



Sabbath Keeping

entering God's promised rest

Some Reflections on Sabbath

by Steve Doughty

For this report I will focus briefly on the process and the intent of the Work Group, and then I will offer a few comments that I hope may encourage ongoing reflections and responses, particularly on the need for recovering the gift of sabbath and on the nature of sabbath itself as we are growing to understand it.

Process and Intent of the Work Group

In 1998 the Congregational Ministries Division Committee of the General Assembly Council authorized the establishment of a Work Group to:

- study the biblical mandate for sabbath keeping and its theological significance,
- explore the historical observance of sabbath and contemporary sabbath practice,
- understand the connection between sabbath keeping and social justice, and
- discern why and how sabbath keeping can become a way of life for Christians today.

The Work Group is comprised of seven members from the church at large and two GA staff persons. We are lay, clergy, Native American, Afro-American, Latino, Euro-American, and we are having fun. We have held two extended meetings. We plan two more.

We have drawn on our personal experiences and traditions of sabbath, and from contemporary and foundational writings on the nature of sabbath. We have listened to theological and reflective presentations from a variety of persons. We also recently made use of the Presbyterian Panel. We did this partly as a means of increasing awareness of sabbath in our community of faith. We did it also in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the environment in which we are working.

**The following remarks were made to the approximately 100 people who attended the Spiritual Formation Dinner held at the General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas, on June 24, 1999. Steve is a member of the Work Group on Sabbath Keeping, the Executive Presbyter for the Presbytery of Lake Michigan, and author of the book Discovering Community. He began his presentation by observing that only the Presbyterians would establish a work group on sabbath keeping! – Ed.*

about this issue

This special issue of Hungryhearts news welcomes you into the ongoing process of study, reflection and discernment on a topic that is theologically profound, personally transformative, and radically counter-cultural. That topic is sabbath keeping.

Sabbath keeping allows us to align our lives with the divine rhythm of work and rest which God has woven into the fabric of the universe. Yet sabbath keeping has almost disappeared from American life and the Presbyterian Church.

We are not a culture or church that values rest in general nor makes time and space for resting in God. This has dire social and economic, as well as spiritual, consequences.

There is, however, a renewed interest in the Fourth Commandment throughout the church. While there is no desire to return to the rigidity and legalism of past generations, today's over-worked and over-wrought Presbyterians are yearning to experience the rest and renewal Sabbath offers.

For the past year a small group has been meeting to explore this issue for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Two of the members of that group share some reflections in these pages that came out of their experiences at the recent meeting of the 211th General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas.

Steve Doughty offers remarks that originally were addressed to over one hundred people who attended the Spiritual Formation Dinner sponsored by this office. **John Sonnen-day** shares his experiences of talking with people at our display in the exhibit hall. And **Brad Kent** describes a particularly poignant visit.

Capital or lowercase ?

The editing of these manuscripts presented a special challenge that relates directly to the complexity of the topic at hand. Should it be capitalized ("Sabbath"), or lowercase ("sabbath")? You will find both variants in the coming pages.

When capitalized, "Sabbath" refers especially to the observance of a specific day set aside — *the Sabbath*. When not capitalized, "sabbath" points to dimensions that extend beyond one day and embrace a global concern for the goodness and well being of all creation, broad issues of justice and exploitation of others, and a way of living that is pervaded by a rhythm of activity and rest. From this perspective, sabbath keeping is "not just about Sunday," and can be practiced in units of time that range all the way from the jubilee year, to the 30-day retreat, down to the briefest of "sabbath moments" caught at opportune times during a busy day.

Uppercase or lowercase? Yes. Yes to both. Both a designated day and an infinite variety of other opportunities in time and space. Both a foundation from our biblical tradition and a yet-to-be-revealed "new thing" that the Holy Spirit is drawing us toward as individuals and congregations, and perhaps offering to Western culture in general.

We hope these articles will stimulate your own reflection and suggest ways that all of us can begin to say "Yes" to the invitation to enter into God's promised rest.

Kris



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The Need for Sabbath

The need for recovering the gift of sabbath is both layered and deep. This past April, Rabbi Chester Diamond addressed the Work Group. Rabbi Diamond is a Reform Rabbi serving a congregation in Louisville, Kentucky, and teaches on the faculty of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He shared deep joy at being in conversation with us. He also, at one point, read the lines of a penitential prayer offered in Jewish homes at the start of Sabbath: “Days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles.”

When he read those words, we fell silent within.

He had named the need.

We ourselves name the need for sabbath in a thousand different ways. We know only too well that we name the need whenever we feel overwhelmed by the pressures and the ever increasing pace of our lives.

We name it when we grieve that even in the church – no, often especially in the church – we are awash in the toxic waste of our own over-production. The naming presses forth in prayers that cry from within: “When will I, God, have time to play again with the child/the love/the companion you have given for my life?” “When will I once again pause and see the loveliness?” “When will we, as community, simply be in you?”

In our deepest yearnings, we name the need.

The Work Group would much value your reflections on this topic. How do you name the need for recovering the gift of sabbath?” In what patterns of life and of brokenness do you name it? In what yearnings, spoken and unspoken, do you declare it? How does your community of faith name the need? The naming will be strongest and most clear if, from our varying perspectives, we name it together.

The Nature of Sabbath

Four themes, among several others, keep arising for the Work Group as we deepen our reflections upon the nature of this profound spiritual discipline.

Sabbath is a gift.

In the present context of our need, sabbath is an immense gift. Yes, it is a command, but even in the context of the Hebrew scriptures, and surely in the long history of the Jewish people and in the original understanding of The Lord’s Day, it is a graced foretaste. It is hint of what shall be. It is, in Calvin’s definition of it, when we “cease our work so that God may do God’s work in us.”¹ And so on Sabbath we play. We rejoice. We sing. We love. We gather about the table. We enter afresh the mystery of God’s all permeating love. Sabbath is gift for our aching need.

Sabbath is profoundly prophetic.

If we enter sabbath wealth, we find ourselves on a very different path from that of a socioeconomic system that is predicated on a from-now-to-the-eschaton growth rate of 3 - 5% per year. We find ourselves on the path of jubilee, and of care for creation; of release from debt, and of real protected time for real human beings, and that means everyone. If we follow sabbath, we become (or shall become) markedly different from the culture around us. It has always been this way. Sabbath is prophetic.

Sabbath offers a space for coming together.

Sabbath is, at least potentially, a meeting ground for the theologically divided elements of our church. In the Work Group, we have come to sense this increasingly. Whether we are of the theological left or

Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit’s touch, disciplines such as sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.

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the theological right, we all meet the need for sabbath in our exhaustion of spirit. In our yearning for the freshness of God, we all reach out for it. And to us all, whatever our particular theological position, sabbath comes as God's hallowed space-time for our gathering.

Sabbath is an unfolding gift.

Sabbath keeping will draw us into paths we do not yet know. We have properly and long ago set aside Sabbatarianism with its rigid laws, its sterility, its absence of joy. Yet the need for sabbath tugs at us afresh. Barbara Brown Taylor's recent words ring true: "Sabbath is a gift, but we are so reluctant to accept it that God had to make it a command."² And so now we search. How shall we rediscover the gift? What form shall it take in our common life? "Eternal God," says the Service of Morning Prayer, "you call us to ventures of which we can not see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown." Yet "your hand is leading us and your love supporting us."³

And by grace, we shall see the way of sabbath again.

Notes

1. John Calvin wrote of the "Sabbath commandment as promise."
". . . We must be wholly at rest that God may work in us; In short, we must rest from all activities of our own contriving so that, having God working in us, we may repose in him" Institutes of the Christian Religion, II.viii.29.
1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Remember the sabbath." In the Christian Century, May 5, 1999, p. 510.
2. Book of Common Worship. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993; p. 39.

Shabbat Prayer

Elsewhere in this issue reference is made to the Jewish Sabbath service observed in the home beginning at sundown on Friday and continuing to sundown on Saturday. At the end of the Sabbath, the imminent departure of the Sabbath is marked by a liturgy known as the Havdalah. A contemporary version of this service includes the following prayer, which is said by the leader before the spice box is circulated among those gathered:

The added soul Shabbat confers is leaving now, and these spices will console us at the moment of its passing. They remind us that the six days will pass, and Shabbat return. And their bouquet will make us yearn with thankful heart for the sweetness of rest and the fragrance of growing things; for the clean smell of rainwashed earth and the sad innocence of childhood; for the dream of a world healed of pain, pure and wholesome as on that first Shabbat, when God, finding all things good, rested from the work of creation.

*From On the Doorposts of Your House, ed. Chaim Stern.
New York, NY: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1994.*

Conversations from Fort Worth

by John Sonnenday

It makes me want to cry.”

This was among the more poignant responses I heard as I stood talking with visitors at the recent meeting of the 211th General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas. As a member of our denomination’s Work Group on Sabbath Keeping, I was hosting our booth in the exhibit hall.

I had offered only a few words on the gift of sabbath rest when this young woman – mother, wife, elder, lawyer – responded, “It makes me want to cry.” She explained further, “There is so much stress.” I could see the slight moistening in her eyes. The promise of sabbath rest had touched a deep place and she knew it, and she was gracious enough to share that vulnerability with me.

For four days I talked with anyone willing to stop by long enough to visit. So my impressions are anecdotal – hardly a scientific sampling. But what I heard confirmed suspicions based on listening in other contexts to wider audiences, as well as listening to the interior evidence in my own heart. The overarching impression is that we are in a “teachable moment,” in our church and in our society.

Balance

The way we are living just doesn’t work any more. The choices we feel compelled to make in how we use our time wind up wreaking violence on our spirits, a violence that erupts throughout our society and our world. There is a longing for better balance – balance between rest and work, between relaxation and productivity, between being and doing. And there is an increasing openness to the possibility that one avenue toward such wholeness is the recovery of the gift of sabbath.

Identity

When Peter and the apostles stood their ground and affirmed, “We must obey God rather than any human authority,” [Acts 5:29] they refused to let the powerful political and religious leaders define the identity of Christian believers. Today in the United States, it seems the threat comes not so much from totalitarian political powers as from the imperializing forces of culture and economics.

Naming

Two words stood out in my conversations with GA visitors. The first was the word I heard more often than any other as people talked of the difficulty of protecting Sundays for worship and rest: “soccer.” Sunday soccer games have become a competing ritual for many young families in the church. As the father of three soccer players and a soccer coach and referee myself, I know the lure. We want our children to be not only accepted but successful in the youth culture.

Soccer, however, is but one expression of a youth culture that demands more and more of our young people. Children and young people are in at least as much need of sabbath rest as are adults. Some of my more interesting conversations at GA were with young people. A number of Fort Worth area congregations brought their youth groups to observe the General Assembly, and many stopped by our booth – especially once word got around that we were handing out spice-filled sachets.



Sweetness

One of the ancient practices from the Jewish tradition is the use of the spice box. On Saturday evening at the end of the Sabbath, a box of sweet spices is passed around so that everyone can smell the sweet scent of sabbath to carry into the week as a reminder of God's promised rest and its return in another seven days. And so, we handed out small sachets filled with sweet spices so that in the midst of busy activity, people could take a whiff of the sweet scent of sabbath and be reminded of God's promise of rest.

I watched the eyes of one fourteen-year-old girl grow wide with anticipation while I explained the spice sachets, and then I heard her say, "I'm going to use that a lot!" And suddenly I felt both grateful that I had it to offer her and saddened that at fourteen she already knew how much she needed it.

A Symbol

A second word that emerged frequently in my conversations made it clear that increasingly it is not the political establishment that exerts totalitarian control over our lives today but our economic institutions. Their demands, which threaten to take over our lives, were symbolized by this second word: "beeper." The beeper and its ever present cousin, the cell phone, are the embodiment of our growing difficulty in claiming time and space to call our own. The beeper is the extension into our private space of the economy's claim to own us, and it gives a new context to Peter's affirmation about to whom we belong.

A Teachable Moment

Soccer games and their related activities. Beepers and cell phones. They all represent a whole cluster of rituals by which our identities become defined, raising the question of whether there is any way to compete with such forces other than through competing rituals such as sabbath keeping.

And therein lies my final impression, that a teachable moment does not mean smooth sailing. Two consecutive encounters laid out the landscape in which we are currently located. The first was with a pastor in Florida who has many young "soccer families" in his congregation. "They're not going to do it!" was his response to recovery of the Sabbath. The lure of their children's success is too strong, and he sees no possibility of competing against the formative power of America's cultural rituals.

The very next visitors to our table, however, were a group of seminary students, themselves already engaged at an initial level in the practice of sabbath. After looking over our display, one of them offered, "I think Americans are ready for this."

Clearly, whether or not this becomes a teachable moment will depend at least in part upon whether believe that it is. And what we believe will therefore help to shape the future.

John Sonnenday is pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in McLean, Virginia, and a member of the Work Group on Sabbath Keeping.



days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles

"So then, a sabbath rest remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his." Hebrews 4:9-10

One does not nap on the Sabbath in order to work better the next day, even on the Torah, for Sabbath rest is for Sabbath enjoyment, not for the sake of a weekday's work. *Sefer Hasidim*

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Exodus 20:8

The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. Exodus 20:10

You shall keep the sabbath because it is holy for you. Exodus 31:14

Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while. Mark 6:31

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28

The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath. Mark 2:27

Dolores

a remembrance of the 211th General Assembly
by Brad Kent

Her name was Dolores, and she was one of the herd of Hispanics who cleaned up the daily droppings left by the gaggle of Presbyterian geese who gathered in Fort Worth for the 211th General Assembly. I caught sight of her standing by our display of Sabbath symbols. She had a puzzled expression on her face and was sniffing the air.

"What smells so good?" she asked.

"It must be the spice box," I replied, handing her the silver container that was part of our "Sabbath Center."

I explained. "At the conclusion of the Sabbath day — the day of rest — Jews gather for a final simple ceremony. Part of that ceremony is passing around a spice box like this one. Each person in turn inhales the fragrance of the spice. It serves as a reminder of the sweetness of the Sabbath, and encourages them to take the sweetness of Sabbath rest into the new week."

Reaching into a basket on the table and giving her one of the small spice sachets there, I continued, "We are giving people here at the Assembly these sachets with the same spices in them, so in the midst of all they are doing, they can pause and smell

the sweetness of Sabbath and remember to rest in the Lord. We call it 'a whiff of Sabbath.' Please take one with you."

"Thank you," she said. "I know I'll need it. I don't have much time to rest."

She came by our display every day, always bringing one or two other cleaners with her. I could overhear her telling them about taking a "whiff of Sabbath." Each of them always took a sachet.

One day I noticed her take a sachet out of the basket smell it and put it back. I asked her if she had forgotten to bring hers with her.

"No, I gave it away," she replied. "Last night I met this man. He was so sad, so tired. He was working two jobs and had no time to rest or be with his family. I gave it to him and told him to smell it whenever he got depressed, and remember that God loved him."

"Would you like another?" I stammered, struck by her winsome witness.

"You don't have many left," she observed.

"You deserve it more than anyone else," I replied. "You'll inevitably find someone else to give it to."

She smiled, thanked me and walked away — soon, surely, to share sabbath with another.

NOTE: The word "Dolores" in Spanish means "sorrows."

Brad Kent is Associate for Spiritual Formation.

Food for Thought

Would you like to learn more about sabbath keeping? Here are some of the resources the Work Group has found helpful.

Books

- Dawn, Marva J. *Keeping Sabbath Wholly*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Edwards, Tilden. *Sabbath Time*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1993.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951.
- Muller, Wayne. *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1999.
- Postema, Don. *Catch Your Breath*. Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1997.
- Schaper, Donna. *Sabbath Sense*. Philadelphia, PA: Innisfree Press, 1997.
- Schaper, Donna. *Sabbath Keeping*. Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999.

Magazines

- Perspectives*, March 1996. The entire issue is devoted to sabbath keeping and contains articles by a variety of scholars from the Reformed tradition.
- The Living Pulpit*. April-June 1998. The theme of this issue is Sabbath and contains articles from Jewish as well as Christian authors.
- Weavings*, "And God Rested," March/April 1993. This issue contains several articles relevant to Sabbath keeping.

Articles

- Bass, Dorothy. "Keeping Sabbath" in *Practicing Our Faith*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997.
- Fox, Matthew. "In Search of Sabbath" in *The Reinvention of Work*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.
- Peterson, Eugene. "Confessions of a Former Sabbath Breaker" in *Desert Call*, Summer, 1989
- Schwanda, Tom. "The Unforced Rhythms of Grace" in *Perspectives*, March 1996.
- Taylor, Barbara Brown. "Remember the Sabbath," in *Christian Century*, May 5, 1999

Calling All Stitchers

One of the odder sights at the General Assembly in Fort Worth surely was the tableau of Kris Haig, Brad Kent, and John Sonnenday sitting in one of the plenary sessions with needles and thread, sewing up little spice sachets! As we passed the fabric squares and little containers of spices back and forth, we drew many inquiring looks. (Perhaps we reminded them of Mme LaFarge, knitting in the shadow of the guillotine.)

We would like to have lots more spice sachets to distribute at next year's General Assembly, and invite your help with this project. Everyone who sends in 25 or more sachets will become an honorary auxiliary member of the Sabbath Keeping Work Group and Sewing Circle.

And make sure you keep a sachet for yourself, as a "whiff of sabbath," to remind you of God's invitation to the sweetness of resting in the Holy Presence.

P.S. To release the fragrance of the spices, pound on the sachet with a blunt object, which will crack open the spices. But send them to us "un-cracked" so they can be freshly aromatic in June 2000.

Instructions for Making Spice Sachets

- squares of calico or other tightly woven cotton fabric
- thread to match
- whole cloves
- whole allspice

Cut out the squares (you can use a chalk pencil to mark a "grid" on a larger piece of fabric), making the squares 1½ inches on each side. Take two squares and, with wrong sides together, stitch ¼-inch seams on three sides. Stuff with about 3 cloves and 3 allspice. Hand stitch the fourth side with a ¼-inch seam.