

Background Thoughts on Ministry Renewal Leave

From Sabbatical Planning for Clergy and Congregations

by A. Richard Bullock

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David Ellingson describes Ministry Renewal Leave (MRL) as “a time to relearn and rehearse that critical capacity to reflect, which transforms dreams of vacation to new visions of vocation.” For me, and possibly for other clergy, “sabbath study leave” comes closest to describing that period of rest, travel, and study that makes up a ministry renewal leave. And it also alludes to its vital biblical roots.

The situations differ, but the reality is the same. You reach a point where you must get off the treadmill for a while. “The treadmill metaphor was very real for me in my own ministry,” confesses David Pohl, Director for Ministerial Settlement of the Unitarian Universalist Association, “because there was little relief from the pressure of the Sunday morning deadline, virtually no let-up in the seven-day schedule of meetings, study, counseling, and visitation, community and denominational commitments, and little sense of making headway. I would complete one service and sermon only to be confronted with the challenge of another, seven days hence.”

A ministry renewal leave gets one off the treadmill and provides an opportunity for renewal of vision and hope. It’s more than just a chance to recharge your batteries for another year. It can be a life and soul-changing time – a time when perspective and the Holy Spirit can come together.

Ministers desperately need to recreate and restore what has been worn down by day-to-day encounters with reality. Nourishing one’s soul and regaining perspective requires a change of pace and place – a pilgrimage.

But by stepping completely out of our current ministry situations, we are freed to embark on a holy trek. Some clergy have experienced life-changing “ah-ha’s” by listening to God during five, ten, twenty, or even thirty days of quiet retreat. One clergy person took a ministry renewal and did not celebrate the Eucharist for six months. Instead, he stayed in the pew singing hymns and praying with people – and he began to touch again the roots of his ministry, connecting with the holy timelessness of God. For him, ministry renewal leave was a touch of heaven and a glimpse of the banquet to come.

Ministry renewal leave is a time to receive, to be nurtured, to dig deeper into yourself, your relationship with God, and your own roots and stories, so that you can be renewed, refreshed, and revitalized by the breath of God.

Purposes of the Ministerial Renewal Leave

A. Removal

One must leave the place of service temporarily for the purpose of a broader, wider perspective without the tyranny of the urgent or unceasing interruptions.

It is recommended that a portion of the leave be done in isolation to more keenly hear the Lord in quietness and solitude. In the rush of our world, we tend to lose touch with the still, small voice of God.

One must be away from meetings, friendships, phone calls, and all the everyday interruptions if one will gain the clear perspective of one's walk and work.

B. Rethink

In the first weeks, there should be given time for an analysis of present ministry. One should consider a) its strengths, b) its challenges, c) its completeness. It is a time of looking closely to the whole and then to each part.

C. Renew

Now is the time for physical, emotional, and spiritual rest. Let the Spirit of God surround you and hold you. Be sure to take care of your physical and emotional needs, so that your spiritual needs will be met.

D. Retool

Time must be taken for reading, or seminars, or Pastor-in-residence program. One should be in relationship with a mentor, and visits to other sites of ministry might be useful. There are many ways to retool and this approach should be talked about with your leadership before the MRL takes place.

One takes the new vision and new learning for the next steps in Church leadership. How will you introduce the new ideas to the congregation? Plan now for the church retreat that will give you opportunity to bring your ideas for the future.

E. Resource

Take time to assimilate the new learning. Talk about your reading with your mentor. How will you implement new ideas?

F. Return

Refreshed and renewed, one brings new vision and mission direction to one's own life. Share with your family. One should be strengthened in spirit, body, and emotions coming back to the place of calling.

A Suggestion for Ministerial Leave

The Concern

In today's world, there are few vocations that demand as much from a person as does the call to ministry. Our pastors are expected to be available to the needs of their congregation. They are always "on call." There is healthy respect for the pastor's "day off," but when needs arise, we call our Shepherd! Our pastors "burn out" and the Ministerial Renewal Leave gives time for clear perspective, renewal of soul, mind, and body, and an opportunity to resource for the years ahead.

The Recommendation

It is the recommendation that in the fifth year of ministry, the pastor be granted a six-week renewal leave. This is not vacation; it is a planned separation to give the pastor an opportunity to reflect, renew, resource, and return to the church with a vision for what lies ahead. Many of our pastors leave for a new church after five or six years because that is the only way they can have a fresh start. The goal of the Ministerial Renewal Leave is to give conditions that allow our pastors to remain fresh and vital in their current situation.

Considerations

For many of our smaller churches, it is difficult to think of their pastor gone for a long period of time. Care should be taken that the Ministerial Renewal Leave and the pastor's vacation time be spread over the period of the entire year. It is unwise to take leave and vacation consecutively.

The MRL should be accompanied with adequate resources for the pastor. Perhaps a second home of a parishioner could be used. There are programs that require less financial impact than others, such as the resident pastor program of our seminary. The church leadership and pastor plan the renewal leave together for the benefit of both the church and the individual.

Implications

The gospels remind us again and again of our Lord's withdrawal for prayer and to be away from the "crush of the crowd." It is clear that there needs to be time for prayer and reflection in order to renew one's spirit. When one guards one's life and takes time to be at peace, one's work remains strong and one's presence brings consistency and maturity to the work of the church. While a sabbatical of three months in the eighth year removes the pastor from the congregation for too long of a time, a Ministerial Renewal Leave of six weeks every fifth year gives the needed time of reconstruction and renewal and keeps the pastor in touch with his/her church.

Guidelines on Ministry Renewal Leave

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1. Develop a PLAN in which you, your board, a ministry renewal leave committee, and members of the congregation mutually agree upon goals for your ministry renewal leave.
2. Remember that TIME plays a crucial role in developing a good ministry renewal leave plan.
3. Use a CONSULTANT, colleague, or nearby continuing educator to help you and those affected by your absence to be more objective in planning your ministry renewal leave.
4. Search out program RESOURCES in nearby universities, seminaries, or special continuing education programs.
5. Ask for JUDICATORY participation in policy, support, and resources as well as ideas.
6. Organizing your FUNDING provides the “reality test” for a ministry renewal leave.
7. Make firm TRAVEL plans that will literally remove you from your normal office.
8. Locate a COMMUNITY where you can participate as an individual and on a group level.
9. Use a MENTOR to help you reflect theologically and personally on the external and internal journey you’ve taken on your ministry renewal leave pilgrimage.
10. Plan BENEFITS that you hope to receive during your ministry renewal leave journey including several different areas: personal, couple, family, and parish. *(What do I want to happen to me personally? How would I like the parish to benefit? What can be special for my spouse, kids, or the Bible study group I lead?)*

Post-Ministry Renewal Leave Questionnaire

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Use these questions as they seem appropriate to your congregation. The church may ask the pastor to write responses or use this list as a guide for discussion and evaluation of the leave. Leaders in the congregation (the church board, PRC, or executive committee) may also be asked for responses to receive a broader perspective on the experience.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What were the pastor's expectations for this renewal leave?
2. What were the congregation's expectations?
3. How was the content of the ministry renewal leave defined?
4. During the ministry renewal leave, what was the impact on the church?
5. During the ministry renewal leave, what was the impact on the staff (if applicable)?
6. What was the impact on the pastor's career, thinking, and plans?
7. How was the church involved with the pastor during the ministry renewal leave?
8. After the ministry renewal leave, what responsibilities changed for the pastor within the church?
9. How were these changes planned for? Did they just happen?
10. What debriefing happened for the pastor, interim, staff, board, and members?
11. What experiences from the ministry renewal leave became part of church life?
12. What role shifts occurred?
13. How did the pastor, interim, staff, board, and parishioners evaluate the ministry renewal leave experience?
14. What happened to the pastor and family on re-entry?
15. Would the pastor and the church do it again and why/why not?