a place of their choosing
- one week away with my wife
- three "clergy care" sessions with a therapist
- joined extended family for a week at a cabin
- visited a different church each Sunday, especially seeking out church plants and emergent-type churches
- worked on a few home projects including compiling documents from our six years in Germany with EMM

Most meaningful for me were the service weeks with my daughters and my time alone on the Appalachian Trail. It was helpful to step back from my responsibilities as pastor and take a new look at the big picture. I was acutely aware that I missed my primary community. It was encouraging to visit other congregations. I became more aware of the deeper things to which I am attracted and the passions that drive me. I believe it is helpful for pastors to step out of their regular routine for a time in order to reflect and be renewed for continued service.

Barry Kreider  
Pilgrims Mennonite

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Robert and I were given a two month sabbatical in our ninth year of ministry. We had several purposes for our sabbatical. Rest: mental and physical. Read/Study: Robert had a reading list focused on Missional communities and I studied through EMS. Travel: the first two weeks of our sabbatical was spent in Israel with a Tourmagination group led by Nelson Kraybill and hosted by Keith and Brenda Blank. Connecting: we made it a goal to visit the churches of our parents and siblings.

Our tour of Israel was the highlight of our Sabbatical and continues to give back to us in many ways. We continue to use the pictures taken there in sermons and Sunday School made more meaningful by the personal connections to those places. The tour opened the sensory aspects of the biblical text enriching our own spirituality as well as teaching. Because the trip was at the beginning of our sabbatical, we had plenty of time to rest and reflect before re-entering ministry.

Ministry requires engagement on many levels; physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. While regular times of rest and healthy boundaries are essential to an ongoing pastoral presence, an extended time of rest and reflection is also beneficial. Sabbaticals allow pastors to unhook long enough reassess life from one's spiritual vitality to ministry longevity. Time and space for deep reflection give vital perspective to pastoral ministry.

Audrey Kanagy  
Living Light Mennonite Church

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Our sabbatical began with two weeks of Don recuperating from surgery. In late February of 2011, we traveled to Hesston, Kansas, for the remainder of our three months. On the way to and from Lancaster, we had the opportunity to renew relationships with friends in Goshen, Indiana, and then West Liberty, Ohio. After settling into our rental house, we began volunteering with Hesston College. Loretta averaged 15-20 hours per week in the Development Department and Food Services, while Don averaged 40-50 hours per week with the Dyck Arboretum and Hesston College Women's Softball Team. Our sabbatical was one of volunteering, rest and renewal, and reflection, giving us a much needed change of pace.

While we attended worship services in 7-8 different congregations, while we had some opportunity for local travel, a large sense of renewal and joy came from sharing time with our son, Andrew, and his family. Our daughter-in-law, Amy, gave birth to Lucy, on April 1, joining older brother, Jack. Don served as assistant Softball Coach to Andrew, Women's Softball Coach. Don's time with the Arboretum gave him vigorous physical labor and time to reflect on the act of tearing out old vegetation to make room for new spring growth. Loretta shared many precious "grandma" hours with Jack and Lucy.

During our time away, we choose Luke 15:11-32 as our sabbatical text, helping us to reflect on leaving and returning from the perspective of the father, and younger and older son. A book by Henri Nouwen, on this text, wove the Luke 15 account with the personal life experiences of Nouwen and the 16th century artist, Rembrandt.

For us, renewal and rest came through the gift of sabbatical. It involved friends, old and new, family, spiritual reflection, and physical labor. We remain grateful for this experience and encourage congregations to invest in the ongoing health and vitality of their pastors.

Don Sharp  
Rossmere Mennonite Church

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I wonder if shorter sabbaticals (1-2 months) that occur more frequently (every 3-4 years?) This might not be 'enough' to focus on a significant project, but it may provide ongoing opportunities for focused renewal and smaller projects without the significant effort smaller congregations need to marshal to support a longer sabbatical.

In a previous pastorate, I took a 1-month sabbatical. I divided that time to tend to some advanced graduate work as well as research that led to a proposal for the congregation. True, my time was divided, but at the same time, I was able to focus energy to see the congregation and its context in ways that the ongoing, weekly pastoral work does not permit.

It is challenging for a pastor who carries a (part-time compensated) portfolio to take a sabbatical. (I also keep a small therapy caseload and do some adjunct teaching). Though it would be greatly beneficial to have several weeks of Sabbath rest and sabbatical, my other jobs do not make that possible. However, I can certainly see the benefit of the space and silence that could bring.

Pastoring involves a range of skills and tasks that few other callings involve: oversight of an organization and spiritual oversight of a community; awareness of and capacity to engage with biblical and theological scholarship and the existential engagement with scripture and how it can speak into life in the Spirit; ongoing preparation of sermons, meetings, talking with people and tending to one's own participation in the Spirit's life; attending to others calling, nurturing and inviting involvement in designing gathered worship, in instigating and catalyzing mission and ministry among the gathered, building the building to support community life while at the same time, reaching out beyond its boundaries. It's a full plate. Individuals and the Church have invested significantly in the formation of people who are called as pastors; many gifted pastors walk out of this calling. Sabbaticals may be one means to honor and recognize how ongoing focus, training, attention and silence can deepen those called to this ministry.

Tom Leard Longenecker  
New Hope Community Church

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A three month sabbatical policy developed by the congregation had three specific requests which I needed to make plans to fulfill.

**1. Serve in a context of ministry different from my own:**

I spent 10 days in Philadelphia PA serving with the staff of Oxford Circle Christian Community Development Association. They offer adult education and childhood development ministry to their community. This experience had me serving in a ministry context that was completely different from my own.

**2. An element of intentional pastoral study:** I spent most of the month of January at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, IN. An interterm study on I and II Corinthians fulfilled the continuing education element of the sabbatical policy.

**3. Some R & R:** The final month of the sabbatical was an opportunity to, "just relax."

I was most impacted by time I spent alone. I found myself spending a great amount of time praying and reading scripture; pursuing more deeply some of the spiritual disciplines I had implemented a few years ago as a result of pastoral studies. I was not tired or lackluster in pastoral ministry when I began sabbatical. Careful plans were made so that my absence would not cause undo stress in congregational life. I encourage pastors to take a sabbatical. I encourage congregations to take action to make sabbatical available to their pastor(s.) The rewards are numerous for the pastor and the congregation. I was refreshed.

Dwight Groff  
Kinzer Mennonite Church

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I was blessed with a six month sabbatical from April 1 to September 30, 2013. I had served bivocationally for 18 years. The sabbatical was designed as a complete break. I did not receive any e-mails, updates or attend any meetings, other than what the average member would do. The purpose of my sabbatical was for me to have a respite, a break from the spiritual, physical, mental and emotional weight of shepherding our congregation. I wanted to be restored in heart and body, and to come back with a new focus for ministry. I also wanted to use the time to work through some substantial transitions that were taking place in my business. During my sabbatical, I continued to worship at Weaverland most of the time, but I had freedom to go wherever I wanted. This in and of itself was huge. I set a goal of losing 20 pounds during my sabbatical, which I was able to reach. I spent more time with my wife and family, enjoying more time to read. My experience was very positive. I felt energized, refreshed and excited to get back to ministry upon completion of my sabbatical. People commented that I was a different person when I returned. I felt spiritually refreshed. I feel like I gained a better perspective on life and what is most important. I hope to carry this with me to my retirement from ministry and beyond. On the first Sunday back, I had a recommitment to my vows as a pastor and to the congregation that I serve. This was a powerful part of my transition back.

Don R. Weaver  
Weaverland Mennonite Church

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In the year 2012 I experienced my second sabbatical in 17 years of ministry as bishop. Within my heart was the hope for these three months to be a time of developing understanding of preparation for fulfilling my calling in ministry for the next decade which would take me to the age of 65. My goals were to explore cutting edge ministries that are postured for ministry for the next ten years, to prepare myself for relevant and effective ministry, and to experience the rest and renewal needed to be able to lead with grace and joy.

**Exploration of Effective Ministries**--My strategic focus became three settings in Europe where the church is rebounding and the Spirit of God is moving. What I saw in these 3 churches in Switzerland and France were intentionality about ministry to the 35 and younger generation, seriousness about intimate worship, and passionate about making disciples whom assertively use their gifts for the kingdom.

**Experience of Rest and Renewal**--My ability to find rest took longer than expected, however, it went deep quickly as we arrived at a spiritual retreat center in Switzerland 30 days into the sabbatical. We dropped all other plans and stayed at the retreat center until we felt properly detached from the "race of life." The greatest renewal came through time with God, my wife, family, friends, reading, kayaking, and biking.

**Conclusion**--This was an awesome time releasing Elaine and I both to dream again and approach the future with excitement and anticipation.

Lloyd Hoover  
Groffdale District bishop

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In 2012 I took a three-month sabbatical after serving as the lead pastor for six years. It was a tremendous time of refreshment and retooling. One of the keys to a good sabbatical for me was to do a careful job of planning well in advance of the sabbatical. I used Keith Yoder's e-book *Navigating Your Sabbatical* to prepare for this time. I focused the sabbatical on three areas.

**1. Rest & Recreation** – I made a commitment to take a complete break from all ministry and attendance at MMC as a way of resting my body, soul, spirit from these engagements. I worked at developing some hobbies and also took more time just to rest and “be” on my sabbatical.

**2. Reflection & Renewal** – I took a week of retreat away from my home to pause and reflect. I spent time with spiritual friends/mentors who helped me to focus on my personal development and growth and not on church-related things. I read on personal renewal and spiritual growth.

**3. Retooling & Resourcing** – I took a number of trips to places where God was doing something new or of interest to me that helped to resource and retool me for my work at MMC.

I ended my sabbatical by helping to lead a tour to Israel/Palestine with Nelson Kraybill. This was very inspirational and a great way to end my sabbatical. My wife, Brenda, was able to join me for this part of my sabbatical.

Keith Blank  
Mountville Mennonite Church

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I am grateful to Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) for implementing a bishop sabbatical policy and encouraging sabbaticals. And I am so grateful to the Bishop Support Committee and pastors of Landisville and Manor districts who not only made the sabbatical possible, but helped to maintain boundaries that assured a true break from oversight responsibilities. Thank you... Thank you!!!

#### **Travel:**

- My wife and I attended MC USA Convention in Phoenix, AZ. I served as a delegate for LMC.
- We spent nearly a week in Winnipeg, Manitoba with good friends who had been members at Landisville Mennonite Church when I was pastor. One of the highlights of this visit was spending the best part of a day in a Hutterite community.
- We spent several days in OH visiting our son-in-law's parents.
- We enjoyed a long weekend in NYC with two other couples

#### **Refreshment/Renewal:**

- I love fishing. Sabbatical time provided numerous opportunities. I chartered a flathead cat fishing trip on the Susquehanna with my son-in-law and had my boat on the river seven or so times for pleasure and fishing.
- I did more biking than I usually am able to do. There were so many days of wonderful weather!
- There are always work projects here on the farm. When I am busy, they sometimes feel like work, but during sabbatical time I found most of them to be life-giving.

#### **Reading:**

- I've not read a good novel for a long time and so I got into two... *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver and *Fate is the Hunter (a pilot's memoir)* by Ernest K. Gann.
- Also read:
  - o *Discerning God's Will Together* by Ervin Stutzman
  - o *Leading Missional Communities* by Mike Breen and the 3DB team

#### **Sabbatical “project”:**

For the past three years I've been involved with the Lancaster Learning Community (LLC), a group of 15 or so leaders who have been meeting together to explore and work toward implementing Missional Communities

(MC's) as a new expression of church. As I was preparing for a sabbatical, a small planning team began dreaming about planning a "Taster Event" in the Lancaster area for persons interested in and experimenting with the MC approach to discipleship and forming disciples. As part of my sabbatical proposal I committed to being part of that dream.

After some thinking together, we decided to host a Taster event for September 11-12 with resource persons Alex Absalom and Jason Lantz from OH. More than 150 persons registered for this event at Mount Joy Mennonite. This became a significant involvement for me during my sabbatical both in terms of time and what it meant to me as a person and in my role a bishop. We had approximately five planning meetings and several debriefing sessions along with a meeting to begin projecting next steps. I also went with a team of three persons from LMC to Synergy Edge in OH for a three day workshop in September.

Involvement in this MC effort stands out, not as the most fun part of my sabbatical, but certainly as the most significant. The strength of interest in the Taster event from such a rich variety of persons was inspiring. And I sense that the Taster event may well become a tipping point for new initiatives in LMC and beyond. It seems that God has been stirring this movement for several years and that it is at the point of bearing much good fruit, strengthening our resolve to form disciples of Jesus who in turn form disciples of Jesus.

**Reflections:**

- I became aware that a bishop role makes it difficult to create a clean break from responsibilities. While pastors, for whom I provide oversight, helped to maintained good boundaries, most persons outside of that realm had no idea I was on sabbatical and so phone calls and emails and requests continued. I found it easier to deal with these as they came my way rather than hold them until I returned.
- I discovered in the midst of my time away that I was in need of a sabbatical even more than I was aware. It was a new and refreshing experience to feel fully rested and not have significant engagements in front of me. It reminded me of the importance of being more diligent about taking time for renewal and refreshment...to work from rest rather than just rest from work. It renewed and strengthened my resolve to be an advocate for pastors to be granted sabbatical time.
- At age 63, it provided space for me to experience something of what retirement might feel like and to discern when that best happens. That discernment continues.

Sam Thomas, Bishop

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