

A DIFFERENT RHYTHM: Ministry Sabbaticals in the United Church

by J. Clark Saunders

On January 1, 2006 a Sabbatical Policy for Ministry Personnel in Pastoral Relationships came into effect in the United Church of Canada. Sabbatical leaves had been granted to a number of paid accountable ministers in several ministries across the church over the years, but this was the first time a general policy had made ministers in every pastoral charge eligible for leave on a regular basis. Specifically, the policy provides that “ministry personnel in pastoral relationships who have completed five or more years of service in the pastoral charge” are entitled to apply for a sabbatical of not less than three months.

Although the introduction of this policy may have taken some in the church by surprise, it did not emerge out of thin air. A patchwork quilt of local policies and practices had been taking shape here and there for some years. A lack of congruity and equal access to sabbaticals had raised the need for consistency and fairness. That some charges had seen merit in providing leave for their ministry personnel had reflected a growing awareness of the advantages to both ministerial staff and congregations of periodic sabbaticals. This awareness had been aided and abetted by research and writing in the field, much of it under the auspices of the Alban Institute in the United States.

Before and After: Two Experiences of Sabbaticals

When I was on staff at Knox-Metropolitan United Church in Edmonton in the late 1990s the chair of the Ministry and Personnel Committee (M&P) told me of some reading she had been doing on the subject of longer pastorates. What she had gathered from the writings of Roy Oswald, and others associated with the Alban Institute, was that, contrary to a common misconception, a longer pastorate could have more advantages than disadvantages. If a

pastoral relationship was a positive one, a longer pastorate could provide for a deepened level of trust that could lead to more significant levels of pastoral care, a greater willingness for a congregation to accept a minister's leadership, a renewed vision for the future of the congregation, and so on. But these advantages could only be realized if the pastorate was managed well. It was necessary for the ministerial staff to stay fresh and find avenues of renewal. One such avenue was the provision of a sabbatical leave.

I was in my sixth year in that pastorate when M&P and the Board set about developing a sabbatical policy. I had a colleague in ministry at the time, and the congregation had the future to think about. It became apparent that what was needed was not an ad hoc arrangement that would apply only to me, but a policy that could be applied to my colleague, and to staff that might come after us. We learned of a policy that had been created by McClure United Church in Saskatoon and adapted it to our own needs.

My sabbatical – when it came – rounded out my seventh year at Knox-Metropolitan. I spent ten weeks based at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, attending short term courses, singing in the choir at the particular college where I was in residence (the Pacific School of Religion), getting some physical exercise, keeping a journal, and writing a few chapters of a book. I had made my plans in consultation with M&P, and on my return gave an accounting of my activities to them and to the congregation. On the home front, other committees had worked with me and my colleague to arrange for leadership from within the congregation for such things as conducting worship services and assisting with pastoral care in my absence.

The next decade found me at Westworth United Church in Winnipeg. Again my seventh year in the pastorate concluded with a sabbatical. This one was taken in Toronto. Again I used some of my time to write part of a book. As well, I attended worship at a different church each week, did some journaling, set myself an exercise program, and attended a few conferences. And again preparations were made in the congregation to relieve my colleague

of some of her duties so that she could pick up some of mine, while others took on responsibilities in the areas of worship and pastoral care. The sabbatical took place at the same time of year as the first one – just after Easter – a season where some of our congregation’s programs were gearing down as summer approached.

Like my first sabbatical, this one was intended to last ten weeks. But a few months before it was to begin, the national policy came into effect. It was a simple matter to extend the leave from ten weeks to three months, and to observe a few minor provisions that we had not considered – maintaining the payment of a nominal travel (car) allowance for me during this period, for instance. But there was no need to alter the goals I had already set in consultation with M&P.

My two sabbaticals – eleven years apart – were not dissimilar. But the place of sabbaticals in the church had changed considerably. For one thing, my sabbatical in 1995 was a rather rare and exceptional occurrence – a luxury that few ministers could enjoy at the time, and an experience that I could compare with only a few who had had such a privilege. With the introduction of a national policy in 2006, I found myself having conversations with many friends and acquaintances in ministry who were busy planning sabbaticals of their own. What had happened in the meantime to account for such significant changes?

The Movement toward Sabbaticals

Over a generation ago a perceived need for ministry personnel to stay fresh and keep abreast of theological thinking, and other developments in church and society, led to the introduction of a policy that continues to assure ministers of up to three weeks of paid study leave each year. But although people in paid accountable ministry might experience a degree of renewal from attending workshops or short courses, or setting aside a block of time for reading, as part of their continuing education, short periods of study did not provide ministers with an absence from their pastoral duties that was long enough to give them a sense of stepping out of their

usual role. Nor in the provision of short study leaves was the emphasis on refreshment and revitalization. Over the decades that followed, the introduction of the continuing education policy, the need for ministers to take as well an occasional extended absence from their workplace, came to be recognized in many quarters.

For those inclined to look for them there were scriptural warrants. There was the custom recorded in the Hebrew scriptures not just of observing a sabbath *day* (in imitation of God's example of resting on the seventh day of creation), but of observing a sabbath *year* during which debts might be cancelled, slaves might be set free, and fields were allowed to lie fallow. This custom might not have been observed at all times, or in all parts of ancient Israel, but it commended itself as a way of caring for the earth and for those who worked it. Indeed, the practice in academic institutions of providing a sabbatical to teaching staff in their seventh year – and, of course, the very word “sabbatical” itself – could be traced to this custom.

In the New Testament, it was the example and instruction of Jesus that was invoked by those who advocated sabbaticals as a practice that ministers should be encouraged to observe. Not only does Jesus, after spending time with the crowds, go up to the mountain to pray (Matthew 14:23), but he commends such a practice to his disciples. In Mark 6:31, Jesus, noting that his helpers “were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat”, invited them to “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile”. Some might say that Jesus here is commending the practice of going on retreat, but an argument can be drawn for taking a sabbatical as well.

Although biblical warrants might be invoked, those who in the last decades of the 20th century tried to make a case for sabbaticals tended to stress their practical benefits and to answer possible practical objections. Such Alban Institute publications as *Clergy Self-care* by Roy M. Oswald; *New Visions for the Long Pastorate* by Oswald, Hinand, Hobgood and Lloyd; *Sabbatical Planning for Clergy and Congregations* by A. Richard Bullock;

and lastly Melissa Bane Sevier's reflections on her own sabbatical experience in *Journeying toward Renewal* all argue for sabbaticals as good and useful things. Some of these books focus to some extent on the "how to" aspects of planning and carrying out a sabbatic leave. But attention is also paid to the ways in which it would be in the best self-interest of congregations and ministers if they were to make provision for a clergy sabbatical. (I have even heard it pointed out that the financial cost to a congregation of giving its minister a sabbatical to renew his or her energy may be less than the moving costs of a new minister.)

A video prepared by Oswald had as its apparent goal the task of persuading a congregation's board that it would be good for them as well as for their pastor to provide for a sabbatical. With its unabashed title – *Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical* – the video records a presentation that Oswald makes to a congregational group. He includes references to biblical examples of leaders taking time apart: Moses going up a mountain and Jesus spending time sorting things out in the wilderness. But then he goes on to the practical arguments. He outlines some of the benefits of longer pastorates if they are well managed. He mentions the tendency of people in the helping professions to burn out faster than those working in other fields. He points out that when an over-extended pastor loses vitality that development will have a negative impact not only on the individual, but also on the congregation.

Both Oswald and Sevier seem to me to be walking a fine line at times. They describe the tendency of clergy to over-identify with their jobs and the perceived high incidence of ministers going on stress leave. They seem to commend sabbaticals as a "time out" that can relieve these problems. Yet, if stress is the issue a sabbatical is meant to address, unless a time-out includes changing one's self-perception and work habits, the stresses are bound to return to pre-sabbatical levels within a short time of the minister's return to work. To the extent that sabbaticals should have as their goal the renewal of a minister's energies, it is to be hoped that the changed rhythm

a sabbatical can provide is more than a period of “R&R” before the minister is sent back into the same battle with the same equipment.

The Development of a National Policy

Increasing awareness of sabbaticals, of scriptural precedents for them, and of their spiritual and practical benefits led in the closing decades of the last century to an increasing number of pastoral charges making provision for them. As has already been indicated, however, the patch-work quilt approach led to many inequities, the most obvious being the inequity between those ministers who were offered a sabbatical and those who were not. Even among those charges that provided a sabbatical for ministerial staff, there were inequities in terms of how long the leave might be, how long the individual had to serve the charge before a leave was granted, how long they were expected to serve it after the leave had ended, what percentage of salary and other benefits were to be paid during the sabbatical, and so on. A growing sense of the value of sabbaticals for everyone, combined with a concern about these inequities, led to the subject finding its way onto the agenda of the 38th General Council.

At the meeting in Wolfville, August 2003, a petition from Kootenay Presbytery (Petition 131) was carried and formed the basis for the policy that was subsequently developed. It called on General Council to develop a sabbatical policy that would make those in paid accountable ministry “eligible for a sabbatical of at least three months’ duration after five years of ministry in one call/appointment.” This provision was to be included in the terms of a call or appointment.

The task group that was formed to develop a policy along these lines had before it as well a resolution (Resolution 75) on sabbaticals from the Task Group on Policies and Procedures Related to Pastoral Relations, Pastoral Oversight And Ministry Vocations. This resolution – which was referred to the General Council Executive by the same meeting at Wolfville – had called for the Permanent Committee on Programs for Mission and Ministry, and

the Permanent Committee on Ministry and Employment Policies and Services, “to explore options for sabbaticals and leaves...”. Like the petition from Kootenay, the resolution cited questions of equity and consistency, but in particular expressed a concern that “there is not consistent understanding in the United Church about whether sabbaticals are extended leaves for personal renewal or for research or continuing education”.

This concern reflected a tension between an academic and what we might call a pastoral model of sabbatical leave. Academic sabbaticals differ in a number of respects from the kind envisioned by the policy that emerged in the United Church. The inconsistency of understanding identified in Resolution 75 speaks to one of those differences. Both before and after the introduction of a national policy, sabbaticals for ministers tended to span a range of leaves, from those that were designed primarily for rest and renewal (the “lying fallow” aspect of the biblical understanding of sabbatical), to those in which time was devoted mostly to research, writing or study. The latter end of this spectrum most closely reflects the understanding of sabbatical in an academic setting. In fact, because the word sabbatical has connotations of “fallow time” in certain circles, some academic institutions have replaced the word with terms like “reading and research leave” or “study and writing leave”. For such a leave, a proposal with clearly measurable goals must be submitted for approval, and it is understood that at the conclusion of the leave, the individual must “have something to show for it” – something in the nature of a piece of published writing or a new course offering, for example. Some ministerial sabbaticals might satisfy requirements of this kind, but those who lean toward the “personal renewal” end of the spectrum would not.

In any case, following the 38th General Council, those who had the task of developing a policy for the United Church found that there was sufficient data available on clergy sabbaticals – both from congregations within the United Church and from the policies of other North American denominations – to conclude that there was neither time nor a felt need to explore the academic model. There was, however (according to Brian Copeland, the chair of the

Task Group), a perception that “this policy for order of ministry folk was significantly different in its nature and intent that we couldn’t compare it with the academic model.”¹

As the policy emerged, it differed from most academic standards in some other respects as well. A full academic sabbatical is usually reckoned as 12 months, while half sabbaticals of six months are sometimes taken; the United Church policy set a minimum of three months for a leave, but did not include an upper limit. Although academic sabbaticals as well as the policies of some other denominations require service of six or seven years before a sabbatical is granted, the Task Force again was constrained by the terms of the petition which specified a minimum of five years.

The petition did not address the question of percentage of salary and benefits to be paid during the sabbatical leave. Academic institutions most often pay somewhat less than 100% of salary to faculty who are on sabbatical. The question of rate of pay for clergy during the sabbatical leave generated some controversy in the Task Group. Their research suggested that most pastoral charges that had developed their own sabbatical policies paid full salary during a leave. In the end, this – as well as a concern that unless full salary were paid few ministers were likely to make use of a sabbatical – led the Task Group to include in the policy provision for payment of full salary and benefits as well as 40% of an average of the minister’s travel costs when working in the pastoral charge. Petition 131 had given no direction either on rate of remuneration or on required period of service following the sabbatical. With regard to the latter question, the Task Group settled on a minimum of one year in the pastoral charge following the end of the leave in accordance with general practice in North American denominations.

With approval of the policy by the Executive of General Council in October, 2005, an effective date of January 1, 2006 was set. A document entitled “Understanding the Sabbatical Policy for Ministry Personnel in Pastoral Relationships” was made available to the church at large. In a section headed “Justification”, the

¹Brian Copeland, e-mail to the author, July 24, 2007.

familiar spiritual and practical arguments were rehearsed. Another section headed “Obligations” outlined what was expected of both pastoral charges and ministry personnel. As well as the terms I have already noted, a process that included consultation between ministers and pastoral charges in the planning stage, application and approval, reporting and accountability was itemized.

The Task Group had been convinced that “the sabbatical time should have a degree of freedom for the clergyperson to do with the sabbatical whatever it was they felt would make this time a sabbath experience.”² The document circulated with the introduction of the policy reflected this philosophy. In its definition of the term, it describes a sabbatical as “an occasion for reflection, recreation, and revitalization, unencumbered by [a minister’s] usual and customary responsibilities”.³ The document includes statements that appear to value the “lying fallow” end of the sabbatical spectrum (eg. “Sabbatical finds expression in study, rest, spiritual retreat, and prayer”⁴), while others suggest something closer to the academic model (eg. two references to “the nature of the study or experience being proposed and the outcomes anticipated” as well as an indication “that the sabbatical plan must be related to the practice of ministry”⁵). Again, there seems to be allowance for a sliding scale with an emphasis on “doing” at one end and an emphasis on “being” at the other.

Experience with the Policy

In the two years since the policy was introduced we may wonder how things are going, and how successfully it has addressed the concerns that led to its development. In our ability to assess such matters, we are limited by the fact that, while the policy was the creation of the national church, it is implemented at the presbytery and pastoral charge level. There is no means in place for monitoring the policy’s performance, and any information that

²Ibid.

³“Understanding the Sabbatical Policy for Ministry Personnel in Pastoral Relationships”, United Church of Canada, December. 2005, p. 1

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid, p. 2.

comes to those in the national office who deal with matters related to paid accountable ministry is largely anecdotal.

With regard to the matter of equity, the policy may in theory give equal access to sabbaticals for those in pastoral relationships, but pastoral charges may not be equal in terms of the resources available to cover things on the home front while a minister is away. Although there may be no hard data, there is at least an impression that ministers in multiple-staff situations are more likely to take a sabbatical than those in single-minister charges and that urban pastoral charges find it easier to manage without their minister(s) than those in rural areas. Following the implementation of the policy the need for a fund to help some pastoral charges with such expenses as pulpit supply was recognized and the establishment of such a fund was pursued.

A question that is difficult to answer is whether ministers who are approaching the five-year time requirement on a pastoral charge are being encouraged to move on so that the charge does not have to give them a sabbatical, while ministry personnel are hanging on until the magic number has been reached.

Presbyteries find that they are dealing with a number of consequences of the policy – not all of them foreseen. The absence of a number of ministers at the same time, for example, has an impact on the pool of volunteers available for work on presbytery committees. In order to mitigate the effect of a significant number of absences, some presbyteries are limiting the number of ministry personnel who can be on sabbatical in a given year. A presbytery may find that, for the purposes of advance planning, the six month notification from the pastoral charge is not sufficient.

No doubt longer experience with the policy will be necessary before a fair assessment can be made of the practical challenges it raises for presbyteries, pastoral charges and ministers. A sabbatical provides a period in which a minister can live according to a different rhythm. The policy comes at a time when the benefits to ministers and to the church at large of such a period has won reasonably wide acceptance. It remains to address as far as possible those outstanding questions of consistency and equity as they apply to all of the parties who are affected by it.