

Sabbatical Task Force Report

to the



FINAL DRAFT REPORT August 27, 2020

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Executive summary

The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel offers this gem that is well understood and accepted throughout the Episcopal Church ministry. The reality is that not all ordained clergy are eligible to take sabbath or sabbatical. This task force has outlined a path forward to extend the spiritual refreshment of sabbatical to Intentional Interim Clergy.

Walking through the current state of Interim Ministry in the Diocese of California highlights the constancy of years worked without benefit of sabbatical refreshment by, primarily women, clergy who do not have access to sabbatical leave guidelines or policies or financial assistance. We narrowed our terms to only highlight Intentional Interim Clergy yet also note that many ordained clergy in many ministry areas find themselves outside the current scope of “who is or is not eligible” for sabbatical leave.

As an accepted and expected benefit offered to ordained clergy serving in Parish Ministry positions of Rector and/or Associate/Assistant, the sabbatical leave is often negotiated at the outset of a new contract. With the unique contract of the Intentional Interim Clergy this benefit has been overlooked and thus denied to clergy who contract on shorter terms with multiple parishes over many years, thus the need to include the diocese and transition offices in establishing a level field for sabbatical leave policies.

We recommend passage of the resolution to direct the Executive Council to propose a sabbatical leave policy for all clergy with sabbatical funding for Intentional Interim Clergy.

Current Situation

We have in our Diocese a small number of clergy who specialize in serving congregations in transition, with all the issues and stresses of those times. Clergy whose calling is Intentional Interim or Transition ministry have specialized training; adding qualifications to the challenges in their work, in addition to the maintenance of divine services and pastoral care of the congregation. These Intentional Interims are in a unique position in that they serve parishes in transition, but they also work under contract with the Diocese.

Interim Rector service contracts are usually one to two years in length, which is shorter than the time served by rectors or associate rectors who “earn” a sabbatical leave funded by their parish according to their letters of agreement (usually after four or five years). Yet, interim clergy may serve sequentially for four, five or more years with no prospect of a sabbatical.

The Diocese does not have a robust policy on sabbatical leave for clergy, and no provision for financing sabbaticals for clergy who serve in positions other than rectors, and in some cases, associate rectors of parishes.

Objectives

The objectives of the Sabbatical Task Force were:

- To raise awareness, understanding and appreciation of the purpose and importance of sabbatical leave at all levels;
- To raise awareness, understanding and appreciation of the distinctive role of intentional interim transitional clergy;
- To share findings from various sources; to encourage funding of sabbaticals as part of good budgeting practices; and to recommend a practice and policy for the Diocese of California.

Definitions

Intentional Interim Clergy are those ordained priests whose calling is to serve parishes in transition. We distinguish Intentional Interim Clergy from those who serve or aspire to serve in long-term positions, e.g. as rectors, associate rectors, vicars or priests-in-charge, even though the latter may have the training and certification for interim ministry, and may be occasionally assigned to serve in an interim position. [See Appendix L for a list of such clergy in the Diocese of California.]

Methodology

The Sabbatical Task Force was established by the 170th Convention of the Diocese of California to research and prepare a proposal for a paid sabbatical leave policy for clergy who serve as associates, interim rectors, interim vicars, or priests-in-charge.

The Task Force began work in January 2020, with a combination of Internet research along with interviews with a range of clergy, staff and lay persons across a number of our Episcopal Church dioceses and other North American denominations.

Relevant information such as examples of policies with standards, eligibility requirements and financing for sabbatical leaves; language for letters of agreement between paid

clergy and their employers; and a calculation of expected annual expense based on clergy compensation requirements in our diocese are included in the documents appended to this report.

Rationale, Purpose, and Importance of Sabbatical

Sabbatical leave is an intentionally planned time of refreshment and renewal in a season of ministry. It is considered so significant, even fundamental, to a model of ministerial wellness that several dioceses around the Episcopal Church have official sabbatical leave policies, including some policies that are canonically mandated. In the Diocese of California, we incorporate sabbatical language into Letter of Agreement (LOA) templates but do not have an official diocesan policy. The language of LOAs can vary, but generally congregations are encouraged regularly to set aside funding to pay for substitute ordained leadership while their priest is away, and the threshold for taking a sabbatical can be anywhere from three to five years into a season of ministry. Congregations are also often invited intentionally to explore and enter into their own practices of spiritual renewal during their priest's sabbatical. This parallel, collective effort recognizes that a sabbatical impacts the health of the whole congregation, not simply an individual leader, inviting all to take seriously the call to rest as well as to work. The spacing of sabbaticals over several years can also invite congregations as well as individual clergy to see their ministry together as an unfolding of chapters in an ongoing vocational life.

The Task Force was formed through a resolution of the Convention of the Diocese of California to bring greater intentionality to how we support sabbaticals, and to address shortcomings in access to sabbaticals. The default sabbatical pattern in this diocese, as it currently stands, applies only to fulltime rectors. Priests who are not in long term positions and/or are not in full time positions are currently much less likely to be able to access sabbatical, if at all; these include Vicars, Priests in Charge, long-term Supply Clergy, Associate Rectors, and Intentional Interims.

Priests who are trained and called to lead successive congregations through periods of transition, are not institutionally supported in accessing sabbatical. Within this group, Intentional Interim priests, who by design move between positions that usually last fewer than two years, are likely never to have a planned and supported sabbatical in a career of decades. The Task Force therefore views sabbatical leave policy and funding as a matter of health and wholeness in our diocese and beyond, indeed in the collective body of Christ. We also see in this question of sabbatical planning a deeper, structural matter of justice, lifting up questions of how we implicitly value or devalue particular sorts of ministries in our diocese. Indeed, we observe a dovetailing between the work of this Task Force and questions our diocese has engaged in recent Diocesan Conventions regarding increasing equity and transparency in compensation across various axes of difference, particularly gender, race, and sexual orientation, in ordained positions. We also observe that our work arguably raises further questions about how we as a

church can better structurally support deacons, as well as deeper questions about the persistence of clericalism as we seek to support the ministry of all the baptized. Bearing these important questions in mind, we focus the scope of our work on the state of sabbaticals in our diocese and make recommendations about specific ways to structure sabbaticals more consistently and equitably across various forms of ordained ministry.

A Cathedral in Time: Some Notes on Sabbath

Genesis 2.1–3

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

Exodus 20.8–11

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Book of Common Prayer:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers? (Baptismal covenant, p. 304)

Will you be diligent in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and in seeking the knowledge of such things as may make you a stronger and more able minister of Christ? (Ordination of a Priest, p. 532)

Will you do your best to pattern your life [and that of your family *or* household, *or* community] in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to your people? (Ordination of a Deacon, p. 544; Ordination of a Priest, p. 532)

The premise of sabbatical as an aspect of clergy life is rooted in the biblical teaching about the Sabbath, the day of rest which crowned God's creative activity in the Beginning, and which God subsequently commanded God's people to include in their observance of a holy life. In our Baptismal commitment to "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship," people are called to observe a regular day of rest as an expression of faithful commitment to the religion of the

apostles. For Christians, this is not the same as the observance of the Sabbath held by faithful Jewish people, but it may be informed by common theological underpinnings.

In his classic treatise on the subject, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel offers an insight into what distinguishes the Sabbath from other days of the week:

Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.

(Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p. 13)

Sabbath time, or sabbatical, then, is time set apart for concentrated care of the spiritual self, according to the disciplines of one's religious tradition. As many parishioners are wont to observe, clergy are *working* on the day that we call our Sabbath, and as many clergy will attest, "time off" is a chimerical and slippery reality for anyone in ministry.

That said, the Church's support of Sabbath as a spiritual discipline, and sabbatical as a feature of clergy life, must not be confused with mere leisure time or vacation. Clergy and their employers must agree on and find ways to maintain healthy boundaries around work and leisure time, but sabbatical should be considered a third-order of time, something that is neither regular work nor regular paid time off. Heschel helps differentiate between the Greco-Roman view of leisure time as a respite from labor, and the Biblical understanding of Sabbath, which treats the time itself as inherently sacred:

According to [Aristotle], "we need relaxation, because we cannot work continuously. Relaxation, then, is not an end;" it is "for the sake of activity," for the sake of gaining strength for new efforts. To the biblical mind, however, labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work. "Last in creation, first in intention," the Sabbath is "the end of the creation of heaven and earth." (Heschel, p. 14)

For Christians, the concepts of "work" and "rest" may also take their cue from Jesus, who expresses a piety and faithfulness that both honors "rest" and aligns certain kinds of activity ("work") with the obligation to observe the Sabbath commandment.

Famously, though Jesus placed extraordinary demands on his disciples, he routinely encouraged them to take their rest:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. (Mark 6.30–31)

On occasion Jesus retreats to a private place for periods of prayer. Though clergy’s ministry in the Church of the 21st century does not directly resemble the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, the principles of setting aside times of rest and prayer still apply. In faithfulness to our tradition, we should not think of these times as “leisure” times: they serve a different purpose.

Despite the notorious overtones of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism they have inspired, Jesus’ arguments with his fellow religious leaders should be seen as a faithful attempt by all invested parties to understand the law and its application in life. Putting aside readings that are intended to reject Jewish teaching, we can search for life-affirming teachings of Jesus, whom we follow. After one such contentious exchange with some leaders who complain that Jesus is doing things that are forbidden on the Sabbath, Jesus defends himself in faithful terms:

But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”
(John 5.17)

The work that Jesus engages in on the Sabbath is work that is in accord with the life-giving mission of God: healing, teaching, leading worship, feeding people, sharing time in fellowship and religious conversation (including argument!). These can be “works” that strengthen and feed the worker, too.

In these ways, we begin to see that a simplistic differentiation between “work” and “rest” may not apply to those who wish to honor the Sabbath and follow Jesus, and that clergy work in any event escapes customary understandings of “work” and “rest.” Hence sabbatical: the “third order” of time spent on sabbatical allows us to honor the commandment while recognizing the peculiar nature of clergy work, which does not neatly divide into periods of work and leisure; and which denies the cleric the same investment in the Sabbath day that is afforded their parishioners.

Sabbatical is not vacation, it is time spent in concentrated practice of Christian religious life, for the sake of the cleric’s own spiritual well-being. It may have the benefit of bringing them back to work “renewed” and “refreshed,” but we should resist the temptation to think of sabbatical as being the price one pays for increased productivity in ministry (cf. Heschel above).

Sabbatical is part of the clergy-person's commitment to the vows made both in Baptism and at ordination (cited above), and which are only partly fulfilled in the carrying out of their pastoral ministry. It is an essential feature of the pattern of clergy life: time set apart for prayer, study, meditation, fellowship, service, and enhancement of the cleric's own life of personal devotion to Jesus, independent of any act of leadership, responsibility, or pastoral ministry.

It should also be noted that the Church does not regard sabbatical as a privilege reserved for clergy; the pattern of life that includes sabbatical or Sabbath time is a pattern that all people are called to adopt. The world we live in prioritizes work, and many people do not enjoy the degree of freedom to order their lives in such a way as to include regular observance of Sabbath or sabbatical. By creating provisions for clergy sabbatical (and especially for those who serve in interim or associate positions), the Diocese models for the Church and the world that Sabbath time is a commitment that we value as highly as we value other forms of compensation. As the Diocese and individual congregations and institutions of the Diocese develop active plans to support clergy in fulfilling their commitment to sabbatical, we do so with an understanding that this is our institutional response to the particular needs of clergy, and that the Church as a whole is continuously engaged in the work of proclaiming and inviting people into the creative work of realizing God's promises "on earth as it is in heaven," so that the whole world may be free to faithfully observe life-giving sabbatical time.

Findings and Recommendations

Based on our research in conversation with a range of clergy, staff and lay persons across a number of our Episcopal Church dioceses and other North American denominations,

The Task Force finds that:

1. There are a few existing models for paid sabbatical leave policy for clergy, with guidance on how and when such sabbaticals shall vest, the length thereof, and the funding source or sources to be utilized;
2. Clergy whose calling is Intentional Interim or Transition ministry have special training, qualifications and challenges in their work, in addition to the maintenance of divine services and pastoral care of the congregation; and
3. Intentional Interim clergy are in a unique position in that they serve parishes in transition, but they work under contract with and may be appointed by the Diocese^[i]*; and
4. All parishes are or will be in transition at some point in their life cycle, and they all need interim clergy; and

5. Interim Rector service contracts are usually one to two years in length, which is shorter than the time served by rectors or associate rectors who “earn” a sabbatical leave funded by their parish according to their letters of agreement (usually after four or five years); and

6. The Executive Council, serving as the board of directors of the diocesan corporation, exercising the fiduciary responsibilities and powers of such a board^[ii], in consultation with the Department of Finance and the treasurer, has the ability to create a Trust Fund^[iii];

Therefore, the Sabbatical Task Force recommends the adoption of the following resolution:

Sabbatical Leave Policy

Resolved, That the 171st Convention of the Diocese of California directs the Executive Council of the Diocese to prepare and propose to the 172nd Convention a Sabbatical Leave Policy using the findings contained in the Report of the Sabbatical Task Force and in consultation with members of the Sabbatical Task Force;

Resolved, That the proposed Sabbatical Leave Policy shall establish standards and procedures for administering and financing sabbaticals for all paid clergy employed by the Diocese, its congregations and constituent organizations, including sabbatical compensation for Intentional Interim Clergy and model language for letters of agreement between paid clergy and their employers;

Resolved, That the Executive Council, acting as the Board of Directors of the Diocese and with the concurrence of the Bishop, Chancellor and Chief Financial Officer, shall establish a Sabbatical Fund or other suitable financial accounting instrument to receive funds donated or allocated for the purpose of compensating Intentional Interim Clergy;

Resolved, That the proposed Sabbatical Leave Policy shall establish eligibility requirements for compensation from the fund established for Intentional Interim Clergy and shall ensure that the fund is financed and maintained in a sound and prudent manner; and

Resolved, That the Committee on Program and Budget and the Executive Council shall add a line item to the budget for 2021 allocating a reasonable amount for contribution to the fund established for the compensation of Intentional Interim Clergy.

References.

Certified Resolution establishing this Sabbatical Task

Force <https://diocal.org/sites/default/files/media/PDF%20Docs/Certified-Resolutions-2019.pdf>

[i] **Canons Sec. 11.25. Vacancies.*

[ii] Powers of a corporation in California

[https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=CORP&division=2.&title=1.&part=4.&chapter=1.&article=4.](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=CORP&division=2.&title=1.&part=4.&chapter=1.&article=4)

[iii] *Constitution. Article XIV. Trust Funds.*

https://diocal.org/sites/default/files/media/PDF%20Docs/2018_DioCal_Constitution_Canons.pdf

Acknowledgements

The Task Force gratefully acknowledges all the people who contributed to this work, especially in this year of global pandemic.

Our local advisors were an integral part of the team: thank you Mary Jane and Cameron.

Warren Wong advised us strategically.

Dave Frangquist was especially generous with sage advice, and especially with language.

Everyone we contacted, within and outside our diocese, gave freely of their time and wisdom, and they all expressed enthusiasm and support for this initiative.

Thank you.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A. DioCal Example Letter of Agreement between Parish and Rector

APPENDIX C. Diocese of Chicago Guidelines for Clerical Sabbatical Leave

APPENDIX D. Table and findings for Episcopal Dioceses and others in the U.S. and Canada with Sabbatical Leave policies posted online.

APPENDIX E. Estimated Expense for Sabbatical Leave in Diocal

APPENDIX L. List of Diocal Clergy from the Office of Transition Ministry. July 2020.

APPENDIX M. Diocese of Massachusetts Clergy Sabbatical Program

APPENDIX T. Diocese of Texas Sabbatical Policy and Funding

APPENDIX U. The United Church of Canada. Intentional Interim Ministry Policy, Procedures and Resources

APPEDIX V. Diocese of Vermont