SABBATICAL PROPOSAL

Rev. Dr. Erin S. Cox-Holmes

Executive Presbyter / Transitional Stated Clerk

February 4, 2026

PURPOSE AND VOCATIONAL CONTEXT

I am requesting approval for a sabbatical in 2026 after more than five decades of vocational commitment to the church and over 35 years in mid-council leadership. I was ordained as a teaching elder in 1988 and have served continuously in pastoral and presbytery leadership since 1991.

My husband, the Rev. Kent Holmes, has likewise spent 62 years in church service as a musician, educator, and pastor. Together, our lives have been shaped by long-term vocational responsibility, cumulative pastoral care, and the shared weight of leadership through seasons of deep personal and institutional challenge.

This sabbatical is requested not as a retreat from responsibility, but as a planned season of renewal intended to sustain faithful leadership into the years ahead.

RATIONALE FOR SABBATICAL AT THIS TIME

In recent years, vocational demands have been intensified by:

- Family health challenges
- The cumulative impact of crisis leadership (including the COVID period)
- Presbytery transitions requiring sustained adaptive leadership

While regular vacation and study leave have been essential and appreciated, they are not sufficient to provide sustained space for renewal to offset the long-term effects of decades of ministry.

This sabbatical is designed to provide a deeper form of renewal—one that supports emotional resilience, spiritual vitality, and vocational sustainability for the remainder of my active ministry.

SABBATICAL THEME AND INTENT

Theme: Lingering in Landscapes, Meandering through Music, Pondering Poetry, Wrangling Words

The central intention of this alliterative adventure is to create extended, uninterrupted time for restoration through:

- Engagement with natural landscapes
- Sustained immersion in music and the arts
- Practices of play, joy, and attentiveness
- Renewal of relational and spiritual capacity
- Nurturing the soul of the writer

Research on trauma and resilience (e.g., Rick Hanson's *Hardwiring Happiness*) underscores the importance of sustained positive experience in rewiring stress-impacted nervous systems. This sabbatical is structured with that wisdom in mind.

STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULE

The sabbatical will be taken in three discrete segments, allowing for:

- Seasonal considerations to avoid travel in the summer months
- Ongoing participation in key denominational gatherings
- Stewardship of personal and professional responsibilities

Total Sabbatical Time: 14 weeks (Integrated with accrued vacation and study leave per policy)

- Part 1: April 19 – May 9 (3 weeks) Florida — Family-funded travel focused on adventure, play, and relational renewal.
- Part 2: July 5 – August 17 (7 weeks) - Primarily at home, with intentional time away from daily administrative responsibilities. Includes local engagement with the home garden plus public gardens, parks, and music. The sabbatical adventure continues with travel to the British Isles to revisit a honeymoon journey.
- Part 3: October 17 – November 15 (4 weeks) California — Time in formative landscapes of early life, fostering reflection, integration, and closure. This segmented approach allows for both depth of renewal and continuity of leadership commitments.

FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Personal funds will cover portions of travel and living expenses. Any presbytery support would be applied specifically to sabbatical-related travel consistent with the stated theme.

Estimated costs for the international portion (if undertaken): approximately $26,000. Should funding not be available, travel plans will be adjusted accordingly.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES FOR THE PRESBYTERY

Upon return, I anticipate:

- Renewed emotional and spiritual resilience
- Increased capacity for relational leadership
- Greater attentiveness and presence in pastoral and administrative responsibilities
- Sustained vocational joy and effectiveness
- A series of written reflections for publication in presbytery communication channels, as well as other platforms.

This sabbatical represents an investment in long-term leadership health, benefiting not only the individual leader but the wider presbytery and its congregations.

CLOSING REFLECTION

At its heart, this sabbatical is about deepening practices to dwell in joy, beauty, and gratitude—capacities essential for leaders entrusted with the care of others. As a poem by ee cummings puts it, it is a season in which "the ears of my ears" and "the eyes of my eyes" may be opened again.

A STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

from Erin's Coaching & Equipping Team Sabbatical Proposal from Rev. Erin Cox Holmes

"Lingering in Landscapes, Meandering through Music, Pondering Poetry, Wrangling Words."

Rev. Betty Angelini (Chair), Rev. Alex Becker, Rev. Claire George Drumheller,

Rev. Dan Snyder, Rev. Allison Beaulieu, Ruling Elder Elli Grove

Sabbatical Proposal from Rev. Erin Box-Holmes "Lingering in Landscapes, Meandering through Music."

Executive Presbyter and Acting Stated Clerk Erin Cox-Holmes has requested a sabbatical in 2026 for the purpose of rest and renewal. This sabbatical includes the following schedule:

- Part 1: April 19 - May 9 – Florida (3 Weeks)
- Part2: July 5 - August 17 – Mostly home, British Isles (7 Weeks)
- Part3: October 17 - November 15 – California (4 Weeks)

Total Time: 14 Weeks

Available time with 3 months' sabbatical, 1 month vacation, 2 weeks study leave: 18 Weeks. According to the Lilly Foundation, a sabbatical is a three-month time for rest and renewal that helps church leaders "spiritually reconnect with the joy of ministry." Sabbaticals are often taken after seven years of ministry. While sabbaticals often are structured as one 12-week period, they may be broken into smaller sections when appropriate. Sabbaticals for Pastors, Executive Presbyters, and Stated Clerks are becoming more commonly practiced. The Donegal Presbytery last approved a Sabbatical to another employee of the Presbytery in 2023.

Over the past 16 years, Erin has done incredible work to enhance our ministry together, support churches and pastors in need, and fulfill her God-given calling in our midst. She works tirelessly and constantly seeks to serve others. She does work that is emotionally and spiritually difficult, which necessitates periods of rest. Nevertheless, in 16 years, she has not been able to take a sabbatical, which ordinarily would be offered every 7th year. Erin requested the support of her coaching and equipping team in seeking a sabbatical last year, but was unable to pursue that proposal due to extenuating circumstances. Her coaching and equipping team believes that in 2026, it is essential for the Presbytery to uphold the biblical commandment to sabbath rest (Exodus 20) and sabbatical (Leviticus 25) by offering Erin this opportunity.

In order for this sabbatical to meet the goal of providing space and recovery, opportunities for space and recovery are needed! While many people bring an expectation that sabbaticals will always focus on

courses of learning or professional development, this is not always the case. According to Donegal policy, sabbaticals may include learning, adventures, and/or Sabbath rest. It is not required to include all categories.

This sabbatical proposal includes renewal time away, space in the home garden without work interruptions, learning engagement with music, art, and poetry, and travel abroad for spiritual and personal renewal. The planned outcome is a series of written reflection pieces to deepen Erin's gifts as a writer. These aims will feed Erin's soul and allow her to return to the work of the presbytery refreshed and restored. As a colleague and as a fellow human being, this adventure is our hope for her.

The sabbatical that Erin has proposed is also one that makes special considerations for the needs of the Presbytery in 2026. It is broken up into multiple sections that enable her to engage in critical gatherings of Mid-Council Leaders and to return to work at regular intervals to address any challenges or questions that have arisen during her time away. This greatly reduces the burden on staff and other Presbytery leaders. It is noteworthy that two of the three periods for which Erin will be away on sabbatical are not by themselves significantly longer than ordinary vacation leave. In addition, she has already done great work to determine how various needs will be met while she is away, which only strengthens the functioning of the staff and leadership when she returns.

Financial Proposal for Erin Cox Holmes Sabbatical: Approved 1/12/2026 by the Coaching/Equipping Team

Sabbatical Activity Support: $15,000

- Funding from Camp Sale Reserves
- Payable through reimbursement of receipts

Support for Associate Stated Clerk: $500

- Sarah Kneier will primarily consult with the Synod's Acting Stated Clerk Forrest Claassen, who will provide guidance/assistance per his Synod responsibilities; therefore, there will not be a charge
- If action is required to manage judicial process for remedial or disciplinary actions, outside consultants will be utilized and will provide an invoice on an hourly basis at approximately $75/hr. x 4 hrs.
- Funding from Per Capita Reserves

Support for Acting Head of Staff

- Erin and Betty are continuing the discussion regarding a $5,000 fund to implement support for the staff as needed. Relational guidance is the goal. Access by phone or Zoom is acceptable.
- Funding from Camp Sale Reserves

Celebrations $1,000 x 2: $ 2,000

- Onset
- Conclusion
- Funding from Camp Sale Reserves

Read/Study for LT/Admin/COM: $500

- Funding from Camp Sale Reserves

Coverage of Com: $ 0

- Erin will work with Alex Becker to arrange for coverage from within the COM

Total: $23,000

- $22,500 from Camp Sales Reserves
- $500 from Per Capita Reserves