SABBATICALS

In 1987, General Synod endorsed nine suggestions concerning clergy sabbaticals which were then forwarded to the classes for inclusion in their own policies. As with most Synod endorsements of this type, some classes aggressively implemented plans for sabbaticals while others did not. Since that time, however, more and more RCA ministers are being provided with sabbatical opportunities as classes and consistories recognize that to be effective and faithful ministers need refreshment and renewal on a regular and ongoing basis. A timely request for a sabbatical designed around both the needs of the minister and the needs of the congregation is less a fringe benefit than it is an expression of faithful stewardship of one's life and ministry.

The policy submitted to Synod was prefaced by the following two important paragraphs:

Much attention has been focused in the past few years on concern for clergy "burn-out." While not as much has been written about clergy "rust-out," periodic use of sabbaticals, when combined with regular observance of the requirements for continuing education, could offer an effective preventive measure for both problems. It should be noted that a sabbatical is not a vacation. A sabbatical is rather an alternative form of employment which provides the clergyperson with an opportunity to be exposed to new ideas, experience a different context, be renewed and refreshed, deepen the resources of his or her spiritual life, broaden perspective, provide opportunity for renewal, and as appropriate, learn new skills.

Because clergy have differing needs and their careers are at different points, great flexibility with regard to extent and frequency of sabbatical leaves is important. However, there is one matter on which there should probably be no flexibility at all. This is at the point of planning and preparation. A clear statement of rationale and purpose for the sabbatical should be required.

The following suggestions were endorsed by the GSEC for inclusion in classis policies governing sabbaticals:

1. In addition to time allocated for continuing education/professional development, each installed pastor is encouraged to negotiate an appropriate sabbatical leave with the consistory no earlier than after five years of service, and not later than ten. (Exceptions may be considered according to need for sabbaticals prior to five years.) Pastors ought to negotiate with consistories for sabbatical leave every five years.

2. The length of the sabbatical leave may vary according to the need which it is intended to meet and the objectives which it proposes to fulfill. Two to four months ought to be given serious consideration by both parties. At least six months prior to the beginning of a sabbatical leave, a detailed plan shall be presented to the consistory for its approval. The consistory is encouraged to
consult with appropriate persons in classis or the Office of Ministry and Personnel Services for guidance as to the significance of the planned sabbatical. The proposal must include a description of the planned sabbatical, its relevance to ministry in that place, and a plan for covering work responsibilities during the time required for the sabbatical.

3. Sabbatical leaves need not involve complete relinquishment of responsibility. Partial (2-3 days per week) sabbaticals over the period of time required for fulfillment of the objectives may offer viable alternatives to briefer periods of complete absence from parish responsibilities.

4. During a sabbatical, salary and benefits shall continue to be paid as during normal service. (This is consistent with the understanding that a sabbatical leave is not "time off" but an alternative form of employment activity.)

5. Unusual expenses incurred during a sabbatical leave (cost of tuition, travel, etc.) are the responsibility of the minister, who may choose to use funds set aside for continuing education if the consistory agrees that this is appropriate.

6. Within one month following the completion of a sabbatical, the minister shall provide a reflective report of the experience to the consistory in a form which can then be shared with the entire congregation. Ministers are encouraged to submit this report to OHR for inclusion with their Minister Profile Form so that it becomes a part of their permanent record.

7. Following completion of a sabbatical, a minister is morally obligated to remain as pastor of that same congregation for at least one year, unless released from this obligation by consent of the consistory.

8. Provision for sabbatical leaves shall be included in the consistory's call to the minister. Appropriate provision in the annual budget shall be made to ensure that when a plan for a sabbatical is agreed upon the funds for adjunct pastoral assistance (as needed) are available.

9. The classis shall ask each member church as part of its annual inquiry if it has instituted a sabbatical policy for its ministers.

(MGS 1987, pp. 203-204.)

Special arrangements can be made for clergy on sabbatical at Western Theological Seminary, at Princeton Seminary's Center for Continuing Education, and at other seminaries.