A Case for Clergy Sabbaticals

by Shari Woodbury

In congregations lacking a recent history of minister sabbaticals, some members may be skeptical about the value of this practice. Is it financially prudent? (What if money is tight?) Is it fair? (Most hard-working professionals do not get sabbaticals.) Will it ultimately benefit the congregation? (Lay leaders may be wary of the church going into a holding pattern while the minister is away, with little to show for it after.)

This manifesto includes the following sections:

Why Sabbaticals Are Not Only Humane – But Smart

Numerous resources from denominational / judicatory entities, consulting groups, and even funders interested in the long-term health and success of congregations encourage the practice of periodic minister sabbaticals. They argue that yes, it is all of the above things – prudent, fair, and in the best interests of the congregation.

For example, in his 2000 foreword to *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning*, Roy M. Oswald articulates seven reasons a congregation should regularly invest in clergy sabbaticals.[i] Consider that sabbaticals:

1. **Refill clergy's spiritual wells**. Successful spiritual leadership, in the pulpit and beyond, requires a life of spiritual depth for the pastor themselves. The day-to-day demands of parish ministry tend to undercut this need. Sabbaticals help to bridge the gap.
2. **Position a minister to lead in the current moment.** Parish ministry is changing rapidly in the 21st century. To thrive (or survive), congregations need spiritual leaders who are fresh in mind and heart, able to retool their own skill sets and guide the congregation toward new ways of living the mission. Time-outs help prepare clergy for innovative leadership in challenging times.
3. **Reduce the (uncommonly high) risk of burnout.** The risk of burnout rises in the absence of renewal leave. Oswald explains, "the constant intimate involvement with the emotional freight of other people's lives can be draining. Burned-out clergy are much more likely to leave parish ministry, or seek another call," or slide into diminished functioning, with greater likelihood of a conflicted ending. "Every pastoral turnover costs a congregation years of progress," since each ending is following by several interim ministry years, and several years of relationship-building with a new pastor before momentum picks up again.
4. **Protect and enhance a church's greatest resource for growth and stability**: the vibrancy of the spiritual leader. "Clergy vitality is the greatest asset in building up a congregation." Whereas burnout leaves clergy empty, lacking spark, less able to connect with people or champion a church's vision for the future.
5. **Offset the overwork that is normalized in ministry.** The norms for clergy work and work-life balance are "crazy" and unsustainable. "When you add up the time off clergy miss that most lay people take for granted …" it's clear that sabbaticals are "a reasonable proposal to make up for that loss."
6. **Build broader leadership and institutional knowledge.** Clergy sabbaticals help to nurture lay leaders – old and new – and bring ownership back to the membership. This is a correction to the job "creep" that tends to happen over time when you have a competent minister. The congregation's

improved familiarity with the work of the church, its increased skills engaging in this work, and its fresh exercise of judgment about "how we do things" – all of these are healthy for the church, putting the congregation in a better position for the long run.

7. **Are a cost-effective way to nurture an effective, long-term ministry**. Pastoral transitions are costly in terms of budget as well as lost time and lay leader labor. Transitions are expensive, involving search processes, compensation negotiations, and moving costs. Another source reports that "The typical pastor has his/her greatest ministry impact at a church in years 5 through 14 of his pastorate; unfortunately, the average pastor lasts only five years at a church."[ii] (The average tenure for a UU minister in 2023 was slightly longer at six years.[iii])

The Demands of Ministry

Few people who haven't worked in ministry, or been close to someone who has, have a full picture of how this vocation plays out in the life of an individual. Members only see the part(s) of the minister's work that they witness directly – Sunday worship (when they attend), and for anyone involved in a team or ministry, the minister's work with their particular group.

The practice of granting renewal leave is catching on in some other professions, too, and rightly so. (Check out this UUA piece speaking to sabbaticals for all: https://www.uua.org/leaderlab/sabbaticals-all.)

But consider some of the ways that ministry is different from other vocations.

Professional Preparation and Commitment

A Unitarian Universalist minister has undertaken significant professional preparation for the role of ministry:

- spending at least three years to obtain a Master's of Divinity degree (which in the past often required a geographic move)
- completing Clinical Pastoral Education (aka CPE – an unpaid chaplaincy internship, typically in a hospital)

- undertaking a congregational internship (one year full-time or equivalent; unpaid or modestly paid)
- going through psychological tests and screening
- completing the credentialing process to be granted ministerial fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association, which includes additional reading, essay-writing, preaching and interviewing with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (an intensive process sometimes likened to passing a bar exam)
- not to mention the extensive process of a search for a settled position – an 8-month process which is more grueling than even a university job search.

It is theoretically possible to do all this in three years, but most people these days take 4-6+ years to be "formed," credentialed and settled.[iv]

Most new UU ministers in the past decade

- are second- or third-career professionals
- have taken on tens of thousands of dollars of debt to become ministers (in 2023, the average seminary debt for a UU was $75,000)[v]
- if they have a spouse/family, may have moved their family across the country to accept a new position (perhaps more than once)

Here's the difference: While a minister's level of **preparation** may look more like that of an attorney, CPA, nurse practitioner, architect, or MBA, their **pay scale** is often more like that of a teacher or social worker – despite the debt and the geographic moves.

Scope of Work

The precise duties assigned to a particular minister vary with their ministry context – congregation size, number of ministers and other staff, level of volunteer support, culture and programs of the particular congregation, gifts and calling of the particular clergyperson.

Even across such variations, most parish ministers have a **great range of duties** within their portfolio. One source cites this statistic: "Churchgoers expect their

pastor to juggle an average of 16 major tasks."[vi]

In 2010 the UU Ministers Association developed a rubric to support professional development for ministers.[vii] It included nine core duty areas:

1. Worship
2. Rites of Passage
3. Pastoral Care & Presence
4. Spiritual Development
5. Public Witness / Social Action
6. Administration
7. Personal Renewal and Professional Development
8. Serving the Larger Unitarian Universalist Faith
9. Leading the Faith into the Future

Each of the above duty areas is further detailed in 6-18 tasks falling within that duty. For example, area 6 – Leads Administration – includes among its 18 tasks, everything from implementing policies and procedures in compliance with local, state and federal laws, to savvy use of technology and media; from fostering leadership development to ensuring buildings are well managed; from creating membership systems to mediating conflicts with political savvy.

While clergy have specialized skills, in congregations they are expected to be generalists.

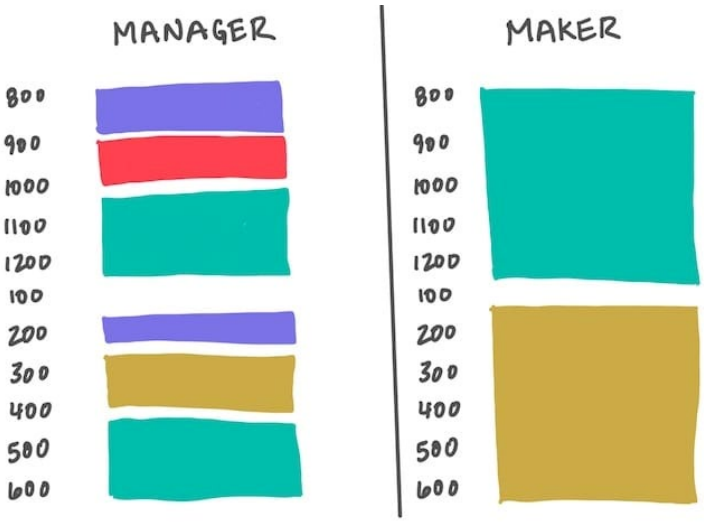
Divergent Types of Work

In addition to the breadth of duties in general, combining administrative and creative roles (e.g., worship creation) adds a particular challenge in ministry. Coming from a non-profit background, I look at a parish minister role (at least, until you get into the very largest congregations, which may have separate executive directors) as a combination of the Executive Director role in a non-profit plus a Program Director role – with the minister leading two of the congregation's most critical programs/services, worship and pastoral care.

As expressed in the graphic that follows, different kinds of schedules lend themselves to these different kinds of work. Many ministers I know try to carve out a Writing Day (large block that allows deep concentration for intellectual or creative work), though it is not easy to do in practice; all those other, managerial tasks try to encroach. The graphic also fails to capture the variability of start and end times of a minister's day.

In addition to not recognizing the scope of duties a minister fulfills, congregants may dramatically underestimate the time spent even on those tasks that they are most aware a minister undertakes. Notably, the rule of thumb for sermon preparation is that an hour of research and writing time goes into every minute of a sermon preached – so a 20 minute sermon will take **20 hours of prep time**.

Different Types of Workflow for Different Types of Work



A solo, full-time UU parish minister cranks out 30-some such sermons per year. I'd bet that most people who have never needed to prepare a sermon themselves have no idea how much time, love and labor is invested in preparation for each Sunday service. But excellent preaching still consistently comes out as the #1 priority congregants list in surveys about what they need in a new settled minister.

Work Schedule

Ministry does not fit neatly into the boundaries of either a work calendar or a church office. Consider the following:

- Ministry is not a 9-5 job, even in the most "normal" of times.
- Ministers typically work six days a week, with consistent weekend work and evening engagements. (While there is some movement toward a 5-day-work week, the 6-day norm has been in place for centuries and still predominates.)
- Clergy are on call for pastoral emergencies, even on their days off and vacations.
- There is always more one could do – and that congregants collectively might want or expect one to do – than is possible for one human being to do

sustainably. (Especially, in my experience, with a mid-size congregation and a solo minister.)

- Some of this work is also emotionally intense in nature. When you care deeply about people – as the sort of people called to ministry generally do – it is not easy to "leave it at the office."
- And the places in which this work occurs – not only at the church, hospitals, and congregants' homes but also in coffee shops, the minister's home office, and by email, phone, text, and social media – tend to blur the boundaries of "work time" and "personal time."

A note about Study Leave: Sometimes congregants misunderstand what Study Leave is, seeing it as a sort of extended vacation. This is understandable, since people in other kinds of jobs are unlikely to have work time set aside for a similar purpose. But make no mistake, **Study Leave is work time**.

Study Leave is meant to be Maker Time and Planner Time. Freed of the usual meetings, staff supervision, pastoral calls, and weekly worship preparation, the clergyperson can map out the worship calendar for coming months, prepare a new course they will teach, study topics that will be subjects of preaching or ritual, devise a new type of service, and similar tasks that require sustained attention, learning, or creativity.

Relational Intensity

Ministry takes place in **dense webs of relationships**. This is an important part of what makes it a fulfilling vocation.

However, it also makes ministry uncommonly relationally complex. Consider that for the clergyperson, congregants are at once:

- your clients – the primary people being served by core programs like worship, pastoral care and religious education
- volunteer staff – colleagues and supervisees, the bulk of the church's workforce
- the hiring body – the entire congregation votes to call a minister, with a subset of trusted members leading the search

- the evaluators – informally giving feedback on an ongoing basis (with their diverse, even conflicting views and preferences); a group such as a board or subgroup sometimes conducts formal reviews
- social acquaintances with whom the minister spends most of their time – whom one loves, and with whom one can be friendly – but not friends*

*Many clergy seek to limit dual relationships with congregants – not only friendship but also becoming a client or customer of any congregant – because these relationships are already dual and then some. Befriending staff coworkers can be tempting, but clergy typically need to steer clear of that too, lest their functioning as supervisor be compromised.

The Mantle of Ministry

The rite of passage that acknowledges one's role as a spiritual leader – ordination – is unique to this vocation. Ministry tends to loom large not only in the day-to-day life of the clergyperson, but also in their personal identity.

Colleagues acknowledge how challenging it can be to get healthy distance from this role – for example, describing the feeling of having a hard time taking off "the mantle of ministry."

All of these factors, individually and especially combined, make ministry distinctive from other vocations:

- the broad scope of a minister's work (so many hats)
- the different kinds of planning and time management required by the divergent roles a minister plays (managerial vs. creative)
- the dense web of relationships in which this work takes place
- the varied times and places and mediums through which this work is done, which makes boundary setting both more important and more difficult
- the depth of ministerial identity

The above features of religious leadership lead to additional challenges for the clergy person, including:

- **Isolation.** One mostly spends time with people who by definition should

not be personal friends, and has limited free time in which to nurture connections beyond work. This is exacerbated when the minister has moved to a new setting to serve, leaving behind old social networks.

- **Empathy fatigue.** As they offer pastoral care and presence through all the ups and downs of people's lives, clergy can become weighed down by "the emotional freight of other people's lives."
- **Conflict fatigue.** Clergy must regulate the stress of conflicts and group dynamics, which at-best are low-grade and ongoing in the "family systems" of churches. Conflict is inevitable within a community like a congregation. Clergy are often pulled in as a problem-solver or counselor. Sometimes issues are projected onto the minister, making them the object of conflict.
- **Role overload**. This comes from unrealistic expectations, role creep (more so the more competent the minister), and having the unexpected – staff turnover, memorial services – regularly added to an already-full baseline of activities.
- **Leadership fatigue.** Successful ministry requires emotional self-regulation, spiritual maturity, and differentiated leadership. It requires both uncommon skill levels and uncommon stamina and resilience.

Religious Upheaval

To the above longstanding challenges of clergy careers, our changing times have added some more stresses. These include:

- The long, gradual **decline of organized religion**, with denominations shrinking, churches closing, and anxiety growing in both the rank and file and leadership of congregations. (A 2003 source indicated that "50 percent of all congregations in the U.S. are either plateauing or declining."[viii]) This started in the mid-1900s – and has **accelerated** since COVID-19 arrived. Unitarian Universalism used to be the exception to this trend, as refugees from other faiths came to us. But UUism is now in decline too.
- **Increasing racial-ethnic, gender and neuro-diversity** in the pulpit, in the pews, and in the Sunday School. Faiths that want to survive – not to mention serve all comers and live their values – can no longer take white-dominant culture for granted. We cannot put off the hard work of widening the circle of concern.

- Changing realities for congregants that affect their ability to support congregations with their **pledges and** their **volunteer time**. The pandemic also further reduced volunteer capacity. This increases pressure on religious professionals, especially in the absence of right-sized expectations about a congregation's programming (or funding for additional staff hours to pick up the slack).
- The influx of women into ordained roles in mainline Protestantism, UUism, Reform Judaism etc. (As of 2023, women make up 57% of UU parish ministers, and nonbinary / trans people another 4%.[ix]) As has happened with other professions, the shift from being male-dominated to mixed or majority-female has coincided with **reductions in societal respect** for the role, as well as **shifting expectations** for clergy leadership styles, caring work, and even compensation.
- **Misconduct scandals** in various faiths have also contributed to reduced trust in and respect for organized religion, including clergy.
- **Technology** is continually evolving for religious organizations, as for all institutions and society. The pace of change in communications increased exponentially, including a shift away from print and to social/visual media, and increasing online options – the latter having exploded during the pandemic. This changes how ministers and other staff do their work. The ubiquity of texting, social media and online meetings puts further strain on work-life boundaries. The mainstreaming of multi-platform worship – even for small churches – has increased workload and added complexity. David Pyle, Lead of the UUA MidAmerica Region, said in 2023 that "**more than a decade of transitions [were] compacted into just a year or two**, as our congregations moved from in-person to digital community, and then into a new multi-platform reality."
- Erosion of benefits and job security – or the threat of it – as organized religion becomes a **less stable field of employment**.

Note that while falling membership, pledging and volunteering naturally leads congregational leaders to consider reductions in staffing and compensation, the work the staff do may actually be no LESS intensive – in fact, working in a time of turbulence and transformation may require **greater imagination, skillfulness and resilience** than in previous decades, when religious leaders could carry on with business as usual.

About Burnout

Burnout is a common challenge in all helping professions, such as teaching, therapy, and social work. Ministry is no exception.

Dropping Out and Burning Out

There's fallout at every stage of the clergy journey.

- **Seminary.** I don't find stats about attrition in seminary. My entering cohort at Meadville Lombard Theological School, in 2012, included fourteen people. Nine of us eventually obtained the M.Div. I can't say if this is typical, but that's a **36% dropout rate**. (Keep in mind that among those who finish, not all become parish ministers. Six of the nine graduates are currently in parish ministry – 43% of my entering class, twelve years later.)
- **Credentialing.** From 320-340 aspirants and candidates are going through the credentialing process annually. In the past, 80-90% completed the process, receiving preliminary fellowship from the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) and continuing onto ministry careers. [x]
- **New ministers.** A long-cited statistic is that 50% or more of new ministers drop out of parish ministry within the first five years. (Another stat I've seen, which includes more evangelical churches, puts it at 80%.[xi])

There may be many reasons why some people leave seminary without finishing their degree program, and likewise some discontinue seeking ministerial fellowship with the UUA (or are discontinued by the MFC).

As for new ministers, burnout is considered the main culprit for their low retention rate in the vocation. Burnout is surely a contributor, as well, to cases in which more established ministers switch careers to some other form of ministry (outside the parish), switch to a different career altogether, go on medical leave, or retire early.

Carey Nieuwhof, a thought leader in ministry, writes about his own experience of burnout. He was motivated to write because he recognized that "**burnout seems to be an epidemic in ministry leadership**." Nieuwhof highlights signs of burnout,

including fading motivation, emotional numbness, finding people more draining than energizing, losing your cool too easily, growing cynicism, falling productivity, self-medicating, loss of humor, and loss of the ability to be renewed by sleep and regular time off.[xii]

Recent Trends

Here are some more recent trends:

- By 2023 the percentage of candidates who saw the MFC and were granted preliminary fellowship dropped to 70%, with more people being required to make a return visit to the MFC (to complete more preparation before being declared ready to serve). The portion of people discontinued in candidacy – deemed unsuited for ministry – has also increased, up to 6% in recent years. [xiii]
- There's an uptick in people leaving ministry, with both retirements up (20 more per year than a decade ago), and ministers shifting from serving in congregations to serving in various community settings. There are also fewer new people going into parish ministry.[xiv]
- UU ministers are less open to geographic moves than they used to be. When they are open to moving, opportunities for a working spouse often matter – and of course the compensation package offered to the minister is key.[xv]
- As average length of a ministry shortens, congregations are having to more frequently spend funds on search and move costs (not to mention the leadership capital).[xvi]
- Church conflict has played into this. A 2023 survey found that almost 10% of UU churches experienced conflicts during the pandemic that led to the departure of the minister.[xvii]
- Burnout has increased during and since the pandemic. In 2015, 11% of pastors reported having **considered quitting ministry** in the previous year. Per research by the Barna group, by 2022, that figure had jumped to 40%. The same survey found that the **overall well-being** of pastors had hit a disturbing low, with precipitous drops in spiritual, physical, and mental/emotional health of pastors, as well as significant drops in overall quality of life, respect from the community, and true friends. Nieuwhof observes, "Because the health of a leader impacts the health of a church, **we'll see a ripple effect of pastoral exhaustion that could damage churches for years to come**."[xviii]

- Another investigation, undertaken by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and reported in Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC), includes these key findings: "The further we are from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the more we observe larger percentages of clergy pondering alternatives to their present congregation, vocation, or both. In the Fall of 2023, over half of religious leaders (53%) have seriously considered leaving pastoral ministry at least once since 2020 (See Figure 1). This is nearly 20% more clergy than in 2021 when 37% reported having such thoughts since 2020 (These findings parallel those by Barna Research). Similarly, in the Fall of 2023, close to half (44%) of religious leaders have seriously considered leaving their current congregation at least once since 2020. This has more than doubled as only 21% of leaders reported having this thought in 2021."[xix]
- For the cohort who started as new settled ministers at the beginning of the pandemic (2020), tenure has been even shorter. Pre-pandemic, 1-2 settled ministries matched in each search cycle would end up being super short. For the 2020 cohort, it's been four so far (2-4x more) – and more are considering leaving early who haven't yet done it.[xx]

Growing Shortages

Let's see how all the trends add up:

- while people continue to pursue ministry, ***fewer of them are making it through*** the preparation and credentialing process
- among those that do end up doing ministry, ***interest has shifted dramatically away from parish ministry*** to community ministry (chaplaincy, spiritual direction, coaching, leadership in non-profits and other ministries); only 25% of the candidates who came before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in 2023 were leaning toward parish ministry[xxi]
- among those serving congregations, burnout from the pandemic as well as other long-simmering pressures on churches/clergy means that ***fewer of those parish ministers are lasting long*** – the tenure of the average placement has gone down, and more people are simply leaving ministry for other kinds of work.

The upshot of all this is that there is a **shortage of ministers**. Ministers are having

difficulty filling ministerial internship positions at even "plum internship sites" (congregations). The UUA Transitions Director reported that when he took the position, there were typically 130 ministers in search for congregational ministries each year. By 2023 it was more like 55-60 ministers in search for settled positions. That's ***~45% the size of the previous pool*** of ministers.[xxii]

Things are changing on the job side of the equation too. There's a rise in part-time positions, and more congregations are opting to offer contract ministries vs. called or interim ministries.[xxiii] (Contract ministers can later be called, but the pool of ministers willing to make a geographic move with indeterminate hopes of real tenure is a smaller pool of people.)

UUA Transitions Director Keith Kron shared the following at the beginning of the 2024 search cycle (in Dec. 2023):

Unitarian Universalism and Ministerial Changes

There has always been a shortage of ministers in Unitarian Universalism for part-time ministries. Ministers were unwilling to move for part-time positions and the need for full-time employment meant looking for another part-time position. Five years ago, we saw a smaller pool for interim ministry. This was exacerbated during the pandemic as we saw fewer newer ministers entering looking into interim positions and then that expanded into any congregational position.

One of the realities of the pandemic is that those ministers in congregations were asked to do more for the congregation. This could range from technical expertise and management to attending more meetings to actually doing parts of jobs that other staff left. Rarely did they get extra compensation despite doing more work. This caused more ministers to feel burnt out and leave. Many congregational leaders also felt overworked, sometimes without the appreciation as well.

Assumptions and Ideas that Used to Be True

- A surplus of ministers meant it was a "Congregational Market", especially for congregations that were higher in membership and income and in popular geographic areas. It was easy to just get a new minister if one left.
- A congregation could save money by finding a newer minister.
- A new minister can find an affordable place to live.
- Ministers want to live here. We don't have to do much else. [for coasts / desirable places]
- A minister can be asked to take on new things, and extra work does not need to be compensated.

- The way church used to be done before the pandemic was ideal. We can go back to that.
- We can find a minister just like _____ who served us well.
- Ministers don't care about getting all those benefits or how much they get paid.
- Doing ministry is its own satisfaction.

[Take in that none of the above is true anymore…]

Learnings from Engaging from All Religious Professionals

Recently, Jan Gartner from the Office of Church Staff Finances engaged with ministers, religious educators, administrators, and other church staff about their work. While these conversations were with a small fraction of people, there were some interesting insights.

- Most religious professionals love their work. Yet feeling respected and valued for their work lagged significantly behind. And only a third of religious professionals felt adequately compensated for the work they did.
- About half of religious professionals felt like they had a good work-life balance.
- When asked about the best things about the work, overwhelmingly respondents mentioned making a positive difference in people's lives. Less than 10% mentioned salary and benefits (and people could check all 9 answers as true) as being one of the best.
- The greatest professional struggles listed were about working too much and having too much on the person's plate. This was followed closely by poor communication systems and inadequate compensation.
- The greatest personal struggles mentioned were financial worries and hardship and exhaustion.

These findings also anecdotally match what ministers have said over the years and which were amplified during the first three years of the pandemic. This led us to look at ministerial evaluations—none of which ask generically or specifically about job satisfaction. As one ministerial colleague said, "I can't recall being asked if I liked the work of ministry, especially the day to day of ministry. More often than not, it's assumed I love all of it—no matter how much there is of it."

2024 At A Glance

So far in the 2024 search cycle, many openings remain unfilled. Going by posts on the Hot Stove Facebook page, an unofficial tracker of the search cycle, here's how it's looking by position type (as of 5-20-24):

- Assistant Ministers: 4 of 5 positions have filled (80%)

- Contract Ministries (over 50%): 13 of 70 positions have filled (23%)
- Developmental Ministries: 2 of 3 positions have filled (67%)
- Settled Ministries: 22 of 28 positions have filled (78%)

Typically a few more churches get matched up during the second cycle, which is still underway – but that won't change the picture dramatically. As it stands now, **~64 congregations (60%) that were seeking a minister have been unable to find a match**, including 56 contract positions and 6 settled positions. The interim search cycle is now underway, and if past years are any indication, the shortage is likely to have even more impact there.

Turnover in ministers presents a greater risk to congregations now than it did in the past. Congregations that are smaller, in less desirable locations, that have more modest compensation and benefits packages, or that are simply unlucky may have a harder time getting a minister.

Sabbaticals in Unitarian Universalism

As my colleague (blogging as PeaceBang) observed in a post about the clergy burnout crisis, "ministers are only able to actually do our jobs when we are spiritually healthy and our souls are whole." Sabbaticals foster such health and wholeness. And they are normal business practice in Unitarian Universalism.

The standard Letter of Call for a settled minister includes this commitment:

4.12 Sabbatical Leave*

4.12.1 The Minister may use sabbatical leave for study, education, writing, meditation, and other forms of professional, religious, spiritual, or personal growth. Sabbatical leave accrues at the rate of one month per year of service, with leave to be taken after four but before seven years of service. No more than six months of sabbatical leave may be used within any twelve-month period. The dates of a proposed extended sabbatical (more than three months) should be submitted to the Board for approval at least 12 months in advance. For sabbaticals of three months or less, dates should be submitted at least 4 months in advance. Study Leave and Vacation still accrues during a sabbatical year, but should be taken at another time during the year unless authorized by the Board.

4.12.2 The Congregation will continue full salary, housing allowance, and benefits during sabbatical leave. Professional expenses, if used for sabbatical travel, are subject to IRS Regulations.

4.12.3 In the event of the Minister's resignation, termination, or retirement, unused sabbatical leave is not compensable.

4.12.4 The Minister agrees not to resign from service to the Congregation for a minimum of one year following the end of each sabbatical leave. The Congregation agrees to take no action on ministerial tenure during a sabbatical leave except for extreme and unexpected circumstances and only after consultation with the UUA Transitions Director.

* Each fiscal year, the Congregation should consider budgeting funds for use in funding the Congregation's additional expenses during the Minister's sabbatical. This sabbatical fund would be the property of the Congregation.

Besides mitigating against burnout, sabbaticals also give clergy a chance to step back from the weekly grind and "the way we've always done it" – returning with fresh energy, renewed imagination, and an open mind for the future of church.

A Congregation's Sabbatical History

The history of ministers and sabbaticals within a particular congregation can impact how lay leaders and members of the church relate to sabbaticals.

For example, in one small mid-size congregation (we'll call it First Church), many members were likely unfamiliar with the concept of sabbatical for ministers. It had been three decades since Rev. Longserving took one – and no minister had done so again since. The Sabbatical Team knew it had its work cut out for it in educating the congregation on the value of this practice.

In that case, the church's own history reinforced the wisdom of sabbaticals. Rev. Longserving was followed by a series of settled ministers with modest tenures, with multiple interim ministers in-between. One of the more recent settled ministers had served for seven years, then left not only his position at First Church, but left the ministry for a different career altogether. Another of the settled ministers had a five-year ministry at First Church, ending in conflict and a negotiated resignation. The most recent minister before the current one ended his career with a five-year stint at First Church – after which he retired. The lack of sabbaticals correlated with ministries that led, within 5-7 years, to the pursuit of a different career, a traumatic ending, and retirement, respectively. Whereas the only minister in memory who had taken sabbaticals was the one who lasted in that ministry for decades.

This is a real church example which is consistent with the wisdom that clergy who take sabbaticals are more like to be long-tenured in their congregations – whereas those who don't are more likely to burn out, leaving either that particular ministry or ministry in general.

What is the history of sabbaticals in your congregation? How might this impact members' perceptions of the practice? What should they know about sabbaticals and their value to their congregation's health and vitality?

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[i] Foreword by Roy M. Oswald in *Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning* by A. Richard Bullock and Richard J. Bruesehoff (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

[ii] Burnout for Pastors report at https://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/jesuscreed/2007/08/burnout-for-pastors.html (accessed May 2024); report cites source of statistics as the book *Pastors at Greater Risk*, H B London, Jr., and Neil B Wiseman, Regal Books, © 2003.

[iii] 2023 FACT Survey on UU Congregations Emerging from the Global Pandemic, https://www.beautiful.ai/player/-NURxDCmZdVhV5DRrdO4/FACT-2023

[iv] UUMA Collegial Conversation, May 2023, on Current Trends in Parish Ministry. Michelle Favreault, Director of the Ministerial Formation Network. https://uuma.org/resource/current-trends-in-parish-ministry-may-2023/

[v] UUMA Collegial Conversation, May 2023, on Current Trends in Parish Ministry. Jonipher Kwong, then Credentialing Director for the UUA. https://uuma.org/resource/current-trends-in-parish-ministry-may-2023/

[vi] Burnout for Pastors

[vii] Fulfilling the Call: A Model for Unitarian Universalist Ministry in the 21st Century. https://uuma.org/resource/fulfilling-the-call-2/

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