

# *Sabbath*

A time to renew the call  
and make a difference



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and make a difference

A collection of essays

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# Introduction

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Developing a theology of sabbath is a key to reframing our understanding of renewal for spiritual leaders. Establishing a rhythm of sabbath and ministry serves as a pendulum model—an ebb and flow that allows a person to serve the church and the world and to take time for renewal.

In his book *Sabbath Time*, Tilden Edwards says, “Sabbath time. . . can provide us with an incubator for nourishing our being in the image of God in ways that overflow into appropriate care for the world. . . . It is a rhythm that God provides to human life for its care, cleansing and opening to grace.”

It is important for leaders in ministry to be open to change: through six days we try to bring change to the world and on the seventh we take time to rest and change ourselves, becoming open and in awe of God’s grace.

This booklet is an invitation to reflect on God’s creation and its goodness. God rested on the seventh day and saw that it was good. To see the hallowedness of our labor we need to take time to experience sabbath and recognize the grace-filled work of God’s creation.

Experiencing sabbath can happen through a variety of expressions—from solitude and meditation to community and service. It includes a time of refreshment for the soul as well as for the body. It is a time to celebrate the hallowing of God’s creation.

Sabbath time can be observed more than once a week, once a year, or once every four years as in a “sabbatical.” Sabbath time can become moments in each day intentionally set aside to be open to recognizing God’s grace and the holiness of God’s creation.

We hope you will find this resource helpful as you seek to be renewed and refreshed in your call to ministry.

— Joaquín García  
Assistant General Secretary  
Section of Deacons and Diaconal  
Ministries  
Division of Ordained Ministry





*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;...*

*— Exodus 20:8-10*



# *Biblical Reflections on Sabbath*

*by Simon B. Parker*

According to the first chapter of Genesis, God took pleasure in the work of Creation. One of the refrains of that chapter is “And God saw that it [the Creation] was good.” After the heavens and the earth and everything in them were finished, the text continues, “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it.” We are surprised to learn that it is not those first six days of activity and accomplishment that God blessed, but the seventh day, free of activity and accomplishment. God blesses not the work of Creation, but freedom from that work!

To those of us who have internalized the Protestant work ethic, this blessing of freedom from work seems rather shocking, if not immoral. We celebrate effort, not inactivity; accomplishments, not times that seem nonproductive.

## **God’s Original Day of Rest**

Although it is sometimes difficult to accept freedom from work as a blessing, God institutes and memorializes this freedom from work as the sabbath. God’s original day of rest provides a model for the sabbath. The first version of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11) spells this out: “Remember the sabbath. . .because for six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them, and rested on the seventh day. That is why Yahweh blessed the sabbath day and set it apart as sacred.” The community is to work for six days and to desist on the seventh, because that is what God did. The essential feature of the sabbath is the cessation of the work done the rest of the week.

Those of us who see ourselves as doing God’s work are in special danger of ignoring the blessing of the sabbath. Surely God blesses every day on which we do the work of ministry, we assure ourselves. Yet God, who enjoyed the work of Creation and was completely satisfied with the results, found that stopping work was a blessed occasion to be set aside as sacred. Should not we then, who enjoy our work though we are never completely satisfied with the results, find value and pleasure in stopping that work on a regular basis? Exodus 31:17 takes us a step further: “On the seventh day God ceased [working] and was refreshed.” God was refreshed! If God needed to be refreshed, don’t we?

The element that distinguishes the sabbath from its modern secular

equivalent, the weekend, is that according to the Ten Commandments the seventh day is to be a cessation of work for Yahweh. The sabbath is not a purely natural or human institution, not a purely physical or psychological experience, but a time for thanksgiving and celebration of God-given life and freedom. It is not just a *release from* our regular activity, but also a *release for* experiencing divine activity. It is a time to open ourselves to our Creator and Redeemer: to receive anew the peace that passes understanding, the strength and wisdom needed for our work in the following week, the grace sufficient for all that may try or test us.

### **The Challenge of Sabbath**

For those of us engaged in representative ministry, this still leaves us with a problem. For such ministers, Sunday is usually the peak of the week's work, the central act of ministry to the entire community. For many, Sunday is the last day to think of as a sabbath rest. We need to remind ourselves again of the principle Jesus cited: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). We were not created to meet the needs of the sabbath; it was created to meet our needs. But if it was instituted for our benefit, we do not have to be legalistic about the day of its observance. If the sabbath is to serve our need, we may observe it equally well on a Tuesday or a Friday. Or we may plan our sabbath rest on a different schedule: a longer, less frequent retreat. If those of us whose work is ministry and whose ministry is especially full on Sunday are to enjoy as a gift from God a day in which we cease our normal work, we *must* select another time.

The central significance of the biblical sabbath for us, then, is not precisely when we desist from work, nor what we may or may not do when we observe the sabbath. Rather, the central significance is regularly setting aside our regular work — and relieving those around us of their work — in gratitude to God for relief from labor. The sabbath is a gift to be received with joy. It is a time for us to be free of our normal work, so that we can rest in God. It is a provision to prevent burnout. It is a means of renewal, for returning to work with fresh energy and vision. It is a means of preserving joy in the life of work God has given us.


### **Questions for Reflection**

- How would you define sabbath? What are its essential features?
- Traditionally Christians have viewed Sunday as the sabbath. Can you identify with this tradition? In what ways is it difficult for you?

- In what ways do you currently observe the sabbath, either on Sunday or on other days of the week?

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*If you are wise therefore you will  
show yourself a reservoir and not  
a canal. For a canal pours out as fast as it  
takes in; but a reservoir waits till it is full  
before it overflows, and so communicates its  
surplus. . . . Be filled yourself; then, but  
discretely, mind, pour out thy fulness.*

*— Bernard of Clairvaux, Song of Songs*



# Spiritual Dimension of Sabbath

by Marjorie J. Thompson

Perhaps Bernard of Clairvaux's words help remind us of how indispensable sabbath time is to the vitality and fruitfulness of our ministries. Most of us know how much we need more time with the qualities of sabbath: time just to be; to absorb the beauties and deeper meanings of life; to receive gifts of grace; to nurture the most central and intimate relationship of all — our relationship with God. We know we need it but aren't sure how to get it.

The following questions and exercises are intended to help you choose the most fitting ways to attend to sabbath time in your own particular life and ministry. The basic process is to examine your spiritual journey: 1. to claim your basic spiritual needs; 2. to assess your current response to those needs; and 3. to explore further possibilities for commitment and growth.

## What Are Your Spiritual Needs?

Set aside a little time each day for one week to ask yourself this question. If you are "a morning person," do it early in the day; if you are "a night owl," reflect before you go to sleep. I suggest a week because you might recognize a need over time that would not occur to you right away. Ask yourself questions like these:

*What do I need in my personal relationship with God?* As you respond to this question, pay attention to feelings about yourself, your work, your relationships, and what you see going on around you in church, community, and world.

*What do I need spiritually in order to engage my ministry in a sustained way?* As you respond to this question, be attentive to how you experience your ministry now. Does it seem heavy, burdensome, or boring? exciting, stimulating, or energizing? Do you find yourself full of surprise, joy, or gratitude? guilt, anger, or depression?

Make a list of the spiritual needs you can identify in your life now. Name them as clearly as you can. Talk with one or two trusted friends in faith about how they perceive their spiritual needs. This might help you see a need you would have otherwise missed.

## How Do You Care For These Needs?

Once you have identified your basic spiritual needs, look carefully at

how you do or do not care for these needs. The purpose of this step is not to make you feel guilty about the ways you do not care for your spiritual needs! It is simply to observe realistically what you already do or where there are gaps that need attention and intention.

Either take a second week to reflect on these questions, or follow immediately with this step after identifying particular needs each day in the first step. Ask yourself questions like the following:

*What are some of the ways I have tried to take care of this spiritual need in the past?* How helpful or satisfying have my ways of caring for this need been? Do I need to continue my efforts to be faithful to the ways I have chosen, or do I need to explore other ways?

*What spiritual needs have I not found an adequate or satisfying way to care for in the past?* Where do I feel emptiness or frustration? Where do I experience avoidance or anxiety? Why? (You might look at possible fear of real encounter with God, fear of rejection, judgment, or failure, or unrealistic expectations of perfection.)

Write down everything you can think of in response to these questions. This is a process of self-examination and assessment. Again, talk with a few faithful friends about how they care for their spiritual needs. You might be surprised to discover that you are opening yourself to the gracious sustenance of God in more ways than you realized. You might also get some good ideas!

### **What New Avenues of Spirituality Do You Want To Explore?**

Perhaps you have been wanting for some time to explore a new spiritual practice. Take some time (a third week, or a third step right after the first two) to ponder what you really yearn to explore in your life spiritually. Where does God seem to be drawing you? Here are some questions to help you discern new directions:

*What is my natural path of spiritual nurture?* If you are a person who needs plenty of solitude and reflection time in order to feel alive and whole, give yourself permission to respond to this need (prayer, meditation on scripture, contemplative walks in nature). If you gain your sense of energy and well-being through interaction, be sure to choose some spiritual disciplines that place you in community (corporate worship, small groups, a spiritual guidance relationship).

*What do I need for balance in my life right now?* If you are an active or extraverted type of person, you may be hungering for more inward practice (silence, solitude, or a more contemplative form of prayer). As an introvert, you may need a spiritual practice that leads you out of yourself more (a small group, a practice of hospitality or service).

*What do I do to excess?* We all have areas of compulsion where we feel driven by needs or desires that are destructive of our spiritual health and peace. What we do too much of reveals a place of bondage in our life and invites a practice of letting go (abstaining). It might be the way you relate to food, drink, work, sex, possessions, relationships, or time. Reflect on whether God may be calling you to release some habit and to simplify your life.

*What might be a completely new pathway to me?* Perhaps you have never thought of certain ways of nurturing your spiritual life, or have glimpsed them only from afar. Some practices may have seemed too frivolous or peripheral to consider. How about gardening, for example, or creating music, art, or poetry? What about using your body's natural movements or physical postures to express your heart before God? Have you ever tried journaling your dreams? Let your imagination go and get creative about possibilities for new directions to explore!

You may find just one or two of these questions enough to consider. Pay attention to what you feel deeply drawn to and why. Do you keep coming back to an idea, or feel impelled toward greater balance in your life? If so, perhaps the Spirit is prompting you in a particular direction.

Pray about it; chew it over for several days; reflect on it with your friends in faith or your spiritual guide. Make a choice about one or two new directions you can realistically commit to. Ask your pastor, spiritual guide, prayer partner, or other friend in faith to pray for you and help keep you accountable in love. Anticipate your new growth with joy!

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*The sabbath rest is given so that  
people might be able to stop and  
remember God, to recall that source of our life  
which, in the everyday, workaday world we  
so easily forget.*

*— William H. Willimon, With Glad and Generous Hearts*



# Ways to Observe the Sabbath

*Beth A. Richardson and Kathryn L. Mitchem*

Where do we find places and times that embody sabbath for us? For a church professional in a local church, Sundays are not sabbath times; they are work. We must seek renewal at other times and in other places.

There is no one way to find sabbath—that special quality of time which brings us in touch with the holy, that renews and sustains us in our ministries. Some of us find it as we walk in the woods. Some of us find it through prayer in a quiet place. Some of us find it in making soup for hungry people or mowing the lawn or working in the garden. Sabbath occurs both in community and individually, in settings of worship as well as settings of solitude. In whatever place we find sabbath, we find God and our true self.

## **Individual Discipline**

We need time apart to join our hearts with God, to listen to our deepest yearnings and the answers of the Spirit. We need times of solitude and silence, times away from the telephone and television. We need space where we can hear the stillness, feel the feelings, and think the thoughts which are drowned out by the noisy chatter in our lives.

A sabbath can be a few minutes daily to pray and breathe, to read and listen. Set aside some time each morning or evening when you can “close the wings of the intellect and open the door of the heart,” when you can “rendezvous with God” (Catherine de Heuck Douherty, *Poustinia*).

Make a place in your home or office where you can create a worship center of a candle, a cross, a shell, or whatever symbols are meaningful to you. Keep your journal, your Bible, and your devotional reading in that place.

When you are sitting in that place, devote your attention entirely to resting in God. Turn off the phone or let the answering machine pick up your calls. Ask your children to let you have a time out.

Or, if you feel most connected to God when you are physically active, set aside a regular time for your sabbath activity—running or bicycling, working in the garden, mowing the lawn, or volunteering for a service activity.

## **“Sabbath Rest” Retreats**

Another way of observing the sabbath is to take “a day apart” each month. Some retreat centers offer monthly “Sabbath Rest” retreats especially for church professionals. Penuel Ridge Retreat Center in Ashland City, Tennessee, holds these retreats on the fourth Thursday of each month. The day begins at 9:30 a.m. with a gathering of participants. The retreat leader, usually another church professional, leads the group in an opening reading, in a scripture, or in morning prayer. Most of the remainder of the day is spent in individual silent time. Retreatants take walks, sit and read by a lake, engage in prayer, take a nap. They may gather together for lunch for a time of quiet sharing. The day ends at 3:30 p.m. with a short closing.

If you do not have access to an organized Sabbath Rest retreat, you can carve out your own. Monthly sabbaths can take many forms: a meeting with a spiritual director/friend, a morning of bird watching, a weekday retreat, a watercolor painting session.

The most important thing is to make a commitment to set aside the time. Put it on your calendar and guard the time jealously. Setting a regular time each month will help you to get into the habit of observing the sabbath.

## **Covenant Groups**

Sabbath is a time to rest in the Spirit, to create a sanctuary within. Often, sabbath is a time when we need to be alone with God. But we also experience sabbath in the context of community. The support we receive in community can help us in our personal commitment to participate regularly in sabbath, to take the time even when it feels as though we cannot spare it. That support may come from colleagues, from a spiritual friend, from the witness of faithful pilgrims whose spiritual writings inspire and motivate us. The community reminds us that we are not alone, even in our solitude.

Covenant groups are one way to observe the sabbath in community. Covenant groups meet together regularly — weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc. — for times of prayer, study, contemplation, worship, and sharing. In these settings, persons experience both collective solitude and interaction with others.

One covenant community commits to join together in retreat six times a year. The covenant group provides a setting in which members become a part of each other’s spiritual journey, supporting and holding each other accountable in their faith journeys.

Three of these gatherings are traditional day-long retreats,

combining times of collective worship, study, and sharing with times of individual solitude and silence. The remaining three are contemplative workdays at a retreat center, during which the community does lawn work, carpentry, painting, cleaning, etc. Like the spiritual leader Brother Lawrence, the community finds sabbath, finds God, through the rhythm of work and contemplation. Each retreat includes times for the members of the covenant group to share their faith journeys, their points of challenge or growth, and to celebrate with and support one another.

Another model comes from a covenant group that meets weekly for one and one half hours. Each session begins with reading and reflecting on a psalm. Members of the group share their current joys and struggles, writing prayer concerns in a notebook. The covenant group closes its session with a time of shared silence and prayer.

\* \* \* \*

Listen to the Spirit. How is the Spirit calling you to experience sabbath? Where are the places and times which draw you closer to God? Find what renews and sustains you, and set apart time for that gift of rest, of holy sabbath.

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*What does the Lord require  
of you but to do justice, and  
to love kindness, and to walk humbly with  
your God?*

*—Micah 6:8*



# A Sabbath Time of Service

by Rena M. Yocom

*To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill . . . .*  
—Charles Wesley

Each person has a particular way in which reflection is accomplished. Some of us write our reflections, while others of us are more verbal. Some of us need quiet and solitude, while others find inactivity or total stillness may leave us restless. Yet action without reflection may lead to extreme fatigue. For a creative sabbath idea that combines action and reflection, you might consider a sabbath time of service.

A sabbath time of service is *not* an excuse to “keep on going” and continuing the uphill battle of meetings, paperwork, more meetings, phone calls, planning, and leading. It is an intentional time to renew the covenant to be in service, to tend the need, and to reflect upon the ministry in which one is participating. Begin by reflecting on the following questions:

- When did you first feel called into servant ministry? What was the setting? Were you directly involved with persons? Who were the people?
- When did you last feel that you personally cared for the “least” or the “last” of society?
- If you chose to tend others today, who would they be? Where are they located? Are they across certain barriers or boundaries? Are they the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger in our midst, children, refugees, or hungry?

## Plan a Sabbath Time of Service

First, choose a situation (national or international) where you can learn of other’s needs, and give *personal* time in direct mission. *Do not lead* the group. Remember, Jesus did not only lead the disciples; he also washed their feet.

You might join a mission caravan, or volunteer a set amount of time through a mission project. Take time away from your phone and regular responsibilities. If you choose a local setting, be sure to allow adequate time for reflection.

## **Prepare and Serve**

Prepare by reading and learning about the particular context for ministry. As you serve, converse with people in the community. Listen to their stories. If possible, worship with them.

For centuries, women have conversed as they have shared the common task of caring for others. Sharing thoughts and feelings while completing a task or working side by side lends a certain rhythm to the work and provides a sense of community and solidarity, which can lead to new depths of Christian caring.

Reflect and record, either through journaling or on audio tape, how this ministry follows Christ's own example. What scripture passages come to mind? What music or words to hymns "float" to the surface?

## **A Time for Integration**

To have an experience that you value for its own sake is relatively easy. To have a lasting impact requires you to be disciplined about incorporating the reflection into your ministry.

Plan ahead to give an account of your experience. You may choose to share it informally with a support group or write an official report to your program or personnel committee. Integrate the reflection into your being and into your ministry. Jesus said that he "came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). How do you "pour out" yourself in the form of a servant? (Philippians 2:5-11) Do you allow others to witness to you?

## **A Regular Time for Renewal**

The sabbath is not a singular event but a regular call to renewal. A sabbath time of service should be the same. Do not wait until your energy reserve is gone or until you must attempt to squeeze it onto your calendar. Like a tithe or pledge, begin by committing a portion of your days to renewal through service.

*Rena M. Yocom is executive director of conference mission and ministries for the Louisiana Conference. She is an ordained deacon and has expertise in adult Christian education and experience at every level of the church as a teacher, seminar leader, and curriculum designer.*





# *A Closing Word*

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We hope this collection of essays has given you a few moments to “stop and remember God” (William Willimon); a time to “rest in the Spirit [and] bring [you] in touch with the holy” (Beth Richardson & Kathryn Mitchem); a brief opportunity “to receive gifts of grace” (Marjorie Thompson). Indeed, we hope you have experienced some sabbath time as you have experienced this booklet.

Our lives are filled with conflicting commitments, needs and desires. Our commitment to our call and service to others often feels conflicted with our scheduling time for rest, recreation, and family. Our yearning and need for spiritual growth and renewal are often crowded out by our insatiable desire for the latest and newest technological gadget to do more work.

Jimmy Carr, former head of the Section of Deacons and Diaconal Ministries, says, however, if we do follow God’s call to service to meet the needs of others, we also must take the time for our own spiritual growth and renewal. “Otherwise, what is done [can] become void of real meaning. Without a strong inner self, our spiritual reservoir becomes shallow and our effectiveness as a minister might be compromised.”

We hope you will use this booklet as an ongoing guide as you honor your commitment to sabbath time and renewal and re-commitment.

The sabbath is a gift from God to be received with joy and thanksgiving. Remember the sabbath, be thankful, and keep it holy.

—Sharon G. Rubey  
Director of Conference Relations  
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Ministries  
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