

Diocese of Exeter
Department of Mission and Ministry
Sabbatical: Guidelines and Policy

This document sets out the Exeter diocesan policy regarding sabbaticals – and explains the diocese’s recommended principles for making effective use of such time.

1. Purpose

The prime purpose of a sabbatical is to provide a three month period away from the pressures of everyday ministry in order to take time for personal study and development. Such development should be seen in the widest context, including some or all of: acquiring new knowledge and experience, honing existing skills, and refreshment in prayer and spirituality.

2. Eligibility

All stipendiary ministers are eligible to apply for a sabbatical, providing that:

- They have been ordained for more than ten years;
- They have been in their present post for at least three years; and
- They are not within *five* years of retirement (currently up to approximately 63 years of age).

Prior service in a similar ministry in another diocese will normally be recognised.

A sabbatical is of greatest benefit to those in active and healthy ministry; it is not the right course for those who are recuperating or recovering from any kind of crisis. In such circumstances, the Diocese will offer alternative support and provision.

3. Procedure

The procedure normally begins with a request to the Suffragan Bishop from the clergy person requesting a sabbatical. A particular timescale is recommended. Normally this will be 18 months from the date of the request in order to give sufficient time for planning and preparation. Once the clergy person has informed the Suffragan Bishop that they would like to take a sabbatical, the following steps need to be taken (approximately in this order):

- A meeting with the Director of Mission and Ministry (DMM) in order to begin planning the theme, content and structure of the sabbatical;
- Approval from the PCC(s) that the clergy person may take sabbatical.
- The arrangement of parish cover during the time away, especially regarding the supervision of any curate in training. This will involve consultation with the Rural/Area/City Dean, and possibly the Director of IME Phase 2. However, it is ultimately the responsibility of the person taking the sabbatical to ensure that proper cover is in place;

- Detailed planning of the sabbatical including the drawing up of a schedule, itinerary and budget;
- Applications towards grant-making bodies to help cover the costs (where applicable);
- Final approval. This involves completing the Proposal Form and returning to the (DMM). Once the proposal has been approved, this will release a grant from the Diocese towards the cost. Since some costs may need to be paid in advance, it is recommended that the Proposal Form is submitted at least three months prior to the beginning of the sabbatical.

Once the sabbatical is complete, the clergy person will be expected to report back to the DMM and the Suffragan Bishop (see below).

4. Finance

Sabbaticals can be expensive, especially when extensive travel is involved, and so financial planning is important.

Funds can be found from, for example, Ecclesiastical Insurance Group bursaries, trust fund grants, and your own resources. However, where the budgeted costs are significantly more than the usual amount (around £2000) assurance will need to be provided that the clergy person is not in danger of getting into financial difficulties.

The Diocese will normally make a grant towards a sabbatical of up to £500 or half the budgeted cost, whichever is less, subject to an upper ceiling for such grants each year of £5,000. The remaining cost (less any other grants) should normally be covered by the individual and the Mission Community/PCC. However, a Mission Community would not normally be asked to contribute more than £500, and a single PCC not more than £250.

5. Getting the Most from a Sabbatical

Because part of the purpose of a sabbatical is to live for a while in a different rhythm, it is important to take the three months as a block. For exceptional reasons a sabbatical plan that involves taking two shorter instalments may be approved, provided that they are not more than a few months apart. It is highly unlikely that a plan involving three or more instalments will be approved.

It is much easier to keep clear of parish entanglements if part or all of the time is physically away from the parish, but this is not always possible or desirable. Commitments to family must take a high priority, and there is no objection in principle to a sabbatical being based largely at home, although careful thought must be given as to how the “absence” from the parish is maintained.

Leaving and re-entering regular ministry must be considered carefully. This is especially the case with regard to “clearing the desk” before the sabbatical and potentially returning to a “backlog” of demands. It is good to allow a few clear days at either end of the sabbatical to make time and space for this, and to reconnect with colleagues. It is also wise to think in advance about how it will feel to let go of all the normal ministerial duties, especially when it is borne in mind how much a clergy person’s identity can be bound up with the role.

6. Elements of a Sabbatical

Sabbaticals vary greatly and each clergy person's time away will be unique. The church should not lose sight of its roots of 'sabbatical' in rest and renewal. Thus, it is crucial not to fill up three months with an endless succession of activities, no matter how worthy and worthwhile they may seem. Nevertheless, a sabbatical is part of Continuing Ministerial Development, and it is expected that the time away will enable clergy to grow and develop personally and professionally. Thus, it is expected that a sabbatical will incorporate three elements.

Rest and Refreshment

A sabbatical is not an opportunity for an extended vacation! Nonetheless the biblical pattern of Sabbath does include rest as a vital part of its very nature. It is, therefore, appropriate and necessary that the three month includes some time of physical rest and refreshment. This may involve devoting time to – or maybe taking up for the first time – a relaxing hobby or activity such as painting, gardening, cookery, sailing or playing a musical instrument. It is particularly wise to begin with a few days to “recover” from the demands of ministry and to adjust to a change of pace.

While annual leave should be kept distinct from the sabbatical, in some instances – especially when foreign travel is involved – it would be foolish not to combine it with a holiday. In such a case, the holiday component should ideally come at the beginning or end of the sabbatical so that the subsequent “project” is not interrupted. When the sabbatical does incorporate a holiday element, this should be discussed with the DMM early in the planning process. The diocesan grant does not normally cover any specific holiday costs.

Broadening or Deepening

This is the “project” element. It involves personal, professional and ministerial development, and will generally take the greatest part of the three months. While it won't necessarily involve formal studying, it will involve some element of learning. This may take one of two forms – or occasionally both.

The project may involve some “broadening” of the clergy person's experiences and horizons. This would be the case particularly when the sabbatical involves learning about something which is completely new for that individual. An example would be visiting a church in a different context, culture or country.

Alternatively the project may focus more on “deepening”. This would be the case when the clergy person already has an interest in a particular subject area and would like to devote time and energy to exploring it further. One example would be studying a theological topic in more detail than is possible in daily ministry. Another would be improving a particular ministerial skill or expertise.

Whatever project is chosen, it should be designed to widen horizons or deepen thinking, rather than simply revisiting familiar territory. While most clergy have some idea of what they want to do with this time, the DMM can help to clarify the precise nature of the project.

It should be noted that a sabbatical should not be used solely for completing dissertations for higher degrees. While some time may be given to “writing up”, the purpose of a sabbatical is wider than this.

Getting Back In Touch with God

Clergy should set aside some time during the sabbatical for nurturing their own relationship with God. For some clergy this will involve going on a “Retreat”, but there are other ways of doing this including time spent at Christian festivals, on pilgrimages or living in community.

This is often a good way to complete the three months away as it gives time to “process” the experiences of the sabbatical in a Godly and reflective way before re-entering regular life.

While the DMM can help with this element of the time away, clergy are also encouraged to discuss this element with their spiritual director, if they have one.

7. The Sabbatical Report

There are two views regarding sabbatical reports. On the one hand, a sabbatical is time away from work and clergy should not be burdened with having to produce lengthy written documents. On the other, since the Diocese and PCC are contributing financially, it is reasonable to expect some kind of “outcome”.

In practice the only requirement is that clergy bring back *something* from their time away. Ideally this should be something that would be of interest and benefit to others in ministry, but this is not always possible. Examples would include: a short written report, a presentation that could be shared at a Deanery Chapter or Synod, or the fruits of a creative project (such as art or poetry). The key point is that whatever is brought back demonstrates what has been gained as a result of the time away.