

Pastoral Sabbath Keeping

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by **Judith A. Schwanz**

The word *holy*

means set aside for a special purpose or withdrawn from common employment and dedicated to God. To set aside a day for a special purpose suggests a break in weekly patterns. To withdraw from common employment means that sabbath should be an uncommon day in many dimensions.

Sabbath is a break from routine, a change of pace. In the midst of your busyness and achieving, God calls you to rest, to lay aside your to-do lists and let the sabbath be different than the rest of your days. If your week is filled with e-mails and telephone calls, turn both machines off for the day. If your frantic schedule has you traveling all week, a sabbath at home will provide much-needed rest. If you spend your week cooped up in an office, a sabbath walk in the woods or an afternoon at the park playing with the kids may be just the space you need.

Sabbath is a break from expectations and productivity. You don't need to accomplish anything in the true sabbath. We have become so conditioned to believe that unproductive time is wasted time. What things have you put off doing because you had more pressing deadlines? When was the last time you read a book just for fun? How long has it been since you turned off the alarm clock and slept in? Do you love to putter in the garden, but rarely find time for it? These things and many others may be ideal sabbath practices for you if you find them to be a source of refreshment.

Sabbath is a break from competition. For one day, we lay aside the pressure to be number one, to be better than anyone else. Competition pervades our society and the church and pushes us to try a little harder, give a little more to strive for the best. For the sabbath, lay aside the need to win and be content to participate in life. Choose not to engage in those activities that require competition.

Sabbath is a break from consumerism. We spend so much time during the week thinking about making money, paying bills, and acquiring things we really need as well as those we just want. Our consumer society provides us with so many choices and upgrades that we can easily get sucked into the cycle of always wanting more. We want the newest gadget, the latest technology. God calls us to a life of simplicity. Especially on the sabbath, resolve to take the time to appreciate what you do have and refrain from the hectic grasping for more. Sabbath is a good time to ask, "Do I really need that?" and discern what is really important.

Sabbath is a break from being in control. This may be the hardest thing for pastors to lay down. So many people depend on us. We carry heavy loads of responsibility that create for us the illusion that we have control. Parents leaving their baby alone with a sitter for the first time often worry, what if the baby gets sick? What if she gets hurt? What if he cries? Will the sitter know how to handle it? In reality, babies get sick or hurt even when the parents are home. Parents cannot always prevent or control that any more than a sitter could.

In essence, you (the pastor) are leaving your child (the church) for the day when you take a sabbath. Are they grown up enough to take care of themselves? Can the world survive if you step off the merry-go-round for a day and aren't around to run things? The real, underlying question is, can you trust God to take care of things in your absence?

Sabbath Brings Renewal

The word *renewal*

suggests making things that have become old and familiar new again. Sabbath brings social renewal. A sabbath day provides time for us to renew our relationships with others, building new connections and new memories. In most Jewish homes, sabbath begins with the sabbath meal shared with family and friends. How many times have you said to someone, "We really should get together more often" after an evening of good food and conversation? Sabbath provides an excellent opportunity to do just that, to relax with good friends, enjoying relationships that are mutually nurturing.

Sabbath also provides time to reconnect with your spouse. Often in the course of weekly schedules at church and children's school activities, ministry couples begin to feel like two ships that pass in the night or strangers who just happen to share a bed. Develop a sabbath ritual together. Some couples have declared sabbath a day for no alarm clock and a leisurely breakfast together. Others take long walks or visit museums together.

Sabbath brings spiritual renewal. Sabbath provides extended time to practice any of the spiritual disciplines. The Jewish sabbath often includes lighting candles and singing spiritual songs and concludes with a special prayer of blessing for each child in the family. You may decide, as many pastors do, that Sunday cannot be a true day of rest for you and you may choose another day of the week for your personal sabbath. Whatever day you choose, plan to include a deliberate time of worship, a time when you focus your full attention on God in awe and reverence.

Sabbath also brings physical renewal. For most of us that means, in part, catching up on sleep from which we have deprived ourselves throughout the week. It may mean allowing yourself to follow your body's urging and take a nap when you feel drowsy at midday. But physical renewal also involves activity and stimulation of all of your senses in some break from routine. This may mean taking walks, alone or with family or friends; playing catch with the kids; or having a snowball fight. Satisfying your hunger for beauty and for good scents, good food, and beautiful sounds will renew you physically. Think of the imagery of Psalm 23. David says that God restores his soul. David's language reveals God ministering to him in a very physical, sensate way: green pastures, quiet waters, a table (feast), and soothing oil. Allow God to restore your soul on the sabbath as you find physical renewal.

Common Misunderstandings about Sabbath

Many people resist taking sabbath because they think it is selfish. Or perhaps they tried to take a sabbath and someone else accused them of being lazy. Sabbath keeping is obedience to God's plan and commandment. If that is not enough reason, sabbath keeping is essential self-care for the pastor. Parker Palmer wrote, "By surviving passages of doubt and depression on the vocational journey, I have become clear about at least one thing: self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others."¹

Sabbath is *not*

a sign of weakness. Some people will say, "I don't need a rest. I have lots of energy;

I'm a Type A person. Sabbath is only for sissies." God not only commanded the sabbath but also took the very first sabbath. God didn't *need* to take a break; but God chose to establish a rhythm of work and sabbath. Jesus also followed the general sabbath practices of his day, in spite of his few recorded run-ins with the Pharisees.

Sabbath is not simply a day off. While time away from work is important, the distinction between "day off" and "sabbath" is not merely one of semantics. A day off conjures images of chores and simply doing whatever needs to be done, substituting home pressures for church pressures—hardly a picture of renewal. Sabbath implies a deliberately restful day focused on God and filled with just the right amount of people and activities to refresh you and restore your soul.

In her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting*, Marva Dawn wrote about the importance of keeping sabbath: "When we order our lives around the focus of our relationship with God by letting our Sabbath day be the highlight of our week, toward which everything moves and from which everything comes, then the security of God's presence on that day will pervade the week."² If you remember the sabbath and keep it holy, you will find new appreciation for this gift from God. Respond to God's invitation to sabbath rest. The remainder of your life and ministry will be transformed and enriched as well.

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 49-50.

² Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 34.

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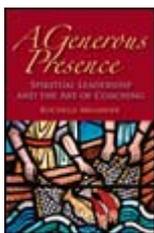
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[Blessed Connections: Relationships that Sustain Vital Ministry](#) by Judith A. Schwanz

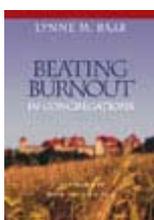
In *Blessed Connections*, seminary professor Judith Schwanz focuses on the person of the minister and the relational system of the minister's life.

She spotlights three areas of connection—relationship with self, relationships with other people, and relationship with God. Attending to these three primary connections will strengthen the pastor and cushion her or him against the pressures and stresses of daily ministry.



[A Generous Presence: Spiritual Leadership and the Art of Coaching](#) by Rochelle Melander

This is not a “how to be a coach” manual; rather, it brings the lessons and insights of the coaching world to ministers and other spiritual leaders in a way that is uplifting and relevant for their work. The tools provided in this book will help leaders understand themselves and enable them to strengthen their definitions for healthy living, raise their awareness about their own life and relationship skills, and improve their skills in relating to individuals and groups.



[Beating Burnout in Congregations](#) by Lynne M. Baab

What is burnout? What causes congregational volunteers to burn out? How can congregations become oases of peace and nurture while still carrying out their mission and ministry? After reflecting on these important questions and dozens of interviews with congregational volunteers, Baab suggests, “We must not fear burnout; instead, we need to do a better job coming alongside people as they experience burnout, and help them figure out what they are learning.”

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