

Sabbatical Leave – Information Sheet for Churches

Ministers don't stop learning as soon as they leave college, or even when they complete the studies required of Newly Accredited Ministers. The process should be life-long, through both day to day study and experience. Sometimes, however, it helps to stand back from regular duties and to take time to study, reflect and pray at greater leisure than the demands of ministry allow. The purpose is to enrich their ministry and make it more effective, which benefits both the minister and the church.

The Baptist Union encourages ministers to take study leave every seven years from the commencement of accreditation. This normally follows initial formation and training at college. This provision is included in the recommended terms of appointment. The leave should be for at least one month, to ensure that the benefits of a significant break from duties can be enjoyed, and should not be for more than three months.

Planning the Sabbatical

Programme

Ministers should plan their study programme well in advance. "Study" does not mean that a sabbatical is simply an academic exercise - it can take many forms, but must enable learning that is relevant to ministry, so it is essential that the minister can show how the planned programme will help his or her ministerial development. A sabbatical is meant to be a stimulating and refreshing break from ministry (but not a holiday) leading to a minister returning better equipped to serve, through deeper understanding and new insights.

Dates

The dates of the leave should be agreed well in advance to enable proper planning, both for the minister and the church. The normal timing is for the first sabbatical to take place in the seventh calendar year following a minister's enrolment as a Newly Accredited Minister on the Register of Accredited Ministers, and then every seventh year after that.

It is wise to look into possible sabbatical timing when meeting ministers during a pastoral vacancy. This is because it is sensible not to ask a church to cope with two sabbaticals close together as well as a vacancy, so it may be necessary to ask a potential new pastor to be willing to defer a due sabbatical by a year or two if the previous minister had only recently taken one. It is quite acceptable for the purposes of the Baptist Union scheme for sabbaticals to be taken later than normal, although the next one should then not be for another seven years.

The Life of the Church

Arrangements need to be made well ahead of the leave period to ensure that there will be adequate pastoral cover while the minister is on sabbatical. Who will be asked to conduct funerals? Who will visit the sick and housebound? The minister should not be burdened with these decisions amongst all the other plans to be made.

Preaching arrangements have to be considered. Some churches can cope well from amongst the members or from nearby ministers or preachers. The Baptist Colleges are often glad of preaching opportunities for students, and providing plans are being made well in advance the church could invite the Regional Minister, Association President or a member of the BU staff, and by offering a wide choice of dates make acceptance more likely! The sabbatical gives the church an opportunity to forge such links with the wider fellowship.

Most ministers have spouses, and many have families living at home. A caring church will make sure that no extra demands are put upon the family while the minister is away, but rather will offer support in what could be a difficult time. And should the minister in fact be studying at home, it must be ensured that he or she is not disturbed nor called upon in any way to step back into the pastoral role. (It would be all too easy for quite a number of members each independently to think "S/he won't mind *me* calling..." - and the minister may not, but it undermines the purpose of the sabbatical!)

Financial contribution

Churches agree in the terms of settlement to pay the stipend and normal allowances during a sabbatical. In addition, the BU hopes that serious consideration will be given to making a worthwhile contribution to the extra costs incurred by the minister in taking the sabbatical, such as travel, accommodation, fees and book purchase. We realise that not all churches are able to do this, particularly those which are grant-aided, but we believe that those churches which can offer more should do so and see this as an investment in ministry that will enhance the quality of service offered in the cause of God's kingdom.

It should, however, be noted that in order that any contribution made by a church towards such expenses is not to be treated as taxable, the sabbatical project must satisfy the 'work-related training' criteria, namely, be designed to "*impart, instil, improve or reinforce any knowledge, skills or personal qualities that are likely to be useful in the performance of the duties of the ministerial office, or better qualify the minister to undertake those duties*", and such expenses must be of a qualifying nature. See section 5.3 of Taxation Guidance Notes for Churches & Ministers - document X03 on the BU web site - for further guidance.

Before and After

It is important to make sure that everyone in the church fully understands what a sabbatical is and why it is granted - *especially that it is not an extra holiday*. Everyone needs to know the arrangements for pastoral care, especially for dealing with emergencies. The minister will appreciate interest being shown, such as being asked to share with the Church the planned area of study. And after the sabbatical, it is helpful in welcoming the minister back to offer an opportunity to share the results - insights gained, discoveries made, visions seen for making the life of the church more effective for the Gospel.

Thanks

The BU Ministries Team is grateful to all churches granting sabbatical leave, and so providing the opportunity for ministers to grow and be refreshed, for the benefit of all and the glory of God.