

Sabbatical Guidelines and Procedures in Coventry Diocese

In 2001, *Mind the Gap*, the National CME report, recommended that sabbatical leave of a period of three months should be offered at least every ten years to all licensed ministers. It also noted that 'the word sabbatical is derived from the same root as Sabbath. This indicates that a fundamental purpose of a sabbatical is to have time for *rest, renewal* and *re-creation* so as to return *refreshed* in one's ministry' (*Mind the Gap* 6:15, my italics). These four 'Rs': rest, renew, re-create and refresh are what I think of as the key principles behind a sabbatical. Opportunities for all four are important.

Just for Clergy or for all Ministers?

Mind the Gap also rightly emphasises that sabbaticals are not the prerogative only of those who are paid by the Church: NSMs and Readers should also be encouraged to take some time out from their regular ministry although they may not qualify for grants.

Sabbatical or Study leave?

Although 'study leave' is often easier to sell to a PCC than 'sabbatical', since very few other professions have the latter, the principle behind the terminology is worth fighting for. We seek to have a group of ministers in the diocese who give adequate time to their own spiritual, emotional and intellectual needs at least in part as an example to other Christians, but also so that in a time of rapid change we help people to avoid burnout and exhaustion.

'Study leave' is more appropriate for some than others. It can be the route to rest, renewal, recreation and refreshment, but it must be seen in that context, not just as a good in its own right. It follows, therefore, that there is no blueprint for a sabbatical. Especially helpful is travel, to experience churches overseas, as well as activities such as climbing mountains or learning a completely new skill. So long as there is room for rest, renewal, recreation and refreshment almost anything can qualify, which is where the Sabbath principles are important theologically in emphasising the needs of the whole minister, and specifically the dimension of refreshing the relationship with God.

Sabbatical Aims

Sabbaticals need a clear aim but a modest and achievable one is the most important thing. Too ambitious an aim often leaves loose ends and a feeling of frustration on return and therefore does not achieve rest, renewal, recreation and refreshment. A more intensive relationship during a sabbatical period with a spiritual director or mentor is often very helpful. We also encourage some form of retreat both early and late in the sabbatical period: early in order to slow down and late in order to reflect on what God has been doing during the three months.

What about holidays?

Holidays are not counted a part of sabbatical time, but can be linked with it, so that the period of absence can be extended by up to a month, often at the end of the sabbatical period.

Do I have to go away?

Increasing numbers of sabbaticals are taken at home (or based at home with some time away). This is largely because spouses and families are not usually able to relinquish their commitments in the same way. In such cases we need to be clear that ministers are relieved of the responsibilities which they normally carry, as well as offering clearer guidance on where legal responsibilities lie in an ordained minister's absence.

When's the right time?

Timing of a sabbatical is important. Not in the obvious sense of where it fits with the development of a particular church or other colleagues, but rather of where it fits in an individual minister's personal life. Aside from the occasional need to finish a course of academic study, thesis or book, most sabbaticals are determined by approaching changes in someone's personal life. Ministers in their forties, with twenty or so years of service, may need a sabbatical to reflect on how they are going to manage the latter half of their ministry with less energy but more experience than before; ministers in their late fifties or early sixties may need a sabbatical to begin to get used to the idea of retirement and how their ministry might develop during that time

What time is it for you?

I have found that sabbaticals broadly fall into three categories:

- o The 'mid-term break' – part way through ministry in a particular place, giving an opportunity to re-think patterns of working and home-life, for example, as well as identifying new challenges for the future in the same place;
- o Seeking future direction – towards the end of ministry in a particular place, giving opportunity to consider where God may be calling you next;
- o Exhaustion – timed rightly, an opportunity to withdraw and recover before the process of burnout reaches a point of no return.

Each of these categories brings specific issues with them, and varying degrees of planning. Generally a sabbatical will be planned at least a year in advance, but it may also be possible to have one at short notice (two or three months) in exceptional circumstances.

Can I spread my sabbatical over several years?

Sometimes people ask for a sabbatical to be spread over two or three years, with a month or six weeks being taken in any given year and grants being spread accordingly. This is not a good idea as it does not allow for a long-term disengagement from the responsibilities of ministry. If you have a specific project in mind, however, a period of up to a month's secondment may be possible.

Do I qualify?

Sabbaticals are always discretionary, that is to say they cannot be claimed as a right of employment. Absence from duty for a sustained period for any minister can only be granted by the Bishop's Staff.

Sabbaticals are defined as a period of three months without the expectation of pastoral or liturgical duties. In line with the *Mind the Gap* recommendations, a sabbatical period is available for all licensed ministers, that is, stipendiary and non-stipendiary clergy, Ordained Local Ministers and Readers. The normal criteria are that:

- o You should have been ordained deacon or admitted as a Reader for at least seven years;
- o You should have served at least three years in your current post;
- o It should be at least seven years since any previous sabbatical.

Please note that it is not necessary to have served for seven years in Coventry Diocese in order to qualify.

Training Incumbents will not normally be encouraged to take a sabbatical until the curate they work with has been ordained for eighteen months.

Who gives permission?

Permission varies according to what post you fill:

- o clergy of incumbent status need permission from the Diocesan Bishop;

- o assistant clergy need permission from the incumbent of the parish in which they serve *and* the diocesan Bishop;
- o Readers need permission from the incumbent of the parish in which they serve and the Warden of Readers.

Can I get a grant?

Diocesan Funds are limited, so permission to take a sabbatical from the Bishop's Staff does not automatically imply that a grant will be available. In the vast majority of cases, however, grants are available. A full grant (£600 in 2009) is available for stipendiary clergy. Grants up to £300 for non-stipendiary clergy and Readers can be awarded at the CME Adviser's discretion, depending on need, circumstance and plans for the sabbatical.

Will my parish help?

Some parishes are able to help financially; most will have budgeted a full year's expenses for clergy, for example, and are willing to use some of the money they have saved for specific things. You should note, however, that a lump sum paid towards sabbatical costs may be taxable. It may be better to ask a parish to pay a particular cost as a gift.

Other grant making bodies are able to help, and a list can be downloaded from <http://www.coventry.anglican.org/ministry/learning/ministrydevelopment>. It is worth noting bodies like the Fellowship of the Maple Leaf which gives grants for specific placements in Canada. Tailoring your sabbatical to the brief of the grant-makers gives you much more chance of having a proportion of the costs funded.

How can I ask for a sabbatical?

For clergy of incumbent status, the usual first step is the Ministerial Development Scheme interview. Although you can talk to Richard Cooke as CME Adviser informally about the possibilities of a sabbatical, it is essential that one of the Bishops or Archdeacons is prepared to encourage your plans and their timing from the outset.

For assistant clergy it is important to have the full backing of the incumbent with whom you work, as well a member of Bishop's Staff.

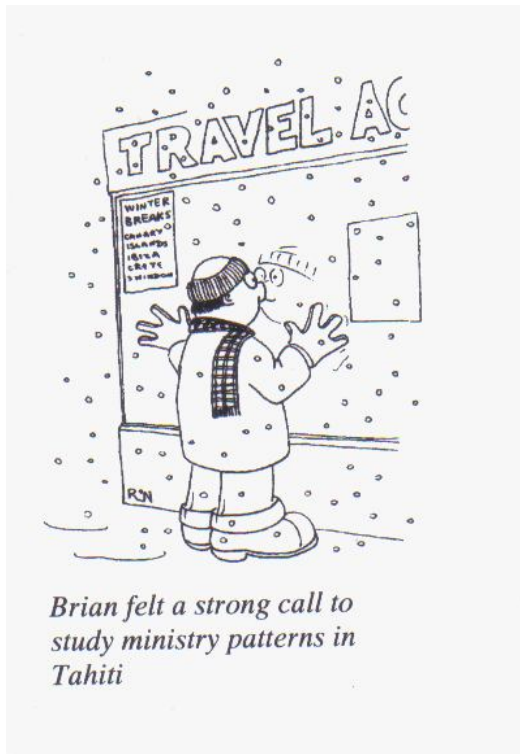
For Readers, discussion with your incumbent and fellow-Readers in the parish (if there are any) is essential, before contacting the Warden.

Some Prayers to Use when thinking about a sabbatical

Timeless God,
 help us to be still.
 Creator God,
 help us respond to your world.
 God of comfort,
 help us rest in you.
 Playful God,
 help us take ourselves less seriously.
 Holy God
 suffuse us with the fragrance of Sabbath.
 Amen

Sabbath God,
 help us to stop,
 slow down,
 unclench our fists
 and receive.
 Amen.

God of eternity, teach us to pause.
God of creation, teach us to wonder.
God of Sabbath, teach us to rest.
God of delight, teach us to play.
God of the poor, teach us to share in your work of liberation.
God of love, reconciling us through Christ Jesus,
fill our lives with your perfect peace. Amen



Richard Cooke
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