

## Sabbaticals in the Methodist Church – a guide for ministers

### What is a sabbatical?

Standing Order 744 defines a ministerial sabbatical as ‘a period of release from the ordinary duties of the [presbyteral or diaconal] appointment, in addition to normal holidays, for the purpose of pursuing an approved programme of study, research, work or experience’. Sabbaticals are opportunities to ‘re-train, refresh and renew the very base from which future activity may spring’ (‘Sabbaticals for Ministers’, Conference Agenda 1985, 240). Normally the length of the sabbatical is three months and special permission is required for any longer period. It is usually taken as a three-month block. If for any reason it needs to be split up, it should be taken in no more than three parts, over a period of no more than six months.

The term ‘sabbatical’ derived originally from the Old Testament and related to the *Sabbath*, the weekly day of rest and delight in God (Exod 34:21; Is 58:13-4), and the *sabbatical year*, in which, every seven years, complete rest was commanded for the land, with no sowing or reaping, and the remission of debts and release of Hebrew slaves (Lev 25:4; 1 Macc 6:49; Deut 15:1,12). By extension, in the nineteenth-century, ‘sabbatical’ became used by universities to denote a period of study leave for their academic staff, originally every seven years. Later, other professions and occupations embraced the practice, as a means of vocational development and refreshment.

### Why take a sabbatical?

Ever since 2000, sabbaticals have been a required part of the minister or deacon’s ‘performance of his or her duties’ (CPD 2000, SO757(1)), in the light of the acknowledged ‘benefits of sabbaticals for ministers, deacons and the church at large’ (Conference Agenda 1999, 320).

These are some of the key benefits of sabbaticals identified by ministers in a connexional survey:

- “it was a time of growth & development”
- “it was a time of experiencing other cultures and God's people elsewhere”
- “I became more attentive to God’s voice”
- “it gave me the time to simply be with God, to listen and not have to rush away; to be touched, healed, restored and directed”
- “it was a time of new learning”
- “both I and the church benefited from creative work undertaken”
- “it reduced my stress”
- “it improved my mental and physical health, rebuilding lifestyle habits affected negatively by the non-stop nature of ministry”
- “it was a time of refreshment & renewal”
- “it enabled me to take stock”
- “it enabled me to hear where God was guiding my future ministry”
- “it enabled the development of resources to use in my ministry”
- “hopefully, there was a benefit to the wider church from the research I did”
- “it was a time to re-invest in family life in really significant ways”
- “it re-enthused me in my ministry”
- “it helped me re-focus on priorities of Church & ministry”

- “it renewed my soul so that I was in a better position to minister in a way that could renew the soul of others.”

Senior circuit stewards also testified to the benefits of sabbaticals for ministers:

- “they give our ministers more time for peace and reflection with a complete break from the incessant calls upon their time”
- “ministers return re-energised, refreshed and their calling re-ignited”

Sabbaticals can be extremely beneficial both for you, the individual minister, and for the health of the wider Church. ‘The stimulation and confidence deriving from learning a new skill, the refreshment and renewal of a period in which one is distanced from regular commitments, as well as the direct benefit of spiritual and intellectual pursuits [can] only enhance the whole ministry of the people of God’ (‘Sabbaticals for Ministers’, Conference Agenda 1985, 240).

It is a great privilege to be given a sabbatical. Few people in Methodist congregations have that opportunity during their working lives. This can sometimes result in resentment or misunderstanding and the assumption that the minister is simply taking extended paid leave. To help mitigate this, it can be helpful to explore some of the likely wider benefits of your sabbatical with your churches, both before and after the sabbatical takes place.

### Who can have a sabbatical?

All presbyters and deacons in Full Connexion and stationed in an appointment within the control of the Church are expected to take a regular sabbatical.

Ministers in appointments outside the control of the Church or given permission to work in a secular job may be eligible for sabbaticals there, but this will depend on the specific terms of service in that role. Those ministers fall outside the Methodist sabbatical arrangements described in this Guide.

### When are sabbaticals taken?

The years in which sabbaticals may be taken are normally every seventh year of your travel as a minister. Sabbaticals may, for good reason, be taken one year earlier or later. However, sabbaticals should not be taken in the first year of a new appointment. Also, sabbaticals should not be taken in the same connexional year as maternity leave. Special permission is required for any greater departure from the normal dates. (Standing Order 744 (1-3)).

If a minister is in an appointment outside the control of the Church or has been given permission to work in a secular job, the sabbatical clock will be paused and then restarted on their return to ministry within the control of the Church. The qualifying period for sabbaticals relates to the number of years spent in appointments within the control of the Church. So, for instance, if Minister X is eligible for a sabbatical in two years’ time, but then takes up an appointment outside the control of the Church, Minister X will be eligible for a sabbatical two years after returning to an appointment within the control of the Church (however long the intervening period).

There are special provisions for ministers from other Conferences and Churches. Although Standing Order 744 refers only to ministers in Full Connexion, SO 732(5) states that ministers who are ‘Recognized and Regarded’ serve under the same terms and conditions as those who

are in Full Connexion. Hence, they should be expected to take a sabbatical in the seventh year of their travel in the Methodist Church in Britain (and every seventh year thereafter), regardless of any sabbatical provision in their previous appointments. Those who transfer into Full Connexion should be expected to take a sabbatical in the seventh year of travel in the Methodist Church in Britain (and every seventh year thereafter).

Ministers from the Irish Conference serving in the Methodist Church in Britain are entitled to a sabbatical in the seventh year after their last sabbatical (or in their seventh year of ministry if they serve in Britain in their early years of ministry). The same is reciprocal for British Ministers serving in Ireland.

The following table indicates when sabbaticals are due – please note the transition arrangements, in the light of the Methodist Conference 2018 decision to begin the first sabbatical at seven years’ travel.

SABBATICAL ELIGIBILITY CALCULATOR											
CONNEXIONAL YEAR		YEAR OF BEGINNING TRAVEL									
2018-	2019				2009	2002	1995	1988	1981		
2019-	2020	2013			2010	2003	1996	1989	1982	2011	2012
2020-	2021	2014				2004	1997	1990	1983		
2021-	2022	2015				2005	1998	1991	1984		
2022-	2023	2016				2006	1999	1992	1985		
2023-	2024	2017				2007	2000	1993	1986		
2024-	2025	2018				2008	2001	1994	1987		
2025-	2026	2019				2009	2002	1995	1988		
2026-	2027	2020	2013			2010	2003	1996	1989	2011	2012
2027-	2028	2021	2014				2004	1997	1990		
2028-	2029	2022	2015				2005	1998	1991		
2029-	2030	2023	2016				2006	1999	1992		
2030-	2031	2024	2017				2007	2000	1993		
2031-	2032	2025	2018				2008	2001	1994		
2032-	2033	2026	2019				2009	2002	1995		
2033-	2034	2027	2020	2013			2010	2003	1996	2011	2012
2034-	2035	2028	2021	2014				2004	1997		
2035-	2036	2029	2022	2015				2005	1998		
<b>SABBATICAL NUMBER</b>	<b>Sabb #1</b>	<b>Sabb #2</b>	<b>Sabb #3</b>	<b>Sabb #1</b>	<b>Sabb #2</b>	<b>Sabb #3</b>	<b>Sabb #4</b>	<b>Sabb #5</b>			
	NEW SYSTEM			OLD SYSTEM					TRANSITION		
<b>YEAR OF TRAVEL</b>	7th	14th	21st	10th	17th	24th	31st	38th			
Those who began travelling in 2011 or 2012 will start their first sabbatical 1 or 2 years earlier, respectively, than originally expected											

NB. If a minister is in an appointment outside the control of the Church or has been given permission to serve in a secular job, the sabbaticals clock will be paused and then restarted on their return to ministry within the control of the Church – so this calculation guide will not be applicable.

### How are sabbaticals arranged?

Each district has a **Sabbaticals Secretary** and a **Sabbaticals Advisory Group**. It is their job to:

- identify who is eligible for a sabbatical according to the connexional guidelines
- decide exactly when sabbaticals should be taken
- agree what should be done during the sabbatical (based upon proposals from the

minister)

- authorise the incurring of expenses
- check that a support group is established
- ensure anything learned during the sabbatical is shared
- deal with any other queries.

If you are eligible for a sabbatical, you will be reminded by the District Sabbatical Secretary about eighteen months ahead of the connexional year in which your sabbatical is due.

The first thing which then has to be agreed is when precisely during the year your sabbatical can practicably be taken. This needs to be discussed with your family (where applicable), circuit staff and the circuit leadership team.

You will then need to set up a **sabbatical support group** as soon as possible. It is their job to:

- ensure there is adequate cover in the circuit during your absence;
- ensure there is pastoral and practical support for your family (if applicable)
- help you as you plan your sabbatical (especially with practical matters)
- help you plan your return from sabbatical and your transition back into work
- help you share the fruits of your sabbatical in the circuit.

The composition of the sabbatical support group will vary from place to place but should normally include:

- you (the person taking the sabbatical)
- a representative of each church for which you have pastoral charge/ in which your ministry is focused;
- a representative of the Circuit Meeting (for instance, a circuit steward)
- a member of your family (if applicable)

The group may also opt to include:

- the superintendent minister or another member of the circuit staff (or, in the case of a single-station circuit, the neighbouring superintendent)
- a link person appointed by the District Sabbaticals Advisory Group
- someone from outside Methodism, such as a minister from a different denomination, (if wider support is needed)

A **programme for your sabbatical** then needs to be agreed with the District Sabbaticals Advisory Group. As part of this process you will need to complete a 'Sabbatical Prospectus' form, no later than October, eleven months before the start of the connexional year in which you will be taking your sabbatical.

Ministers include a wide variety of things in their sabbaticals, such as:

- reflection time
- reconnecting and spending quality time with family
- study
- travel

- reading
- recreation
- retreat
- time to simply be with God
- research
- opening up a new experience
- quiet time
- taking a course
- doing something creative;
- volunteering

If you need any more ideas, ask the District Sabbaticals Advisory Group for their help. You might also get some inspiration from finding out what other ministers in the district have done previously as part of their sabbaticals.

Obviously, it's not possible for you to have a completely free choice. Your sabbatical, for instance, is not intended to be one long holiday! The next section of this Guide explains some of the ways in which sabbaticals are shaped.

When the details of your sabbatical have been agreed it is then possible to apply for an **advance payment**, if necessary, of your anticipated expenses, via the District Sabbaticals Secretary who can provide the requisite form (you will need to provide relevant receipts).

### How are sabbaticals shaped?

It's important to devise a well-balanced programme that will re-equip, refresh and renew you. People often find that it's helpful to go away for however long they can afford. This can help you open up new horizons and see things from new perspectives.

As part of your regular Ministerial Development Review (MDR) and in conjunction with your supervision programme, you will have identified future **hopes and goals** (particular projects, initiatives or aims towards which you feel called to direct your efforts) and **areas for learning and development** (which may arise from your hopes and goals, from aspects of your ministry that you have found challenging, or from gifts and graces which should be allowed to grow and develop). Try to ensure that your sabbatical helps you address at least some of these hopes and goals and areas for learning and development. Your subsequent MDR and supervision will also then give you the opportunity to reflect on, discuss and celebrate ways in which your sabbatical has helped you develop.

Like your supervision programme, your sabbatical should ideally be both **restorative** and **formative**. Restoratively, it should help you (re-)connect with your 'vision and sense of vocation' and gather back to yourself those parts of yourself that can get lost in your work, such as your 'sense of humour... ability to get angry... ability to ask for help... ability to preserve space for [yourself]... ability to think straight... ability to connect with [your] own feelings'. Formatively, your sabbatical should help you connect your vision and theology with your practice of ministry, and enable you to 'grow more nearly into the minister God is calling [you] to be' (Jane Leach & Michael Paterson, *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook*, London: SCM Press, 2015 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 20-22).

Your sabbatical is part of your continuing development in ministry (CDiM). It should fit naturally into that flow of learning and development that began when you left training and which is, hopefully, continuing to inspire and equip your ministry. There are four key learning areas that CDiM is intended to address:

- ❖ learning to inhabit ministry and enter into leadership and oversight responsibility
- ❖ deepening theologically-reflective practice in context, and so expanding horizons for mission and ministry
- ❖ deepening engagement with Bible and Christian tradition, with one particular focus on ministers' growth as worship leaders and preachers
- ❖ growing in holiness, and confidence in evangelism and seeking justice

Try to ensure that your sabbatical engages with at least one of these learning areas – ideally one that you haven't had much chance to give attention to recently.

Of course, you know the things you can't wait to do and the things that will really energise you. Make sure to include those things too: to arrive at a well-balanced programme for your sabbatical.

### Pre-planning a sabbatical

It's worth taking the time to plan your sabbatical carefully and prayerfully, with the help of your support group. Some of your preparation may need to be quite early, especially if you are arranging travel and accommodation. However, do try to resist the temptation to over-plan your sabbatical, otherwise it may become as congested as your everyday ministry may have become. Workaholic tendencies can sometimes be carried over into a sabbatical. Your sabbatical offers you a chance to 'be' as well as 'do' - to include creative, joyful and restful experiences, helping to bring you more fully into the presence of God.

It's important to include your family (where applicable) in your planning. You may choose to spend part of your sabbatical alone, away from home. Equally, you may want to maximise quality time with your family and, maybe, go travelling with them. Of course, if you spend more time at home than usual, you may find yourselves getting under each other's feet. There is a healthy balance to strike between togetherness and respect for each other's space and time. Although this is a sabbatical for *you*, your family will be affected. Hopefully, your family will find that there are good spin offs for them from your sabbatical. That is most likely to happen if you make time to talk your plans through with them beforehand, so that they can be fully involved in your planning.

We have already mentioned the possibility that you might travel as part of your sabbatical. People often find this a really important aspect of their sabbatical. They report that travel has expanded their mind and soul, with new environments, new experiences, new conversations, new friendships and perhaps new challenges. Sometimes people immerse themselves in a very different culture. Sometimes people renew ties with members of their extended family. A change of scene can bring rest and renewal. It also can also actively help you disengage from your churches, by literally removing you from your normal schedules and preoccupations. Of course, travel and accommodation can be expensive. Sometimes Christian retreat and conference centres offer special deals for those on sabbatical. Hopefully, your costs will be covered by the sabbatical allowance, but if you wish to spend more do check you can afford it.

The other key players to include in your pre-planning are your churches. It is important to clarify expectations and set proper boundaries for the period of your sabbatical, otherwise unwarranted assumptions may be made. When, and for what reasons, might you be available, if at all, during your sabbatical? Would it be appropriate, or not, to contact you in certain emergencies? Would it be appropriate, or not, to tell you about, or even ask you to conduct, certain funerals? The answers to those questions lie with you. You should feel no pressure to be available at all during your sabbatical, and, certainly, if you allow any exceptions, this must not impinge detrimentally on your sabbatical. Remember, no minister is indispensable – your sabbatical is a good chance for you and your congregation to learn (or re-learn) that!

## Taking a sabbatical

Churches sometimes mark a person's departure for their sabbatical by holding a farewell meal, to which the whole church family is invited. Often there will be special blessing prayers said for them at their final service. Churches are encouraged to find an appropriate way of saying goodbye (with its original meaning of 'God be with you!'). All of this will be couched in terms of wishing them well for their sabbatical journey, in the expectation that they will return refreshed and renewed in three months' time. Naturally, this is different from the sort of farewells expressed when a minister moves on to a new appointment.

It's important to make a clean start to your sabbatical. Say your goodbyes at your final services. Reassure people that you will be back and are not leaving for good. And then disconnect from Day One – your churches will survive without you!

It can be very helpful to symbolically mark the beginning of your sabbatical in some way and not simply drift into it. You may, for instance, choose to go out for a meal, go to an event or go away for a few days. However, don't try to do too much, all at once – people often welcome the chance to initially catch up on their sleep and put their feet up, especially if they have been busy right up to the last.

You may like to keep a journal during your sabbatical, either in a notebook or as a private blog. This could help you capture some of your new experiences and ideas. It could also give you something to revisit as the sabbatical unfolds – to reveal growth and development brought on by the sabbatical.

Before your sabbatical ends, it's worth asking yourself whether you still have the same personal and spiritual priorities you had at the start. If they've changed, how will your future ministry reflect this? If your previous priorities have been validated and reinforced, how will you remain true to them? What has brought you the most refreshment and renewal and how could that be built into your future ministry? Might you, for instance, include brief 'mini-sabbaticals', every so often – a few hours when you take up again things that energised and restored you on your sabbatical?

## Coming back from a sabbatical

As you approach the end of your sabbatical, you will probably have a complex mixture of feelings – maybe, sadness that this time is ending; gratitude for what you have received; curiosity about what might have changed in your churches; apprehension about getting back into gear; excitement to return and share some of the new energy, vision and ideas that the sabbatical has

helped you discover. It's important to acknowledge that mix of emotions and explore it with God in prayer.

Successful re-integration to the circuit calls for some pre-planning. While you will be expected to hit the ground running, it's important not to be too ambitious. Don't aim to do too much immediately, otherwise your new-found energy and enthusiasm may soon evaporate! Recognise that you may feel a bit overwhelmed and give yourself time to adjust. Guard some time for things that have lit up your sabbatical – such as prayer, restfulness, and creativity – and try to carry these forward into everyday ministry.

Hopefully, you and your churches will be very happy to see each other again. It's worth acknowledging, however, that some people may be jealous that you were given a sabbatical. Others may be resentful, because you haven't been there when they especially needed you.

There will be lots of catching up to do. Not least, your churches will be interested to find out what you've done during your sabbatical and how this might impact your ministry from now on. As you approach the end of the sabbatical, begin thinking about what you might say in your first sermon back, first church council, first newsletter article, first blog, or first talk about your sabbatical. How have you been refreshed, renewed and re-equipped? Some things may be too personal to share, but in many ways this is the culmination of your sabbatical: the opportunity to name and share its fruits.

However, the sabbatical is not just about you. It has also been about and for your churches. It will be good to allow time for your congregations also to share their experience - What was different during your sabbatical? What were the high points and low points? What have they learned? How have they grown? What do they specifically want to praise God for?

There is also, potentially, another chance to speak about your sabbatical. The agenda for the presbyteral synod provides scope for presbyters to report on their sabbatical study (SO 488 C (6)). That would be a good opportunity to present some of the key fruits of your sabbatical, to encourage and inspire ministerial colleagues (though, bear in mind that some may have a while to wait till their own sabbaticals!).

### **When might compassionate leave be more appropriate?**

Ministers sometimes end up spending their sabbatical dealing with a substantial personal pastoral issue. In a connexional survey, some ministers described how their sabbaticals had been overtaken by such things as: caring for ill, aged or dying relatives; recovery from pregnancy loss, illness, accident or burnout; or developing physical fitness prior to an operation. It is significant that a number of these personal pastoral issues should have warranted a period of compassionate leave, rather than sabbatical leave.

We hope you won't find yourself in this situation. However, if you do, please approach your District Chair as soon as possible. Sabbaticals for ministers in these circumstances may, when appropriate, be transmuted into periods of compassionate leave. It is important that, for your and your churches' sake, you benefit fully from your sabbatical.