

**Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
Sabbatical and Health Leave Policy for  
Ordained Pastors and Deacons**

*Guidelines Adopted by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Council, 3/19/2022*

*Summary: Sabbatical leave of three to six months shall be offered by congregations and other ministry organizations to pastors and deacons who have been ordained at least five years and served their current call for three years. Further sabbaticals shall be granted every five years. Compensation during sabbatical leave shall remain unchanged for the pastor or deacon. The congregation is responsible for the costs of pulpit supply and emergency coverage, or the salary of an interim pastor, during a sabbatical leave.*

**PURPOSE**

This policy specifies the manner in which sabbatical and health leaves for clergy (ordained ministers of word and sacrament/pastors and ministers of word and service/deacons) will be provided.

**SABBATICAL LEAVE**

Sabbatical Leave should be considered by both clergy and congregation as an integral feature of clergy's life and ministry. The clergy and congregation should plan together a definite sabbatical schedule which provides benefits in ministry for both.

Sabbatical leave is a privilege granted by a congregation to its leader. It is an opportunity the congregation provides its leader to experience a renewal of oneself and of one's mission. It is a time for reflection, spiritual re-encounter, renewal, and community.

The distinct benefits of a sabbatical leave are twofold:

- a) The mission of the congregation benefits from the opportunity to be re-empowered through caring for the ministry of the congregation in the absence of a pastor or deacon in addition to the presence following sabbatical leave of clergy whose skills and creativity have been renewed or enhanced through a time for reflection, spiritual re-encounter, renewal, and community.
- b) The ministry of the clergy benefits from the personal renewal that comes from an extended time for reflection, spiritual re-encounter, renewal, and community.

## GUIDELINES

### A. Eligibility, Length and Planning

- 1) To be eligible for sabbatical leave, Clergy shall have been
  - (a) in the ordained ministry for five years and
  - (b) at least three years in their current call.
- 2) Following their first sabbatical, Clergy shall be eligible for sabbatical leave every five years.
- 3) Clergy are expected to stay in the current call for at least one year following the sabbatical.
- 4) A typical sabbatical is three months. Longer or shorter leave can be considered where appropriate. Clergy should only take two weeks vacation in years when a sabbatical leave is taken. Clergy should consider the sabbatical to take the place of their two weeks continuing education. Participation in the Bishop's Theological Convocation should be maintained even in a sabbatical year, unless the clergy is on sabbatical at the time of that event.
- 5) The sabbatical leave plan is to be developed in cooperation with and/or reviewed by the Mutual Ministry Committee of the congregation and presented to the Congregation Council for approval six months to one year before the leave is to begin. Special circumstances shall be considered. Clergy and the calling body shall seek the counsel of the Bishop before finalizing the agreement.

### B. Arrangements for Coverage and Compensation

- 1) The congregation shall assume the responsibility of the arrangements for pastoral coverage, including pulpit supply, during the pastor's/deacon's absence. The congregation may consider beginning a savings plan which would allow for funds to be set aside prior to the time of eligibility for a sabbatical leave. The compensation guidelines should be consulted for direction. A thirteen-month compensation budget may be helpful in accomplishing this.
- 2) Normally the financial consideration for the sabbatical/health leave shall be negotiated by the pastor/deacon and the congregation or agency. It is suggested, however, that the defined compensation (base salary, housing, and Social Security allowance) and ELCA Pensions and Benefits program be maintained at the current budget level. Pastors, deacons and congregations are encouraged to apply for outside funding support when available.

### C. Available Assistance

- 1) Congregations and/or pastors/deacons who want assistance in developing sabbatical/health leave plans should contact the synod staff or synod Committee on Ministry. Assistance may also be requested in helping to establish the compensation agreement.

2) Congregations/pastors/deacons considering a health leave should contact Portico or Synod Staff for help in determining whether this type of leave is the most appropriate option.

D. Documentation

1) Any pastor/deacon who is engaged in an extended study leave for more than one month shall make monthly updates to the congregation.

2) Within six weeks of the completion of the extended study leave, the pastor/deacon shall present to the congregation a written reflection on the experience and the implications for the ministry of the congregation and ministry in the parish. This written reflection shall be appended to the pastor's/deacon's Annual Report to the Bishop.

3) Any pastor/deacon who is engaged in an extended health leave shall at both the approximate midpoint of the leave and at least thirty (30) days prior to the conclusion of the leave, submit a health professional's (i.e., physician, spiritual director, psychologist) statement to the Bishop, indicating the extent to which the purpose of the leave has been achieved and evaluating the health status of the pastor/deacon relative to his/her ability to return to his/her present call.

**Extended Health Leave**

The distinct benefits of an extended health leave (health here is defined as physical, emotional, spiritual well-being) are twofold:

a) The mission of a congregation benefits from the presence of clergy who has been allowed to recuperate fully when their health has been threatened.

b) The ministry of the clergy benefits from the personal renewal that comes from being able to accept the ministering of others when the need arises.