



Mennonite Church
USA

Mennonite Church
Canada

Sabbatical, Study and Services Leaves for Pastors

Why should a pastor take a leave?

Sabbatical, study and service leaves for pastors are good for the pastor, good for the congregation, and good for the church. Pastors stay longer and serve with greater enthusiasm if their ministry includes opportunities to learn and exposure to other ministries. They experience spiritual refreshment, new vision, strengthened skills and wider perspectives. Congregations benefit from a chance to exercise lay leadership gifts or to experience the ministry of an interim pastor during the leave. When the pastor returns the congregation experiences better pastoral leadership and longer service. The whole church benefits by having better leadership, cross-congregational sharing of perspectives and ideas, and greater satisfaction in ministry for those in whom the church has invested time, money and energy in training for leadership.

A leave is not an entitlement for pastors, but a part of the congregation's and the pastor's strategy for enhancing ministry. It is an investment in future ministry. It may not be an added financial burden for the church nor a financial setback for the pastor and her/his family, but a different opportunity for sharing in building up one another for the greater benefit of all.

What results might a leave produce?

The sabbatical regulations of the Old Testament meant that the land could rest for one year. The concept of "sabbatical" means being released from the ongoing burden of pastoral duties and responsibilities. Such a period of release can renew and restore pastors whose deeper wells have been drained over years of ongoing ministry.

Study leaves combine rest from pastoral duties with structured study. For some it will be 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, perhaps needs identified through an evaluation process. All pastors need to be students of the scriptures, of the teachings of the church and of the world throughout their whole lives. All pastors can improve their ministry through additional training in pastoral skills (preaching, counseling, conflict mediation, etc.). Many pastors would also benefit from studies that are not directly related to ministry but which provide a more rounded understanding of the world outside the church. It is assumed that all pastors regularly attend short-term seminars and workshops, but longer blocks of study time are also important.

Although study leaves are more common, other kinds of renewal leaves can also contribute to one's ministry. Pastors have gifts and interests that are not fully exercised in any one congregation. Sometimes pastors' families resent the amount of time and energy that the pastor invests in congregational life. Congregations sometimes become bored or over familiar with one pastor's style, gifts and perspectives. These factors lead to shortened ministries and more frequent moves. An alternative is a short-term leave or exchange that reinvigorates the pastor, re-interests the congregation and opens new possibilities for the pastor's family.

In addition, the larger church can benefit from pastors who are available for short-term assignments. Mission and educational institutions can use the energy of a pastor on leave. Congregations and other institutions that receive the ministry of pastors on leave can be encouraged to new life. The exchange of ideas, gifts and resources can strengthen the corporate witness of the Church of Jesus Christ.

What kinds of leaves are there?

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 pastoral duties during the leave.

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 centre and might involve reading, rest, physical exercise, spiritual disciplines, keeping a journal and worship. There should be clear goals for such a leave, and accountability through formal spiritual direction and preparing a concluding report.

C. Service Leave

Congregations have released pastors for a service leave when the pastor has a particular expertise or interest 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.

D. Special Assignment

Pastors sometimes are released by their congregation for short periods (usually not more than one month) to work on a special assignment. Examples include writing Sunday school curriculum or other materials, visiting other churches and ministries or assisting in the development of a local service ministry.

E. Pastoral Exchange

Some pastors have been able to participate in a short-term (often two to six months, though it could be longer) exchange with another pastor. Sometimes these are international exchanges where pastors and their families trade homes and jobs while retaining their own salaries. Exchanges within North America with a pastor of a different racial or cultural congregation are also encouraged. Exchanges allow both congregations an opportunity to experience the ministry from a person of another culture while giving the pastor's family a chance to experience another part of the church.

How long is a leave?

Many factors influence the answer to this: the purpose of the leave, family circumstances, financial considerations, congregational needs. The leave must be long enough to achieve its goal. Often that is three or four months. Experience indicates that after a lengthy leave (e.g., a full year) it may be difficult to reconnect and the pastor or congregation may soon want a permanent change.

How often might this happen?

It is wise for a congregation to expect a leave to happen on a regular basis. Some churches plan for a leave (two to four months) at the beginning of each new term of service (usually three to five years). In other cases the leave is granted after seven or 10 years of ministry. Yet another model offers one month of leave for every year of service to a cap of perhaps four or five months.

How much will it cost, and who will pay?

Some leaves are self-supporting. An exchange leave, for example, involves few financial changes for the congregation and modest expenses for the pastor's family. It may be necessary for a North American congregation to pay some travel costs for a pastor's family from a less wealthy part of the world to come to North America. A service leave or special assignment may be paid for 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.

A study leave or a leave for rest and spiritual renewal does not offer similar possibilities for funding. Typically for a leave of less than three months the congregation continues to pay the full salary and the pastor uses the continuing education allowance for tuition costs. For a longer leave it is common practice in congregations (comparable to schools and other institutions) to continue to pay a portion (often 66% or 75%) of the pastor's salary, all the usual benefits, including the continuing education allowance to cover some of the tuition costs. Additional financial support is available through some of the area conferences. Support for formal study in an extended study leave may be available through the "Company of 1000" fund managed by the Denominational Minister of Mennonite Church Canada and through the Mennonite Mutual Aid matching grants for education in the USA. The pastor's family usually incurs some expenses related to educational expenses and perhaps a temporary move in addition to any salary reduction.

Who will be our pastor during the leave?

In the case of a short leave (up to three months) congregations usually arrange for members to cover the pastoral duties, thus incurring few additional expenses. If lay leadership is not available or in the case of a longer leave it is common to engage an interim pastor, often at less than full time. This helps to reduce the cost; but an even greater advantage is the chance for members to try out gifts that they wouldn't otherwise have a chance to exercise. Most churches find it a good growing experience and a lot of fun (though tiring if it goes too long).

Will the pastor come back?

Usually a pastor returns refreshed and eager to carry on in ministry in this congregation. Often that expectation is built into the leave agreement, for example, an obligation to serve one year or to complete a contract term after the leave. Usually the pastor returns with renewed passion and enhanced skills. Pastors who take periodic leaves usually stay longer in their congregations. Occasionally a pastor (or a congregation) will realize during a leave that it is time for a permanent change. Little advantage is gained by insisting on fulfilling the term when there is no enthusiasm for it.

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 her/his service to that congregation, especially if the ministry has been more than 10 years long. This enables a better start to be made in the pastor's next assignment and may be less disruptive and cause fewer transitions for the congregation than a leave followed by a short return and then moving on to another ministry.

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. It will be to a congregation's advantage to ensure that a leave does not place excessive financial or other burdens on the pastor's family.

What should a congregation do?

Talk about your approach to pastoral leaves before your pastor asks for one. Recognize and anticipate the advantages you will enjoy as a result of a well-planned leave for the pastor. When you call a new pastor or renew a contract with a pastor include plans for a leave. (Some congregations set aside money every year so there is a fund available after six or seven years to cover the costs of a leave.) Develop a policy on frequency, length, costs etc. to guide discussion of specific proposals, but build in room for flexibility according to a particular pastor's needs and circumstances. Be open to adjustments to the policy if circumstances warrant—e.g., an opportunity or invitation for a service leave or exchange arises or it becomes evident that the pastor needs a spiritual renewal leave. When you receive a proposal for a leave, negotiate details with the pastor to everyone's advantage and write up an agreement.

What should a pastor do?

Talk with your congregational leaders about a policy on leaves. If there isn't a policy, begin working on one within the usual decision-making structures of your congregation. If you are considering a call to a new pastoral assignment or renewing a contract, negotiate a policy (or at least a commitment to work at a policy) with your memorandum of understanding.

Once there is a policy in place, consider whether you need a leave soon. (It is best to plan a year in advance—longer if it is your congregation's first experience with this.) Talk with your spouse and children, if appropriate, and pray about the opportunities for you and the congregation. Get counsel from colleagues, the conference minister and other people about the best way to use a leave. Develop a specific proposal to present to congregational leaders. Define what kind of leave you want; what you and the congregation will gain from it; how you will be accountable for the results; when and where it might happen and so on.

After your leave, report to congregational leaders and the whole congregation how the experience influenced you continuing ministry. After a longer leave, expect some awkwardness around returning to the congregation. Prepare yourself and your family for this and work with the congregation to plan an appropriate celebration and reentry program upon your return.

Where can we get more counsel on planning a leave for our pastor?

Contact your area conference minister or denominational office. One resource is Eugene Peterson, "Desert and Harvest: A Sabbatical Story" in *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Word, 1989) for related stories. Alban Institute www.alban.org/ also has some resources.

Written by Dan Nighswander
Revised by Sven Eriksson, January 2005

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Updated November 2010:dlr
Mennonite Church USA, Leadership Development

Sample Study Leave Agreement

Plan for a study leave for Pastor Gwen Maki of the Second Mennonite Church of Yellowknife for the months of January through May, 2003

The purpose of this leave is to complete a term of study at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, including the January interterm and Pastor's Week. This study will focus on, but will not be limited to, enhancing skills in conflict resolution, a need identified in the recent congregational review. During this leave Pastor Gwen will take one course in the interterm and three courses during the winter term and attend the activities of Pastor's Week. In addition she will spend time in reflection and prayer, worship in a variety of churches and spend at least two weekends in retreat at The Hermitage in Three Rivers, MI.

During this leave, the Second Mennonite Church will continue to pay Pastor Gwen 75% of the usual salary and 100% of the pension plan, disability and life insurance and health insurance. A free-will offering to be received at the Christmas Eve service on December 24, 2002, will be given in addition to help Pastor Gwen and her family meet the expenses of moving to Elkhart for this study term and incidental expenses related to the leave.

Pastoral needs during this leave will be addressed by a team of three lay members of the church who will each be paid an honorarium for their labors. Pastor Alvin Lizotte of the Third Mennonite Church has been contracted to provide counsel to this team and to provide any services requiring the leadership of an ordained pastor.

This leave coincides with the final five months of Pastor Gwen's current contract with Second Mennonite Church. The congregation, having called Pastor Gwen to a further three-year term, expects her to complete that term in its entirety following the study leave.

Signatures: Congregational Chair/Pastor/Conference Minister/Overseer

Sample Service Leave Agreement

This is a statement of the understandings regarding a service leave for Manuel Garcia, pastor of the Cedar Blvd. Mennonite Church of Cedar Hills.

Pastor Garcia has been invited by the Mennonite Church of El Salvador to conduct a teaching ministry in the churches for a three month period, September 1, through November 30, 2011. The congregation is pleased to release him to respond to this call and to assist Pastor Garcia and his family in their trip.

The Mennonite Mission Network of Mennonite Church USA has agreed to pay Pastor Garcia's salary and travel expenses for this trip. Accommodation and living costs will be borne by the churches in El Salvador. Cedar Blvd. Mennonite Church has offered to pay 75% of the travel cost for Mrs. Garcia and their children to accompany the pastor. The congregation will also continue to pay 100% of the pastor's pension plan, disability and life insurance and health insurance during this leave.

While Pastor Garcia is away the ministry of the church will be conducted by a seminary student pastoral intern under the supervision of a seminary-appointed mentor. The student will be paid a partial salary (75% of Conference guidelines for a beginning pastor) and will live in Pastor Garcia's house rent-free. He/she will also be able to take one seminary course while serving the congregation.

Signatures: Congregational Chair/Pastor/Conference Minister/Overseer