

'Why don't I get a vacation, too?' How to talk about clergy sabbaticals

By Robert C. Saler

Associate dean and research professor, Christian Theological Seminary

TUESDAY, JANUARY 23, 2018

Reframing the pastoral sabbatical as a journey for the entire congregation can diminish resentment and help make regular periods of renewal a part of the Christian life, writes the director of the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs.

One of my favorite jokes, particularly during the period when I served in a parish, tells of a pastor who is in her office, head bowed and hands folded in silent and fervent prayer. The church administrator walks in the office door without knocking, sees the pastor and sighs in relief, "Oh, good. You're not busy."

The wry smiles that this joke would often elicit when I told it to fellow clergy testify to the odd disconnect that many pastors face in the perception of their work by people in their congregations. The very practices (prayer, slow study, contemplation) that tend to sustain a healthy pastorate are often the activities least likely to seem like "real work" to many parishioners. To the extent that this disconnect is present in a congregation's relationship with its pastor, it can have an impact on a number of areas related directly to the pastor's health (compensation, expectations for weekly schedule, hours worked, self-care) and to the congregation as a whole (spiritual development, sense of Christian mission, support for paid and volunteer leadership). One of the places this shows up is in clergy sabbaticals. It's becoming more common for pastors to take sabbaticals of several months or more. But conversations between pastors and their congregations around the topic have the potential to become fraught if the congregation and pastor are on different pages as to what sabbatical is for -- and indeed, who it is for.

In my work directing the Lilly Endowment Clergy Renewal Programs (which Christian Theological Seminary administers on behalf of the endowment), I speak to many pastors who are raising the possibility of taking a pastoral sabbatical for the first time with their congregations. One of the most common objections from congregants is, "Why does the pastor get a sabbatical when I don't? I work just as hard at my job." This, along with the parallel suspicion that "sabbatical" is code for "the pastor gets a three-month paid vacation," is a challenge. But it's also a shared learning opportunity for pastors and congregation members. How can the understandable resistance to the practice of clergy sabbatical be addressed nondefensively in ways that minimize rather than exacerbate the clergy-lay disconnect? We might think differently about how we emphasize the distinctiveness of ordained ministry vis-à-vis other vocations. One historic way to justify pastoral sabbaticals has been to point out the unique challenges of congregational ministry. Weekly sermons, walking with parishioners in the most emotionally intense periods of their lives, community outreach, being on call around

the clock -- excellence in ministry requires a massive expenditure of physical, mental and emotional energy each week. So the case can certainly be made that pastors are uniquely positioned to benefit from time to replenish their spiritual care, revitalize key relationships, go deeper into a theological passion or avocation, or any number of activities characteristic of a quality pastoral sabbatical.

“Uniquely positioned” is not the same as “uniquely deserving,” however, and here is where my thinking on this question has evolved. In an increasingly post-Christendom church, and within a frame that values the practice of Sabbath and renewal as one that encompasses all Christians, it seems wiser to me to step back from emphasizing the distinctiveness of the pastoral vocation. Instead, it’s fruitful to focus more on how pastoral sabbaticals can catalyze the entire congregation toward renewal. The attitude should be less “being a pastor is a harder job than yours” and more “the church should encourage sabbaticals for everyone.” I recommend framing the conversation around the question, How can a successful pastoral sabbatical, one that involves the entire congregation, model what it means to make regular periods of renewal a part of the Christian life? The former strategy broadens the clergy-lay disconnect, while the latter helps close it in constructive and non-defensive ways. What might this look like?

Walter Brueggemann has spoken of the Sabbath as “resistance” to the culture of excess work and consumption that plagues much of Western society. With the frantic pace of multiple obligations (work, family, health, etc.) faced by many congregants, I hear an increasing number of pastors say that they find it helpful to actively advocate (and, if possible, experiment with creative ways of fostering) similar, sabbatical-like renewal experiences for their church members. For instance, while lay leaders may need to “step up” and take on more responsibility during a pastoral sabbatical, the congregation might consider intentionally blessing time away from active service for those leaders after the pastor returns. The leaders might use the “sabbatical” from volunteer church responsibilities to pray, spend quality time with families, etc. -- all with an eye toward coming back refreshed and re-energized for their vocations in the church and broader community. Moreover, with more Americans than ever moving between careers on a regular basis, congregations are in a position to help members conceive of times between jobs as times to retool spiritually and move deeper into the practices that will sustain them, not simply as workers in the economy, but as children of God.

We know already that the more invested the congregation is in the pastor’s sabbatical and the more the members see it as a journey for the entire congregation, the more successful the experience. If this can be extended, and Christian congregations become advocates for the practice of sabbatical across the American economy, the effects can be significant and deeply humane.