

NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**“FELLOWSHIP OF THE REST”
PRACTICING SABBATH TOGETHER:
A WESLEYAN APPROACH TO HELP PASTORS REST AND FLOURISH**

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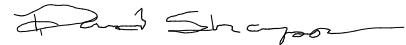
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ABSTRACT

W. Kyle Poole

“Fellowship of the Rest”
Practicing Sabbath Together:
A Wesleyan Approach to Help Pastors Rest and Flourish

In a digital age of constant connectivity, we are profoundly shaped by technology and cultural liturgies of consumerism and productivity. While this context presents tremendous challenges for everyone, pastors face unique pressures that make them particularly vulnerable to depletion and burnout. Therefore, recapturing an understanding and appreciation of Sabbath is vital. In addition to exploring the importance and impact of Sabbath-keeping, this project particularly focuses on helping Christian ministers develop Sabbath-keeping practices in community. Following a brief exploration of the the divine gift of Sabbath, the digital age, and some of the particular pressures on pastors, this dissertation proposes a Wesleyan approach that emphasizes small group encouragement and accountability in order for clergy to better learn and implement Sabbath-keeping practices. A twelve-week plan and leader’s guide for starting and facilitating “Fellowship of the Rest” Sabbath-keeping groups will serve as a project artifact. This research and accompanying leader’s guide could be used by district superintendents or other ecclesial leaders to encourage and enhance Sabbath-keeping in order to catalyze clergy well-being and flourishing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sabbath is a gift of God's grace best received and practiced in the context of an additional divine gift... a loving community. So, as this dissertation and artifact explore the joy and vitality of practicing Sabbath together, I would be remiss without thanking some of those who have graced my life with joy. While I cannot thank everyone who deserves it here, I do want to mention several.

Thanks to Julie – the steady, smart, sweet, and sassy love of my life – whose beautiful love for Jesus inspires and encourages me every step along the way. Thanks to my sons and daughter-in-law, Jackson, Kurtis, and Meagan, who help me laugh and become a better Dad and minister. Thanks to my parents, Wendell and JoAnn Poole, who introduced me to the world on a Sabbath, valued education, and consistently showed me how to love God and people. Thanks to my brother, Kendell, for listening sessions, sports talks, and encouraging me along the way.

Thanks to the Church of the Nazarene congregations and districts (Grand Saline, Texas; Gardendale, Alabama; Gallatin, Tennessee; Midland Valley Community, South Carolina; Georgia District, and Kansas City District) who have loved me and my family as I learned how to serve Jesus by serving them as “Pastor” (my forever-favorite title). Thanks to all my Trevecca Nazarene University and Nazarene Theological Seminary professors, Dr. David Sharpes (DMin. Advisor), Dr. Dana Preusch (Second Reader), and the Georgia District pastors and leaders who made this project possible. Thanks to Pastor Lewis Stark who listened to my ache for Sabbath, encouraged me to hike, and helped inspire “Fellowship of the Rest.”

“Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God.” – Philippians 1:3a, MSG

CHAPTER 1 STARVING FOR SABBATH

God created. God created. God created. God created. God created. God created.

God rested.¹ And it was good.

Sabbath is a divine rhythmic gift, longing to be recognized and received. From the dawn of time humans have been invited to this divine dance. Created in the image of God, we represent God best when we respect and rehearse the divine rhythm of creating and resting. We reject the rhythm at our own peril. In many ways, our bodies and minds are starving for Sabbath.

My Story: “Confessions of a Sabbath-Breaker”

Ignorant. That’s the word that most often comes to mind when reflecting on my stroke. It was a Thursday afternoon in September 2012 when I felt the “stinger” in my neck. Fortunately, Julie, my wife, and I were both home that day. Usually, I picked up our youngest son from middle school each afternoon. But, this unusual and sudden twinge on the left side of the back of my neck was nagging. A few years before, I had a bout with vertigo. The dizziness from vertigo was miserable and annoying, but it could be treated and subsided in a few days. This 2012 dizziness reminded me of my previous encounter with vertigo. So, I self-diagnosed and asked Julie to drive and pick up our son Kurtis from school while I stayed home. I was sure this “minor problem” would vanish in a couple hours and my busy life and ministry would quickly return to normal. But I was *ignorant*. As a seemingly healthy forty-two-year-old Pastor, I had no idea what was happening to my body and how my “breakneck” pace might be covertly contributing to a crisis.

¹ The word “rested” in Gen. 2:2 (HCSB) is translated from the Hebrew “Shabbat” which means “to cease.”

I had been serving as Pastor at Midland Valley Community Church of the Nazarene for two years. The church was growing rapidly, and I was determined to minister to the best of my ability. I usually stayed out of the office on Thursdays, but always responded to calls and pastoral emergencies, no matter the day or time. I knew about Sabbath, but I didn't *know* Sabbath. We added a third Sunday morning worship service to connect with more people and I usually preached at all three, plus teaching Sunday and Wednesday night classes. Though we had a large pastoral staff and plenty of volunteers, I loved connecting with as many people as possible, but may have almost killed myself in the process.

My stroke was diagnosed as a cerebellar infarct caused by a dissection of the left vertebral artery. No one is sure why my vertebral artery tore on that Thursday in 2012, but doctors know that the dissection caused a blood clot which subsequently blocked the flow of blood to part of my brain for forty-eight hours or more. This led to a large stroke in my cerebellum that landed me in ICU for a week and in therapy for several weeks following. Through prayer and excellent medical care, God miraculously healed my brain and body. I returned to my duties as pastor within three weeks of the stroke and still serve in full-time ministry today as a District Superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene. I am forever grateful for God's gracious healing touch, and all the people who prayed and helped me.

Looking back, I not only see how God healed my body, but also how God began healing my ignorance and neglect of His divine gift of Sabbath. Amazingly, this Sabbath awareness and "healing" has been slower than the physical recovery from my stroke. While the stroke was certainly a rude wake-up call for me to rest more frequently and pay better attention to my body, the struggle to embrace and practice Sabbath seems more subtle and stubborn. In these years

since the stroke, I have learned to better appreciate and practice the divine gift of Sabbath, but I have also learned that Sabbath is profoundly counter-cultural, even in the church.

Walter Brueggemann's 2014 book, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, was prophetic and is still relevant.² For those of us formed by cultures that value success, growth, sacrifice, and hard work, Sabbath never feels like it fits. And yet, we long for the peace and rest that only Sabbath can bring. My research and writing have certainly been cathartic. I am still learning how to practice Sabbath in my life and ministry. My hope is that this project will point pastors and church leaders toward the life-giving joy of remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy.

***Our Story: "We Are at Altitude"*³**

Experiencing unpleasant consequences from Sabbath-neglect is not unique in our society. The constant connectivity of technology adds fuel to this fire. Sociologist Felicia Wu Song compares our digital era to the negative effects of being at altitude:

"When we are at altitude, even if our minds don't grasp it, our bodies do and they send out distress signals. Similarly, when we are living in a digitally saturated society, even if our minds don't recognize it, our bodies and spirit know – and arguably, they've been sending out distress signals for more than a few years now."⁴

Similarly, in *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, John Mark Comer asserts, "We all know our world has sped up to a frenetic pace. We feel it in our bones, not to mention on the freeway. But it hasn't always been this way."⁵ He also provides a helpful sketch of our culture's busyness epidemic by describing "a brief history of speed." From the sundial to Steve Jobs, Comer shows

² Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), preface.

³ Felicia Wu Song, *Restless Devices: Recovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 17-18.

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019), 29.

how “after millennia of slow, gradual acceleration, in recent decades the sheer velocity of our culture has reached an exponential fever pitch.”⁶ In addition to citing the vast decadal changes in sleep reduction and increased technology addiction, Comer laments the death of Sabbath in American life. In 2016, New York Times Magazine essayist Andrew Sullivan also lamented the loss created by the absence of Sabbath observance:

“It [Sabbath] helped define much of Western public life once a week for centuries—only to dissipate, with scarcely a passing regret, into the commercial cacophony of the past couple of decades. It reflected a now-battered belief that a sustained spiritual life is simply unfeasible for most mortals without these refuges from noise and work to buffer us and remind us who we really are.”⁷

Pastor and professor A.J. Swoboda rightly chides the Christian church for “Sabbath amnesia.”⁸ Forgetting that Christians have practiced some sort of Sabbath for some two thousand years, the modern church has been formed by Western rhythms of industry, production, and success. With Brueggemann, Swoboda sees faithful Sabbath observance as “resistance” or “subversive” in a culture of “more” and “now.”⁹ Swoboda calls pastors to account for our Sabbath neglect:

“Because we pastors rarely practice Sabbath, we rarely preach Sabbath. And because we do not preach the Sabbath, our congregations are not challenged to take it seriously themselves. The result of our Sabbath amnesia is that we have become perhaps the most emotionally exhausted, psychologically overworked, spiritually malnourished people in history.”¹⁰

Ministers are not immune to the consequences of busyness and living without margin. In fact, some believe that clergy are among the most vulnerable to depletion, depression, disease, and burnout. In a 2021 summary of a study of Nazarene clergy well-being in the USA and

⁶ Comer, *Elimination of Hurry*, 42.

⁷ Andrew Sullivan, “I Used to Be a Human Being,” *Intelligencer*, September 18, 2016.

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/09/andrew-sullivan-my-distraction-sickness-and-yours.html>.

⁸ A.J. Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2018), 5.

⁹ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, preface.

¹⁰ Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 5-6.

Canada, Dr. Chris Adams (Biola professor and clergy wellbeing expert) cites research showing that ministry leaders are at significantly higher risk for many serious health issues related to stress, role immersion, and neglect of self-care.¹¹

With added stressors, it is vital that clergy find ways to rest, reflect, and reconnect with God by observing Sabbath. Since Sabbath rest on Sundays is not feasible for most Christian ministers, it is wise for clergy to develop unique Sabbath rhythms which foster greater wellbeing and lead to a flourishing life. Adams' Sabbath suggestions for clergy are also worth noting:

“Prioritize Sabbath. Sabbath is an invitation to receive the grace of being a beloved creation of God, who “knows how we are formed, and remembers we are dust” (Psalm 103:14 NIV). Rest and renewal [are] the focus of Sabbath. Take daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly breaks from ministry work for restorative rest and purposeful recreation. (If you take Mondays off currently, try taking off a day later in the week when you can engage in something restorative, and truly enjoy your Sabbath.)”¹²

Roadmap for Our Journey

Before we travel to the thesis of this dissertation – that Sabbath practice today is best learned in the Wesleyan context of a supportive group of friends and colleagues who embody loving accountability – let us review the roadmap for our “Fellowship of the Rest” journey.

Chapter One serves as an introduction to the project by giving quick glimpses of the desperate need for Sabbath, in our personal lives and in society at large. This chapter reminds readers that Sabbath is a divine gift while also recounting and recalling some of the pain caused by Sabbath neglect, especially for pastors.

Chapter Two provides an overview of Sabbath in biblical and historical context. How have those who have gone before us approached Sabbath? This chapter is a brief survey of Sabbath history. First, this chapter traces Sabbath's Jewish roots by looking at a few Old

¹¹ Christopher J. Adams, *A Guide to Flourishing: Personal Wellbeing and Vocational Ministry in the Church of the Nazarene* (Lenexa: Church of the Nazarene, Inc., 2021), 24.

¹² Adams, *A Guide to Flourishing*, 24.

Testament passages and Sabbath observance at the beginning of the Christian era. Next, Chapter Two looks at Sabbath from a New Testament perspective and through the lens of the post-apostolic church. Finally, this chapter cites a few historical examples of Sabbath emphasis from a Wesleyan-Holiness perspective.

Chapter Three explores Sabbath practice in a digital age. Part one of this chapter focuses on defining and describing the digital age. What do we mean by the “digital age?” How did we arrive at this point in history? While acknowledging the benefits of technological advancement, I also begin exploring some of the challenges and problems our digital connectedness creates. Technology is shaped by humans, but technology also shapes humans.¹³ In part two of this chapter, the focus turns to the dangerous impact of digital culture on individuals and communities. How do digital technologies and practices shape personhood? Should digital technologies be embraced or resisted? How is the digital age impacting our relationship with God and others? These questions are considered in the context of a Christian, Wesleyan-Holiness theological framework. Part three of this chapter explores healthy Sabbath practices in a digital world. This section includes examples of digital resistance (stopping) as well as suggestions for embracing or starting alternative Sabbath habits. Finally, this chapter highlights the vital importance of community to be Sabbath-keepers in a digital age.

Chapter Four focuses on the wellbeing of Christian pastors today and ways that practicing Sabbath connects to flourishing in life and ministry. Part one of this chapter explores the unique role of Christian pastors and some of the vocational dynamics that challenge clergy health and wellbeing. It also highlights ministry attrition and the dangers of stress and burnout. Utilizing research and resources on clergy wellbeing, suggestions for steps toward flourishing

¹³ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 11.

are offered, with emphasis on Sabbath practices. Part two focuses on the importance of relationships in overcoming clergy loneliness and developing a sense of belonging. Ministers themselves, local churches, and denominational leaders all contribute to the social support needed for clergy to flourish. We really do need each other, and Sabbath is best practiced in community. Pastors practicing Sabbath, especially in community with other pastors, is certainly a path toward greater wellbeing and flourishing that is well worth pursuing.

Chapter Five leans into a Wesleyan approach to practicing Sabbath in community. It suggests that pastors meeting in loving accountability with other pastors is an ideal way to recapture the joy of practicing Sabbath and catalyze clergy wellbeing. Part one focuses on how humans are created for community, and how a Wesleyan approach to discipleship and accountability can help guide pastors toward practicing Sabbath. With the pressures of ministry and our digital age, it explores how the structure and purpose of John Wesley's societies, classes and bands can be adapted for pastors practicing Sabbath. In addition to combating the isolation many pastors feel, this Wesleyan approach provides structure and accountability needed to resist pressures that war against Sabbath practice. This section also provides an overview of the dissertation artifact (a three-month plans for "Fellowship of the Rest" Sabbath groups). These groups will gather in a combination of face-to-face meetings (in a retreat-type setting) and online meetings for Sabbath accountability. Part two focuses on the environment for launching and hosting these Sabbath-practicing groups. It explores spiritual retreats and why retreats are the preferred context for encouraging clergy to practice Sabbath. In this section we also survey retreat dynamics and some practices that encourage Sabbath encounters with God, Sabbath encounters with others in community, and Sabbath encounters with creation.

CHAPTER 2

SABBATH IN BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sabbath in the Old Testament

The origin of the Sabbath and the seven-day week have been debated for centuries. Popular origin theories have included: Babylonian, Lunar, Kenite, and various calendar and socioeconomic proposals.¹⁴ This paper, however, will follow the “biblical view” described in Old Testament scholar Harold Dressler’s chapter, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament”:

“The biblical view is unequivocal: the Sabbath originated in Israel as God’s special institution for His people. That such a momentous creative achievement should have been the product of the people of Israel is usually regarded with extreme skepticism if not complete rejection... But to refuse to credit Israel with any cultural achievements of consequence, which some time ago was very fashionable, is certainly unreasonable... only the ancient Hebrew literature speaks definitely about a seven-day week and a Sabbath.”¹⁵

Genesis 2 does not actually use the noun “Sabbath.” What we are told is that God finished creation activities on the sixth day and ceased from such activities on the seventh day. However, Genesis 2 does tell us that God “blessed the seventh day and declared it holy.”¹⁶ Dressler asks: “Can we recognize here the inauguration of the Sabbath, perhaps in the sense that God blessed and sanctified the observance of the one-in-seven cycle, so that the keeping of the seventh day as a day of rest would come under the special blessing of God?”¹⁷

Exodus 16:22-30 contains the first Old Testament references to “Sabbath.” Here, the Israelites were instructed to gather manna each morning for six days, trusting God’s promise to provide enough manna on the sixth day for the seventh day as well. The seventh day was

¹⁴ Harold H. P. Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” in *From the Lord’s Day to the Sabbath*, ed. D.A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 22-23.

¹⁵ Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” 23.

¹⁶ Genesis 2:3, HCSB.

¹⁷ Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” 28-29.

designated as “a day of complete rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord.”¹⁸ It is worth noting that the first specific mention of “Sabbath” is not found in the Genesis creation accounts, but in the context of God’s Exodus promises of provision, freedom, and rest for the Israelites.

The next Old Testament Sabbath reference is found in Exodus 20:8-11. The fourth of ten commandments given to the people of God through Moses is explicit:

“You are to labor six days and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. You must not do any work — you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the foreigner who is within your gates. For the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything in them in six days; then He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and declared it holy.”¹⁹

In his *Interpretation* commentary on Exodus, biblical scholar Terrence Fretheim points out that the fourth commandment on Sabbath is the crucial “bridge” that connects all Ten Commandments.²⁰ The Sabbath commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests. Yet, the fourth commandment also looks forward to the last six commandments that focus on the neighbor. Walter Brueggemann writes: “God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day; that social reality provides a commonality and a coherence not only to the community of the covenant but to the commandments of Sinai as well.”²¹

Sabbath is also a sign of the Mosaic covenant between God and the people of Israel. “Tell the Israelites: You must observe My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, so that you will know that I am Yahweh who sets you apart.”²² Every Sabbath reminded the Israelites that God keeps promises. For Israelites, to break the Sabbath was to

¹⁸ Exodus 16:23.

¹⁹ Exodus 20:9-11, NASB2020.

²⁰ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 230.

²¹ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 1.

²² Exodus 31:13.

violate the covenantal relationship and forfeit the spiritual renewal of the covenant, which meant separation from the community and death.²³

The Sinaitic covenant also points to Sabbath-keeping, usually in the context of references to the land. As Israel must cease from her daily work and be restored, so the land must cease from its annual work and be restored. God spoke through Moses on Mount Sinai to establish Sabbath rest for the land on the seventh and fiftieth years.²⁴ Sabbath was meant to be a gift, not a burden. This divine gift shows compassion for God's people by providing resources, rest, and reminders of God's holiness. Yet, as Dressler reminds us, Israel often neglected and abused God's good intentions and provision of Sabbath:

“Instead of understanding it to be their privilege to rest on the Sabbath, they viewed it as deprivation; instead of recognizing their opportunity to commune with God, they saw only inconvenience and hardship. Rather than discovering freedom to worship, they felt bondage to a law, and instead of grasping the idea of renewal of their covenant relationship to God, they experienced the tragedy of legalism.”²⁵

Sabbath Observance in Judaism at the Beginning of the Christian Era

For the Jew, love of God included obedience to the Torah. But, as the prophetic movement waned, the will of God was not always apparent based on scriptural text alone. This was especially true in the case of Sabbath observance. University of Oxford Professor Emeritus Christopher Rowland writes:

“Despite the fact that the keeping of the Sabbath was one of the cornerstones of Judaism, especially in the Diaspora, Scripture itself offered very little detailed advice on how this special day was to be kept... In light of such problems, we can understand the variety of regulations that were developed by Jewish teachers, especially those contained in the Halakah (Mishnah).”²⁶

²³ Exodus 31:14.

²⁴ Leviticus 25:4-5, 10-11.

²⁵ Dressler, “The Sabbath in the Old Testament,” 34-35.

²⁶ C. A. Rowland, “A Summary of Sabbath Observance in Judaism at the Beginning of the Christian Era,” in *From the Lord's Day to the Sabbath*, ed. D.A Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 44.

The Halakah (Mishnah) reveals that a substantial body of Jewish tradition developed regarding Sabbath observance, not always grounded in scripture. Rabbis found that scriptural guidance was inadequate in the case of Sabbath, and further rules were necessary.²⁷ Various approaches to the observance of Sabbath created a variety of complex regulations. While these rabbinic laws can be understood as sincere attempts to apply the will of God in a complex Hellenistic culture, this complicated smorgasbord of Jewish Sabbath practices also created a confusing legalistic backdrop in the intertestamental period.

Sabbath in the New Testament

Sabbath controversies abound in the New Testament gospels as well. The synoptics and John's gospel provide several glimpses into Jesus' Sabbath approach. New Testament scholar D.A. Carson's extensive exegesis of gospel Sabbath passages provides great insight. Carson summarizes Jesus' Sabbath encounters in the gospels by concluding that "there is no hard evidence that Jesus Himself contravened any written precept of the Torah concerning the Sabbath."²⁸ But, Carson also asserts that Jesus "did contravene Halakic Sabbath regulations."²⁹ In other words, Jesus did not disregard Sabbath observance but placed it in the larger context of Christological mission and Messianic fulfillment. Christ did not go out of His way to make Sabbath conduct an issue but faced opposition in response to placing His mission over legalism. For example, Jesus heals on the Sabbath because the opportunity presents itself and not because

²⁷ Rowland, "Sabbath in Judaism at Beginning of Christian Era," 47.

²⁸ D.A. Carson, "Jesus and Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in *From the Lord's Day to the Sabbath*, ed. D.A. Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 84.

²⁹ Carson, "Jesus and Sabbath in the Four Gospels," 84.

it is a Sabbath. “Jesus’ paramount concern was to be about His mission whether or not the Sabbath was involved.”³⁰

In the New Testament church, Sabbath observance varied greatly. Some Jewish and Gentile Christians followed the teaching of the Apostle Paul and considered themselves free from the Sabbath commandment. Other Jewish Christians regarded observance of the whole law as necessary to salvation and continued to keep Sabbath. There were also Gentile Christians who decided to adopt Jewish Sabbath observance. New Testament scholar A.T. Lincoln observes:

“By its silence in regard to any Sabbath controversies, Acts suggests that Jewish Christians must have continued to keep the Sabbath. The Sabbath was an institution too central to Judaism for it to have been tampered with without provoking hostile reaction and persecution, but there is no record of persecution on this account. Instead, the early Jewish Christians appear to have taken advantage of Sabbath observance to preach Jesus as the Messiah (e.g., Acts 5:42).”³¹

As we conclude our overview of New Testament Sabbath approaches, a brief look at Paul’s epistles seems appropriate. While Paul doesn’t deal explicitly with Sabbath observance, he spends considerable time covering the Christ-follower’s relationship with the law under the new covenant. British scholar D.R. de Lacey concludes that Paul opposed some sort of Sabbath-keeping being imposed on new converts:

“The clear implication is that he refuses to dogmatize one way or the other. An individual may keep Sabbath or not; presumably, in general Paul might have assumed that a Jewish Christian would do so and a Gentile convert would not. The important factor was not which practice one adopted, but one’s motive; to convert for inadequate reasons is reprehensible.”³²

³⁰ A.T. Lincoln, “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” in *From the Lord’s Day to the Sabbath*, ed. D.A Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 361.

³¹ Lincoln, “Sabbath: Biblical and Theological Perspective,” 365.

³² D.R. de Lacey, “The Sabbath/Sunday and the Law in the Pauline Corpus,” in *From the Lord’s Day to the Sabbath*, ed. D.A Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 183-184.

Sabbath in the Post-Apostolic Church

The early church had no single answer to practicing the Sabbath commandment. While some second-century Christians imitated Jewish Sabbath practices, others began to reject Sabbath observance along with Jewish practices in general. Early church fathers like Ignatius believed that Sabbath observance should be abandoned. New Testament theologian Richard Bauckham writes:

“The Sabbath, for Ignatius, is the badge of false attitude to Jesus Christ, while eucharistic worship on the Lord’s Day defines Christianity as salvation by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is an early witness to the dissociation of Christianity from Judaism which characterizes the second century, and to the wholly negative attitude to Sabbath observance which was the corollary of that.”³³

Bauckham’s insights show how these second-century views begin to shape a de-emphasis on Sabbath and greater focus on Sunday as the Lord’s Day.

Roman Emperor Constantine’s decree (321 A.D.) officially declared Sunday as a day of rest from labor which further accelerated the transference of Sabbath ideas to the Lord’s Day. Sunday was eventually viewed by many Christians as Sabbath. In *Sabbath: Biblical and Theological Perspective*, A.T. Lincoln summarizes this development well, bringing us from the early church fathers to modern times:

“The biblical and theological grounds adduced took the form of the notion first that the Lord’s Day was analogous to the Sabbath and then that the requirements of the fourth commandment concerning Sabbath rest had been transferred to the observance of the Christian Sunday. By the central place he had given to the abiding validity of the ten commandments for Christian moral theology Augustine had paved the way for the first full-scale theological justification of Sabbath transference, that of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’ formulation of the issues were in turn determinative for the Reformers who did not break with his basic premises, though Luther and Calvin resisted their logic, and for both Puritan Sabbatarianism and nineteenth century English Sabbatarianism, which continued the tradition of Sabbath-transference theology.”³⁴

³³ R.J. Bauckham, “Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church,” in *From the Lord’s Day to the Sabbath*, ed. D.A Carson (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 261.

³⁴ Lincoln, “Sabbath: Biblical and Theological Perspective,” 390.

Sabbath in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition

By the time John Wesley arrived on the eighteenth-century scene, Sabbath-transference was accepted as the norm among Christian leaders and churches. A review of Wesley's works reveals that his scarce references to Sabbath usually focus on the dangers of Sabbath-breaking, with the assumption that the Lord's Day (Sunday) is the Christian Sabbath. In Wesley's "A Word to a Sabbath-Breaker," he writes:

"Shall a man rob God? And art thou the man? Consider, think what thou art doing! Is it not God who givest thee all thou hast? Every day thou livest is it not his gift? Nay, wilt thou deny him what is his own already? This day is God's. It was so from the beginning. It will be so to the end of the world. This he cannot give to another. O 'render unto God the things that are God's' now; 'today, while it is called today!'"³⁵

And, in Wesley's tribute to the life of Reverend John Fletcher he ramps up the Sabbath rhetoric to include national warnings about the dangers of Sabbath-breaking:

"Our national depravity turns greatly on these two hinges, the profanation of the Lord's Day, and the neglect of the education of children. Till some way is found of stopping up these two great inlets of wickedness, we must expect to see our workhouses filled with aged parents forsaken by their prodigal children, with wives forsaken by their faithless husbands, and with the wretched offspring of lewd women and drunken men. Nay, we may expect to see the gaols, and even the gallows, largely stocked, to the perpetual reproach of our nation, with unhappy wretches ready to fall a sacrifice to the laws of their country."³⁶

Church of the Nazarene pioneer Rev. Phineas Bresee also emphasized the importance of the Lord's Day as Sabbath. At his Los Angeles church, Bresee focused on dedicating this day for the purpose of worship and ministry. "Sunday – Bresee called it 'Sabbath' – was taken up with meetings."³⁷ The 1895 Sunday schedule included a Young Men's Prayer Meeting in the

³⁵ John Wesley, "A Word to a Sabbath-Breaker," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. XI (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986), 164-165.

³⁶ John Wesley, "A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Reverend John Fletcher," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. XI (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986), 335.

³⁷ Carl O. Bangs, *Phineas Bresee: Pastor to the People* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2013), 160.

morning, “Sabbath” school, preaching by Bresee in the morning gathering, an afternoon teaching time led by J.P. Widney, an evening street meeting, and an evening worship service.³⁸

The *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene makes no specific mention of “Sabbath,” but encourages members in “The Covenant of Christian Character” to evidence their commitment to God by “avoiding every kind of evil, including... profaning of the Lord’s Day by participating in unnecessary secular activities, thereby indulging in practices that deny its sanctity.”³⁹ However, there is positive sabbatical emphasis for Nazarene churches here: “In order to encourage a healthy pastoral ministry and a strong spiritual life of the pastor... [local churches] should provide a sabbatical leave for the pastor during each fifth consecutive year of service in one congregation in the Church of the Nazarene.”⁴⁰

The Wesleyan-Holiness emphasis on Sabbath is historically sparse and leaves much room for expansion and improvement. Some of this can be explained by Sabbath-transference views inherited from our tribe’s ancestors, but it would serve us well to recover and revive the divine gift of Sabbath. While there is certainly special and appropriate value to worshipping the Risen Christ on the Lord’s Day, recapturing the gift of Sabbath rest has never been timelier and more precious.

³⁸ Bangs, *Bresee*, 160.

³⁹ Church of the Nazarene *Manual*, 2023 (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2023), 21.2 (2).

⁴⁰ *Manual*, 139.10.

CHAPTER 3 SABBATH AND THE DIGITAL AGE

Sabbath is a divine gift and command for people of every era and generation. God created for six days and rested on the seventh,⁴¹ establishing a rhythm for work and rest that humans often neglect at our own peril. In this digital age of constant connectivity, recovering Sabbath-understanding and Sabbath-practices is vital to human flourishing. This Sabbath recovery cannot be limited to legalistic approaches so familiar to Judaeo-Christian history but must be adapted and applied by individuals and communities in our current cultural context.

Part One: Defining the Digital Age

*“This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.”*⁴²

Smartphones, laptops, tablets, wireless speakers, apps, email, social media platforms, etc. These are some of the things that come to mind when we think about digital technology. However, when we refer to the “digital age,” it is more than the device or application in front of us. In the tech industry, “the digital” is shorthand for referring to the entire digital realm that is technological, economic, social, and political in nature.⁴³ Our digital devices and apps are actually part of an entire ecology - vast digital technology infrastructures and systems that shape our lives and culture today.⁴⁴

When the internet went mainstream in the 1990’s, there were two basic responses: alarm and euphoria.⁴⁵ Some feared we would be seduced by cyberspace fantasies and neglect our “real lives.” But most were excited and hopeful that this new technology capable of connecting people

⁴¹ Genesis 2:2.

⁴² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar Self-Reliance Compensation* (Washington, D.C: Palala Press, 2018), 8.

⁴³ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 31.

⁴⁴ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 24

⁴⁵ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 19.

all over the world would create amazing new paths of worldwide support, empowerment, and harmony. A kind of technological utopianism prevailed in many parts of the world.⁴⁶

The development, marketing, and rapid adoption of mobile devices in the first two decades of the twenty-first century is the technological hallmark of our digital age. In 2010, writer and journalist William Powers noted: “The total number of mobile phones in the world went from about 500 million at the beginning of this century to approaching 5 billion today.”⁴⁷ In 2022 there were 7.26 billion mobile phones users in the world today representing 91.54% of the global population.⁴⁸ In *Mobile Communication and Society*, author and researcher Manuel Castells summarizes and analyzes the impact of wireless communication:

“Wireless communication networks are diffusing around the world faster than any other communication technology to date. Because communication is at the heart of human activity in all spheres of life, the advent of this technology, allowing multimodal communication from anywhere to anywhere where there is appropriate infrastructure, raises a wide range of fundamental questions.”⁴⁹

Some of these questions include how mobile communication is affecting family life, workplace dynamics, educational strategies, politics, religion, health, and society at large. This brief overview of the digital age will focus on the most prevalent feature of mobile communication: pervasive and permanent connectivity ⁵⁰ Author David Levy writes:

“What makes these tools [mobile digital devices] so powerful is how they allow us to *connect*: to extend ourselves across space and time, to project ourselves beyond our immediate circumstances. They are the latest developments in a five thousand-year-long trend, beginning with the invention of writing, which has made it possible for us to create forms of external memory and to speak to one another at a distance.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), preface.

⁴⁷ William Powers, *Hamlet's Blackberry: Building a Good Life in the Digital Age* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 31.

⁴⁸ www.bankmycell.com, April 2022.

⁴⁹ Manuel Castells, *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009) 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵¹ David Levy, *Mindful Tech: How To Bring Balance To Our Digital Lives*, (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 2.

With the rise and reign of smartphones in the first twenty years of the twenty-first century, the internet moved beyond desktops to our phones and watches. Now, the digital is our constant companion, available and accessible 24/7. In addition, today's social media platforms utilize our existing networks of relationships so that we become "digitally tethered" to family and friends regardless of time of day or location.⁵² In a sense, we are always available, always on call. For many, this creates the anxious feeling of needing to respond quickly to digital requests for our attention. Sociologist Felicia Wu Song notes:

"'Being *connected*' in today's world means something dramatically different from what it meant back in the 1990's when the internet of yesteryear was accessed through boxy desktop computers dialed into the wall of our homes or workplaces. Most prominently today, 'Being connected' today is closer to a state of consciousness – a human condition – than a discrete behavior."⁵³

In *Technopoly*, Neil Postman reminds us "every technology is both a burden and a blessing."⁵⁴ It is a mistake to assume any technology has a one-sided effect. There are advantages and disadvantages of the digital age. It is not an either-or, but a both-and. Therefore, a wise person must begin a critique of technology by acknowledging its successes.⁵⁵

There are certainly advantages and benefits of our global digital connectivity. Some prominent examples include staying in touch with friends and family members no matter our location, conveniences of working and shopping remotely, access to vast amounts of information at our fingertips, GPS navigation systems, and greater accessibility for people with disabilities.⁵⁶ In *Mindful Tech*, David Levy counts the blessings of digital devices before wrestling with the burdens they bring:

⁵² Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁶ Alan I. Marcus and Howard P. Segal, *Technology in America: A Brief History. Third Edition* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 368-371.

“Whatever their problematic side, they are undeniably powerful and useful – and in today’s world increasingly necessary. Surely, it is a remarkable thing to carry a device in our pockets that allows us to communicate instantaneously with loved ones, to read the news as it is unfolding in real time, to listen to music, and to play games. Not long ago, such possibilities lay only on the realm of science fiction, or magic.”⁵⁷

Every culture must deal with technology. “Technology giveth and technology taketh away.”⁵⁸ A wise approach acknowledges and appreciates the positive impact of technology but also realizes that technological progress can be costly and painful. Many are beginning to count the costs of our constant digital connectivity. Let’s turn our attention now to the alarming impact of the digital age on individuals and communities.

Part Two: Dangers of the Digital Age

*“A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything.”*⁵⁹

We live in a world of constant connectivity. We are digital maximalists who have subscribed to this philosophy: the more you connect, the better off you are.⁶⁰ This way of life has saturated society, often unnoticed and unquestioned. Some scholars have compared the cultural reality of digital connectedness to the air we breathe,⁶¹ or the waters in which we swim.⁶² Digital technology has radically changed the way we live, and yet we rarely pay attention to its potential dangers. In his book *Hamlet’s Blackberry*, journalist William Powers writes:

“Having just explored the broad range of very real benefits that these [digital] devices offer, it’s easy to see why we’ve embraced the philosophy and way of life it produces. Those benefits are manifest all around us, so manifest that for many years now, it hasn’t seemed necessary to wonder about the philosophy behind it or question its tenets. Connecting enhances life on so many levels, it’s common sense to conclude that one should be as connected as possible at all times. Digital maximalism is clearly a superior way of living. Except when it isn’t.”⁶³

⁵⁷ David Levy, *Mindful Tech*, 2.

⁵⁸ Postman, *Technopoly*, 12.

⁵⁹ Postman, *Technopoly*, 25.

⁶⁰ William Powers, *Hamlet’s Blackberry*, 35.

⁶¹ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 17-18.

⁶² James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 37.

⁶³ William Powers, *Hamlet’s Blackberry*, 35-36.

Postman sounded the alarm decades ago by warning us that that technology is both friend and enemy.⁶⁴ While technologies, like a friend, may make life easier cleaner, and longer, we often approach their adoption and implementation without examination of the consequences. Technologies' gifts are not without heavy cost. In a scathing indictment of technology gone wild, Postman wrote: "... the accusation can be made that the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of humanity. It creates a culture without a moral foundation. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living."⁶⁵

Postman also reminds us that uses of technology are largely determined by the structure of the technology itself.⁶⁶ In other words, its functions flow from its form. Applying this principle to our digital age, Felicia Wu Song suggests that today's digital companies have shifted their strategic model from "technology and social" to "attention and data." As a result, we now live in an "attention economy" where data-driven advertising rules the day.⁶⁷ Digital technologies today are designed and monetized to keep our attention. As Wu Song writes:

"Now it is taken for granted that being in the digital media business is to be deeply invested in figuring out how to attract and retain more of our attention on a daily basis, 'from cradle to grave' as the industry puts it. As a result, the most successful of digital media take great pains to develop algorithms that account for all they know about us and calculate the optimal way to keep us coming back to their site."⁶⁸

The design of today's digital technology along with blind faith and acceptance of its pervasive reach into our daily lives has created some cultural and personal challenges for our reckoning. Here, we consider a few dangers of the digital age.

⁶⁴ Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

Busyness

In this age of constant connectivity, we have lost the sabbatical rhythm between work and rest. Sleeping, breathing, beating hearts, and the seasons of the year all remind of this divinely created rhythm. After creating for six days, God rested on the seventh. As humans created in God's image, we desperately need the gift of Sabbath rest. While having the world at our fingertips and on our screens may be thrilling and rewarding, managing the resulting busyness is killing us. Author, minister, and therapist Wayne Muller captures the pervasive reach of busyness in our culture:

“As the founder of a public charity, I visit the large offices of wealthy donors, the crowded rooms of social service agencies, and the small houses of the poorest families. Remarkably, within this mosaic there is a universal refrain: *I am so busy*. It does not seem to matter if the people I speak with are doctors or day-care workers, shopkeepers or social workers, parents or teachers, nurses or lawyers, students or therapists, community activists or cooks. Whether they are Hispanic or Native American, Caucasian or Black, the more their lives speed up, the more they feel hurt, frightened, and isolated. Despite their good hearts and equally good intentions, their work in the world rarely feels light, pleasant, or healing. Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation. It becomes the standard greeting everywhere. *I am so busy*.”⁶⁹

Author and pastor Mark Buchanan laments the toll of busyness on our bodies by describing how stress contributed to his father's heart attack and sudden death. But Buchanan also sheds light on the spiritual threat of busyness: “Busyness makes us stop caring about the things we care about. And not only that, busyness also robs us of knowing God the way we might.”⁷⁰

Christian ministers are especially vulnerable to twisting busyness into a badge of honor. Since a minister's entire life and schedule are dedicated to serving God and others, an overpacked calendar may seem like a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord. It seems there are infinite

⁶⁹ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives*, (New York: Bantam, 1999), 2.

⁷⁰ Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006) 48.

ways to help others in the name of Jesus. And yet, we forget that we are finite creatures who have limitations and need rest. Reflecting on a time of physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that led to a breaking point, Author and attorney Justin Whitmel Earley writes:

“So, I was too busy, totally overcommitted, and living with a chaotic, packed schedule. But I thought I was different because *I had a calling*... only in retrospect did I realize that, while the house of my life was decorated with Christian content, the architecture of my habits was just like everyone else’s. And that life had been working for me – until it collapsed.”⁷¹

Even though our culture still arranges its time around a seven-day schedule, we tend to neglect the habit of Sabbath rest. In some circles, taking a day off is seen as quaint or even scandalous. While busyness and constant connection may be cultural status symbols of the digital age, these things can destroy us. The Genesis creation account reminds us that we have been created for a rhythm of work and rest. Just as God created for six days and rested on the seventh, as humans created in God’s image, we must recognize our need for times of digital disconnection and rest.

Distraction

As digital technologies multiply, so do the ways for us to stay busy and distracted: e-mails, texts, tweets, chats, pokes, comments, dm’s, alerts, tags, posts, links, photos, pop-ups, swipes, banners, ringtones, emojis, and more. Digital technology is designed for our attention. And now that digital mobile devices and networks are accessible almost anywhere in the world, wherever you go, “the global crowd comes with you.”⁷²

Our attention is the primary target of technology and marketing in the digital age. Devices, apps, software, and platforms are designed to keep our eyes and mind engaged as long

⁷¹ Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 4.

⁷² Powers, *Hamlet’s Blackberry*, 15.

as possible. Billions of dollars are spent every year, competing for our attention, and the range of digital products and services continues to multiply. “And the greater the range of opportunities to extend ourselves, the more challenging it becomes to choose what to pay attention to at this very moment.”⁷³

Jaron Lanier, author and computer scientist considered by some to be one of the founders of virtual reality, warns readers that social media modifies our behavior and makes our attention its muse. In *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Lanier’s issues a clear battle-cry of resistance against the onslaught and manipulation of social media.⁷⁴ Further, Lanier and others raise important questions about what the digital age is doing to our free will. Because so much marketing today is driven by vast and pervasive data-driven algorithms, our individual preferences, feelings, values, and choices are publicly available and monitored like never before. Digital companies feast on data about us every second we are online: what links we click on, what videos we watch, where we are when we do those things, who we are connecting with and when, and even what facial expressions we make in certain situations. Lanier warns:

“Now everyone who is on social media is getting individualized, continuously adjusted stimuli, without a break, as long as they use their smartphone. What might once have been called advertising must now be understood as continuous behavior modification on a titanic scale.”⁷⁵

A key to personal and societal wellbeing in a culture of constant connectivity is learning to use our attention wisely. As digital technology continues to extend its reach around the globe and deeper into our lives, choosing the focus of our attention becomes even more important. While the digital competition for our attention grows, our human attention capacity remains

⁷³ Levy, *Mindful Tech*, 3.

⁷⁴ Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018), 4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

unchanged. Some would even argue that attention spans have shrunk.⁷⁶ Either way, it is true that our time and attention capacity is limited.

Practical experience and observation reveal the pain of our distracted society. Have you experienced friends, couples and families who don't listen to each other because we are so focused on our phones? Have you ever been so distracted by digital stimulation or communication that you don't remember the journey from one place to the other? What about missing a present moment because you were wrapped up in a social media post? Driving while talking or texting on your phones is an example of a distraction that can lead to disaster. May we realize the same principle holds true as we navigate life and relationships in a digital age.

For Christians who desire to follow Jesus' greatest commandment,⁷⁷ we must find a way to stay focused on Christ in a digitally saturated world. This not only means learning to make digital choices that honor God by intentionally focusing our attention on what is good and holy, but also learning to apply Sabbath principles of rest, including times of disconnection from the distractions of the digital. In part three of this chapter, we will look at some suggestions for practicing Sabbath in a digital age. But first, let us consider a couple additional threats constant connectivity poses to personhood.

Addiction

“While tech enthusiasts and skeptics might debate endlessly about the gains and losses of our digital world, the emerging data from neuroscience suggests, at best, we don't actually know what the digital is doing to our brains. And, at worst, we'd better start making some new public service announcements that declare: ‘This is your brain on digital.’”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Levy, *Mindful Tech*, 3.

⁷⁷ Mark 12:30-31.

⁷⁸ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 46.

A 2011 study asked two-hundred students at the University of Maryland to go on a twenty-four hour fast from digital media and technology.⁷⁹ After the digital fast, students consistently reported being bored, feeling left behind about news and events, and feeling disconnected and isolated from friends and family. When describing their feelings during the fast, these students used words common to those struggling with addictions: *jittery*, *very anxious*, *frantically craving*, *withdrawal*, *miserable*, and *unbearable*. This range of negative reactions to fasting from digital media makes sense when science shows that we do actually get hooked on digital stimulation.⁸⁰

Another 2012 study found that the compulsion to engage in social media can become significantly harder to resist than the desire for tobacco, coffee, alcohol, or eating.⁸¹ Studies like these show that digital notifications activate the release of dopamine, opiates, and other pleasure chemicals in our brains. When this happens, we feel a rush of satisfaction and develop an appetite for more. This is the same neurological pattern researchers have found when studying drug, alcohol, and gambling addictions. In addition to the addictive potential of the digital, there is increasing concern about the effect of screen time and digital usage on our health and the resilience of our brains. Some research shows that digital use and heavy multitasking takes up working memory that fatigues our brains and inhibits creativity.⁸² Other researchers have found that our current digital practices are causing our cortisol levels to rise more frequently.⁸³

While individuals struggling with stress and pressures from the digital world may direct their frustrations toward notifications from particular phones, apps, or social media platforms, it is important to remember that we are being shaped by an entire digital ecology. Our digital habits

⁷⁹ Susan Moeller, “A Day Without Media,” International Center for Media and Public Agenda, 2010, <https://withoutmedia.wordpress.com>.

⁸⁰ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 47.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸² Matt Richtel, “Outdoors and Out of Reach: Studying the Brain,” New York Times, August 16, 2010.

⁸³ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 49.

are not only formed by personal choices, but also by a digital culture structured to reward constant connectivity and continuous use. Walter Brueggemann's 2014 book, *Sabbath As Resistance*, hits the bullseye where he contends that practicing Sabbath in the digital age will require saying "no" to the culture of now. He writes:

"In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods. Such an act of resistance requires enormous intentionality and communal reinforcement amid the barrage of seductive pressures from the insatiable insistences of the market, with its intrusion into every part of our life from the family to the national budget."⁸⁴

Polarization

*"Deeply troubling is the digital's role in furthering political polarization, extremism, Christian nationalism, and the entrenched systems of racism and sexism."*⁸⁵

There is growing concern that the digital age, especially social media, is damaging our capacity for empathy and fueling political and cultural polarization. Many point to data-driven digital algorithms as the culprit, especially how these function in social media. Lanier writes:

"Not only is your worldview distorted, but you have less awareness of other people's worldviews. You are banished from the experiences of other groups being manipulated separately. Their experiences are as opaque to you as the algorithms that are driving your experiences. This is an epochal development. The version of the world you are seeing is invisible to the people who misunderstand you, and vice versa."⁸⁶

Interestingly, Google's stated mission is to "organize the world's information and to make it accessible and useful."⁸⁷ But while this sounds benevolent, Wu Song warns:

"Google exerts an extraordinary amount of energy gathering data about us and feeding that data into algorithmic gatekeepers that actively control and deliver what content Google thinks we will find most 'useful' or relevant. Indeed what Google means by 'organizing' is actually a proprietary process of customizing what we see on our screens based on our prior history of clicks and reams of other data we've given over and given off on other websites."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, preface.

⁸⁵ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 13.

⁸⁶ Lanier, *Ten Arguments*, 83.

⁸⁷ Google, "Our Mission," www.google.com

⁸⁸ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 40.

Our data-driven, algorithmic digital culture is creating what many call “filter bubbles.” A filter bubble refers to the digital information we encounter that has been tailored specifically for us based on algorithmic data. Most of us do not know this filtering is happening. We may think that what we see is the shared world everyone experiences, not realizing that what appears on our screens has been sifted and selected for our particular interests and appetites. Perhaps most troubling, unless we completely destroy our profiles and wipe clean our devices on a regular basis, “this filter bubble is a controlled information environment from which we will never be able to remove ourselves.”⁸⁹

Filter bubbles easily lead to digital “echo chambers” where we become accustomed to having our views and opinions affirmed. The algorithms that are designed to give us what companies think we want also lead us to fewer encounters with diverse people and perspectives. As Lanier notes: “Your own views are soothingly reinforced, except when you are presented with the most irritating versions of opposing views, as calculated by algorithms. Soothe or savage: whatever best keeps your attention.”⁹⁰ This creates digital silos that threaten to damage human empathy.

Empathy is a distinctly human capability “to identify with or understand another’s situation or feelings.”⁹¹ Some have said empathy is “the fuel that runs a decent society.”⁹² And, developing empathy is vital to Christian formation and discipleship. In Philippians 2:1-11, the Apostle Paul urges followers of Christ to imitate the “self-emptying” example of Jesus: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than

⁸⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁰ Lanier, *Ten Arguments*, 80-81.

⁹¹ www.yourdictionary.com/empathy

⁹² Lanier, *Ten Arguments*, 80.

yourselves” and “look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others...” How is this possible in a world of filter bubbles and echo chambers?

Created for Communion, Settling for Connection...⁹³

Technological progress has not granted us peace. We are not content despite unprecedented connectivity to people, entertainment, news, and information. Wars, anxiety, racism, fear, and angst still abound in the digital age. Wu Song concludes:

“This quality of permanent connectivity that our online capacities offer us has not proven to grant us peace. To the contrary, we remain restless and hungry for something we can’t put our fingers on. Why? Because even though we desire connection, what we long for and are actually created for is something far deeper. What we actually need is communion.”⁹⁴

Being created in the image of God, humans are relational beings. Our digital connectivity shapes our relationships, but it cannot satisfy our souls. However, discerning our digital habits and practicing Sabbath can be a significant path to human flourishing, communion with God, and authentic Christian discipleship in a digital age. That is the focus of our attention in part three.

Part Three: Practicing Sabbath in the Digital Age

*“Against the relentlessness of our digital ecology, the church already possesses one of the most powerful and necessary means of counter-liturgy that the heritage of Judaeo-Christianity has to offer: it is called the Sabbath.”*⁹⁵

David Foster Wallace began his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech with this story: “There are two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes,

⁹³ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, Chapter Five title

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

‘What the ?#!* is water?’”⁹⁶ Digital technology profoundly shapes our lives and culture. And yet, for most of us, this reality has become such a way of life that our digital habits are often invisible and unnoticed, like the water in which we swim. Whether it’s work schedules, social media scrolling, checking emails, screen time, family time, or internet searches, these things define vast portions of our lives, but we rarely give them much thought. Author Justin Earley contends: “But just because we don’t choose our habits doesn’t mean we don’t have them. On the contrary, it usually means someone else chose them for us, and usually that someone doesn’t have our best interests in mind.”⁹⁷

Philosopher James K.A. Smith describes these taken-for-granted societal norms as “secular liturgies” that shape us.⁹⁸ These secular liturgies form habits that mold our hearts and guide our worship.

“... secular liturgies ultimately misdirect our desires toward those things that falsely claim to fulfill our longings and that manage to draw us away from the very communion with God for which we were created... these secular liturgies routinely encourage us to bow down to the culturally endorsed gods of our society rather than the Creator God who loves and seeks to make us and all of creation whole.”⁹⁹

When secular liturgies shape the lives of God’s people more than following the pattern of Christ, our witness to the world is usurped by the loudest and most influential cultural pressures and voices. If churches are unaware of the secular liturgies that shape us, or if we refuse to resist culture’s shaping power in favor of being formed by the Spirit into the character and image of Christ, then we lose our effectiveness as holy people set apart for God’s mission and purposes.

⁹⁶ David Foster Wallace, “2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address,” May 21, 2005, Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin, <http://bulletin-archive.kenyon.edu>

⁹⁷ Earley, *The Common Rule*, 7.

⁹⁸ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 86.

⁹⁹ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 134.

We live in a digital age that pushes us toward habits of consumerism, constant connectivity, instant gratification, unlimited information, individualism, and endless entertainment. In part two of this chapter, we looked at some of the dangers posed by secular liturgies of our digital age: busyness, distraction, addiction, and polarization. Many more dangers could be added: depression, anxiety, absence, boredom, loneliness, etc. But now, let's focus on ways to rediscover and reclaim the divine gift of Sabbath as an effective means of resistance; a "counter-liturgy" to the secular liturgies of our digital culture.

Evaluating

A first step toward practicing Sabbath in the digital age is examining our personal level of engagement with technology. Most people are unaware of how much time or how often they are using their digital devices. In *Restless Devices*, Felicia Wu Song suggests an experiment in "digital stocktaking."¹⁰⁰ This experiment starts with listing ten nondigital activities you have not done in a long time, if ever, but would like to do in the next three months (e.g., bake, hike, go to a museum, visit a friend). Wu Song's stocktaking continues with the following suggestions:

Monitoring Digital Usage: Download an app or find the feature on your phone that monitors phone usage. Before tracking write down how much time you think you spend on your phone each day. Track your phone usage for five days. Then, compare your data from the app to your original guesses. Does anything surprise you?

Under the Microscope: For one day, give very close attention to your phone usage. Journal your responses to questions like: In what situations do I use my phone? Are there triggers that motivate me to reach for my phone? How do I feel when I don't have my phone? After twenty-four hours, review your notes and reflect on the trends you observe.

Motivation Check: Create a visual reminder on your phone (post-it note, or screen saver) that says: "Wait!" or "Stop!" Each time you see the reminder ask yourself: What am I picking up my phone to do? Why now instead of later? What else could I do right now besides check my phone? After observing yourself for two full days, reflect in writing on this experiment.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 90-93.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

An honest evaluation of our digital habits is a good starting place for practicing Sabbath in a digital age. Author David Levy adds: “When we see our habits and pattern for ourselves, we are in a better position to make meaningful changes.”¹⁰² Thus, by exposing our personal level of engagement with digital technology and reflecting on its impact on our emotions and relationships, we get a better understanding of our need for “digital Sabbath.” While Sabbath has often been limited to its traditional reference as a literal twenty-four-hour period of rest, I am suggesting here that digital Sabbath be understood in a broader sense: ways of *resisting* constant digital connectivity and *embracing* habits that foster love for God and our neighbors.

Resisting

“More than any other discipline fasting reveals the things that control us.”¹⁰³ Sabbath-resistance in the digital age may mean a day where we “unplug” or fast from all digital media and technology. For more than a decade, Felicia Wu Song has assigned a twenty-four-hour fast from all digital communication and media to students in her *Internet and Society* course. The goal of Wu Song’s experiment is “to burst the bubble of the taken-for-granted and start wondering about freedom.”¹⁰⁴ After a digital fast, one student reflected:

“I used to think of my phone as an extension of myself. I saw it as a part of me — I was anxious without it and could not imagine cutting down my use of it by much let alone cutting it out completely. Now I recognize that it has only become a necessity to my life as culture has evolved to encourage us to adapt tech.”¹⁰⁵

Another approach to digital fasting involves discerning which technologies to abstain from and for what period of time. If giving up all digital technologies is not an option, David

¹⁰² Levy, *Mindful Tech*, 11.

¹⁰³ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 55.

¹⁰⁴ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 62-64.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

Levy suggests “mindful unplugging” from certain devices and apps for at least twenty-four hours, followed by observation and development of personal guidelines. Levy reports three main benefits from those who have followed this practice: increased productivity and focus, better use of their time, and greater relaxation (reduction in stress).¹⁰⁶

New “focus” features on iPhones can also be extremely helpful in resisting the crush of constant digital notifications. Users can program and activate phones settings like “do not disturb,” “work,” “sleep,” or “personal,” which restricts certain notifications and apps at specific times during the day. Ironically, this is a method of using digital technology to stop or slow the usage of digital technology. Like beer companies running ads for the “responsible” consumption of alcoholic beverages, it seems we are entering a phase of the digital age where the tech industry itself is acknowledging and encouraging the value and practice of digital sabbath (or at least breaks from constant connectivity and excessive screen time).

Another act of Sabbath-resistance in a digital age is curating our exposure to media and the stories we consume. Endless stories stream through our digital devices. The internet and smartphones have exponentially increased the amounts and kinds of stories available to us at any given moment. Justin Earley notes that: “...technological and cultural shifts have collided in such a way that stories no longer sit on shelves and wait for us to pick them. They come at us. They pick us — sometimes in rapid and aggressive streams of media. Curating stories used to be a matter of luxury. Now, it’s a matter of necessity — perhaps even urgency.”¹⁰⁷ Earley further suggests that a good way to start curating media intake is through a “time audit” that involves tracking all media consumption for a week and then setting a four-hour time limit (goal) for the

¹⁰⁶ Levy, *Mindful Tech*, 142.

¹⁰⁷ Earley, *The Common Rule*, 112.

next week.¹⁰⁸ Another tool for curating stories is evaluating our digital media feed. Since data algorithms predict and present the stories we see, our media feed tells us a lot about who we are and what we love. If you don't like your feed, then it may be time to add, cut, and curate what you watch.

Embracing

Theologian Marva Dawn emphasizes that “Sabbath keeping is not just negative ceasing.”¹⁰⁹ In addition to resisting ways digital usage shapes us, it is also important to discover and embrace counter-liturgies (actions and habits) that help form us into the people God created us to be. Justin Earley writes that by developing Sabbath habits “we try train our bodies and our hearts to love God as he actually is and to turn to our neighbors as we were made to do.”¹¹⁰ Intentionally embracing Sabbath is not only a way to live as God's peculiar people in the world but also readies us to serve the word more effectively. Marva Dawn adds: “...Sabbath keeping changes the world. The practice does not remove us from the world — as some sort of oddballs who retreat every seven days into our own private “religious” sphere. Rather, it plunges us more deeply into the world and its needs because it carries us more deeply into the heart of God.”¹¹¹

Here are a few counter-liturgies for *embracing* God's formative work in our digital age:

Kneeling prayer three times a day: prayer is one of the keystone habits of spiritual formation. Kneeling is a great way to mark the moment with physicality and humility.¹¹²

Create a new morning and bedtime routine: so often we count on our phones to greet us in the mornings and to put us in bed at night. For fifteen minutes after you wake up and before you go to bed, try new activities that don't involve your phone (physical activity, reading, journaling, praying, music, notes of gratitude, etc.)¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁰⁹ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 101.

¹¹⁰ Earley, *The Common Rule*, 28.

¹¹¹ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 146.

¹¹² Earley, *The Common Rule*, 45.

¹¹³ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 147.

Create a new sacred zone around your bed: make your habituated reach for the digital a little harder by changing where your phone sleeps at night. Charge it across the room or in another room.¹¹⁴

One hour with phone off: we were made for presence, but so often our phones are the cause of our absence. Turning off our phone for an hour a day is a way to turn our gaze to each other (spouse, children, coworkers, friends, or neighbors).¹¹⁵

Scripture before phone: daily immersion in Scripture resists the anxiety of emails, the anger of news, and the envy of social media. Instead, it forms us daily in our true identity as dearly loved children of the King.¹¹⁶

Work of the People

The word *liturgy* is derived from Greek roots that mean “work of the people.” Just as secular liturgies have cultural sway because we engage in them together, our digital counter-liturgies have more power when they are practiced together. Our society presumes that digital practices ought to be private matters of individual discretion. But does it have to be this way? What would it look like if groups of people worked together to develop creative new counter-liturgies that could help each other resist the crushing connectivity and secular shaping of our digital age? In his book *Transforming Our Days*, theologian Richard Gaillardetz reminds readers that an authentic Christian community is the best place to discover and practice counter-liturgies that help us embrace the shaping of the Spirit and resist the dangers of the digital age. Gaillardetz writes: “The best way to avoid succumbing to the tendencies of our technologically driven consumer culture is to situate the spiritual quest within the commitment to an authentic community.”¹¹⁷ Author Mark Buchanan also emphasizes the communal focus of liturgy: “Liturgy is done by me — I am invited, perhaps required, to play a role — but, it’s not about me.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 148.

¹¹⁵ Earley, *The Common Rule*, 77.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹¹⁷ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 88.

It's about us. It is about the Other. Its purpose is to benefit the entire community — to provide access or protection to all.”¹¹⁸

For thousands of years, spiritual communities have been using “rules of life” as a sort of liturgy, or a way of communal spiritual formation. Among the most well known were developed by church fathers and ancient monastics like Saint Augustine and Saint Benedict. A rule of life is “intended to pattern communal life in the direction and purpose of love instead of chaos and decay.”¹¹⁹ Some are suggesting the digital age, with its overwhelming connectivity and life-shaping power, is a ripe time for reviving the communal purpose of a “rule of life.”

In *The Common Rule*, Justin Earley suggests eight habits of purpose in an age of distraction.¹²⁰ Weekly habits include sabbath, fasting from something for twenty-four hours, curating media to four hours, and a one-hour conversation with a friend. Daily habits suggested are kneeling prayer three times a day, one hour with phone off, Scripture before phone, and one meal with others. After describing each of these practices, Earley reminds readers: “The Common Rule is supposed to be practiced in communities. That’s where the ‘common’ part comes from.”¹²¹ What truly makes Earley’s plan an effective liturgy is that the eight habits are not simply to be practiced in isolation, but as part of a shared journey in Christian community.

Practicing Sabbath in a digital age is a daunting challenge. In a culture of constant connectivity with digital technologies that increasingly demand our attention, developing habits of resistance and embracing habits of spiritual formation feels like swimming upstream. The importance of encouragement and accountability from friends and a supportive Christian community cannot be overstated.

¹¹⁸ Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, 9.

¹¹⁹ Earley, *The Common Rule*, 14.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

CHAPTER 4: PASTORS IN PARTICULAR - CLERGY WELLBEING AND SABBATH

Sabbath is a divine habit and gift. God created for six days and rested on the seventh, establishing a sacred rhythm of work and rest for all creation.¹²² From the beginning, humans have wrestled with work-rest rhythms, often neglecting Sabbath at our own peril. In this digital age of constant connectivity, it is more important than ever to rediscover, receive, and practice Sabbath in order to thrive as humans created in God's image. This chapter focuses on the wellbeing of Christian pastors today and ways that practicing or neglecting Sabbath is connected to flourishing in life and ministry.

Part One: The Unique Role of Pastors

*"Pastors do not get into difficulty because they forget they are pastors, they get into difficulty because they forget they are persons"*¹²³ – Dr. Chris Adams, Executive Director of the Flourishing in Ministry Project at Rosemead School of Psychology

We must never forget that pastors are more important than their very sacred and important role. Pastors are persons, created in the image of God. So, as we approach this chapter, we do so with a foundational understanding of human worth and flourishing. Our worth does not come from the roles we fill or the work we perform but is intrinsically part of who we are as human beings created in the image of God. In *Flourishing in Ministry* clergy wellbeing expert Dr. Matt Bloom reminds readers that pastors are human beings with real needs and feelings:

"To be sure, these are real people who are flawed and wonderful and sinful and marvelous, just like the rest of us. They have their own darker sides, and they would be adamant about describing 'their ten thousand faults, foibles, and follies,' as one pastor put it. And yet it is these very real and quite amazing people who fill this challenging, difficult, exasperating, but essentially important role of the pastor."¹²⁴

¹²² Genesis 2:2

¹²³ Christopher J. Adams, *A Guide to Flourishing: Personal Wellbeing and Vocational Ministry in the Church of the Nazarene* (Lenexa, KS: Church of the Nazarene, 2021), 8.

¹²⁴ Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), ix-x.

As Director of the Flourishing in Ministry project since 2009, Bloom's research recognizes the humanity of pastors but also empathizes with the difficulties of pastoral ministry: "Pastoral ministry is complex, challenging, often arduous, sometimes exhausting, and almost always very important for the lives of church members and communities."¹²⁵ Describing the work of ministry as complex, continuous, and diverse, Bloom shows how pastoral stress accumulates over time and can lead to an erosion of wellbeing, depletion and burnout:

"... pastoral work is challenging and difficult. Pastors are often face to face with human suffering. Their days are long and their workload is heavy. Their work days can sometimes be full of the unhappy experiences of others. Yet pastors often overlook these daily experiences – they are focused on caring for others, not themselves. Science shows that these negative experiences may be piling up ... As a consequence, their health declines, their decision making suffers, and they are less effective in their work and less capable of dealing with challenges and difficulties. When the pile gets too big, it collapses on them. This is when exhaustion and burnout set in."¹²⁶

Dr. Chris Adams focuses particularly on ministers in the Church of the Nazarene with these words: "At its best, our holiness tradition reminds us that the sanctifying work of God involves all of who we are as human beings. Consequently, holiness is not at odds with stewarding the greatest resource God will use in your ministry: you."¹²⁷

Pastoral Attrition and Wellbeing

So, how are is the church doing with stewarding our greatest resources? Are we taking care of ourselves and our ministers in ways that honor God and each other? Recent research on the wellbeing and attrition of pastors indicates that there are problems with the stewardship of our human resources.

¹²⁵ Ibid., x.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹²⁷ Adams, *A Guide to Flourishing*, 8.

In her research on clergy burnout, Dr. Trisha Peach presents some alarming statistics from various studies on rates of pastoral attrition.¹²⁸ A Duke University study discovered that 85 percent of seminary graduates would not be in ministry five years after graduation. Lifeway's research affirmed these statistics, finding that four out of every five pastoral graduates would not make it to their fifth year of ministry.¹²⁹ An Alban Institute and Fuller Seminary study found that 50 percent of all ministers will drop out permanently within their first five years.¹³⁰ Another Duke University study states that as many as 90 percent of pastors will have dropped out of ministry before they have served twenty years.¹³¹ And even worse, 90 percent of all pastors dropped out of ministry before retirement.¹³² All these studies agree that the situation is dire.

What is leading to these alarmingly high rates of pastoral attrition? And how can church leaders better understand and encourage pastors, their families, and the congregations they serve? These are some of the leading questions that led to a Lilly Foundation grant provided to study pastoral wellbeing. This grant has funded a thorough and robust study known as the Flourishing in Ministry project.

The Flourishing in Ministry (FIM) project has identified four building blocks of wellbeing for clergy: daily wellbeing (happiness); resilience, authenticity, and thriving.¹³³ These characteristics build on each other, so when one dimension goes up it tends to boost the others

¹²⁸ Trisha R. Peach, *Burnout, Timeout, and Fallout: A Study of Why Pastors Leave Ministry and What Might Make Them Stay* (Saint Paul, MN: Bethel University, 2022), 49-51.

¹²⁹ Thomas Rainer, "The Dangerous Third Year of Pastoral Tenure," *Charisma Leadership Magazine*, June 14, 2014. Accessed October 30, 2022. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/the-dangerous-third-year-of-pastoral-tenure.html>.

Charisma Leadership Magazine, 2014.

¹³⁰ Kathryn Roads Meek, et. al., "Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 4 (2003) 339-347.

¹³¹ "Clergy Losses Are Massive," Ministering to Ministers Foundation, updated 2016. <https://ministeringtoministers.org/clergy-losses-are-massive>, accessed October 30, 2022.

¹³² Kristin Stewart, "Keeping Your Pastor: An Emerging Church Challenge," Thesis Project (Oakland City University, 2009) 107.

¹³³ Bloom, *Flourishing*, 2.

and vice versa. Pastors need sufficient wellbeing across all four to experience flourishing. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus only on the responses regarding daily wellbeing. This is the dimension that first declines for clergy, and if it gets too low it can weaken the other dimensions as well. From approximately ten thousand pastors of diverse churches across twenty denominations, Bloom reports the following regarding clergy daily wellbeing: while 80 percent of pastors are satisfied with their jobs, approximately 40 percent report low satisfaction with their overall life and high levels of daily stress. Most troubling is that nearly a quarter of pastors find their daily life challenging both in their ministry work and their lives outside of ministry. “These leaders are clearly in difficult and dangerous wellbeing territory.”¹³⁴

As part of the FIM Leadership Team, Dr. Chris Adams applied this model to Nazarene pastors and produced a report in 2021: *A Guide to Flourishing: Personal Wellbeing and Vocational Ministry in the Church of the Nazarene*. Adams found that dangerous levels of ill-being were still present among Nazarene pastors but were slightly lower than ministers from other denominations. From 860 Nazarene pastors participating in the survey, 15 percent (compared to 25 percent overall) scored low on daily wellbeing. However, only 26 percent of Nazarene pastors (compared to 50 percent overall) scored in the high daily wellbeing category. The majority (59 percent) of Nazarene pastors reported moderate daily wellbeing (compared with 25 percent overall).¹³⁵ So, what do we make of all these statistics?

Daily wellbeing is a leading indicator of flourishing lives and ministries. As daily wellbeing rises, so does resilience and retention. If we want to see more clergy staying in ministry for the long haul, we would do well to find ways of improving daily wellbeing and

¹³⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

¹³⁵ Adams, *A Guide to Flourishing*, 15.

resilience among our pastors. Pastors embracing and practicing Sabbath, with the encouragement of other pastors and church leaders, is one of the pathways to flourishing.

In his *Guide*, Adams includes a section on “Increasing Daily Wellbeing.” Here, he suggests two major categories: “Nurture Your Soul and “Care for Your Body.” His first suggested spiritual practice is:

“Prioritize Sabbath. Sabbath is an invitation to receive the grace of being a beloved creation of God, who ‘knows how we are formed, and remembers we are dust’ (Psalm 103:14 NIV). Rest and renewal are the focus of Sabbath. Take daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly breaks from ministry work for restorative rest and purposeful recreation. (If you take Mondays off currently, try taking off a day later in the week when you can engage in something restorative, and truly enjoy your Sabbath.)¹³⁶

Additional recommendations include practicing silence, meditating on God’s Word, exercising, improving sleep, managing adrenaline, establishing boundaries, pacing technology, adding margin, and finding a restorative niche.¹³⁷ Notice how keeping a Sabbath day and rhythm empowers all of these other suggestions.

Knowing about Sabbath is not enough to improve clergy wellbeing and resilience. We must come to *know* Sabbath and practice its rhythms. To flourish, we pastors and church leaders must come to a place in our lives and ministry where we recognize our desperation for Sabbath. A.J. Swoboda confesses: “I had become a quivering mass of availability. A need-filler. A gofer. A Christian handyman, available to everyone and everything but the Lord my God.”¹³⁸ Swoboda looks to Jesus as the ultimate model of Sabbath-keeping, noting that Christ did not allow a busy schedule of ministry to control him, but intentionally took time away for prayer, rest, and nourishment: “Jesus lived a rhythm completely different from anyone around him. The rhythm of

¹³⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 24-30.

¹³⁸ Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 32.

his life was, in itself, a prophetic act against the rhythms of the world.”¹³⁹ Ruth Haley Barton also describes her “wake-up call” and confesses her desperation and dependence on Sabbath rhythms:

“I am quite certain I would not be alive today if it were not for God’s gift of sabbath. And not just a weekly sabbath day, but also sabbath moments cultivated in solitude and silence, and sabbatical seasons for letting the soil of my soul lie fallow. These rhythms have given shape and form to a life – my life – lived as a creature in the presence of my loving Creator; these sabbath rhythms have quite literally kept me in the game.”¹⁴⁰

Pastoral Stress and Burnout

“Burnout is not a made-up buzzword. It’s real.”¹⁴¹

The number one reason pastors give for leaving ministry is burnout.¹⁴² The term *burnout* first emerged in the 1970’s to describe those in helping professions who were feeling perpetually drained and weary, suffering a loss of motivation and commitment, and developing cynical attitudes.¹⁴³ Symptoms include physical and emotional exhaustion, a detachment from assignments, and feelings of ineffectiveness.¹⁴⁴ Burnout has been described as emotional collapse or breakdown that can occur as a result of stress.¹⁴⁵ Jackson Andrew Hester, researcher and author of *Enduring Ministry*, makes the bold claim that “pastoral burnout is now such a widespread problem some call it an *epidemic*.”¹⁴⁶ Matt Bloom paints a vivid and painful picture of pastoral burnout:

¹³⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁴⁰ Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest: From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2022), 3.

¹⁴¹ Jackson Andrew Hester, *Enduring Ministry: Wisdom from Veteran Pastors for Managing Stress and Avoiding Burnout* (Mobile, AL: Areopagus Publishing, 2022), 21.

¹⁴² Greg Scott and Rachel Lovell, “The Rural Pastors Initiative: Addressing Isolation and Burnout in Rural Ministry,” *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 1 (2014). 7.

¹⁴³ Hester, *Enduring Ministry*, 20.

¹⁴⁴ Travis Wilkins, *The Pastor’s Sabbath: Addressing Pastoral Burnout and Suicide with Practical Solutions* (Middletown, DE: Ahava House Publishing, 2022), 22.

¹⁴⁵ Gillian D. Abernathy, Carolyn L. Grannum, Rick Williamson, and Joseph M. Currier. “The Pastors Empowerment Program: A Resilience Education Intervention to Prevent Clergy Burnout.” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice Journal* 3, no. 3 (2016). 175-186.

¹⁴⁶ Hester, *Enduring Ministry*, 20.

“Burnout begins with fatigue and progresses to exhaustion ... eventually as exhaustion and ineffectiveness build, burned out pastors experience despair, detachment, and sometimes cynicism. After this point, things become very dire, as people ‘crash and burn’ or have a ‘nervous breakdown’ (many pastors use phrases like these). They can no longer continue, so they give up or break down.”¹⁴⁷

Research on pastoral resilience and burnout is concerning. Bloom’s *Flourishing in Ministry* study reports that across denominations, more than one-third of all pastors report significant levels of burnout.¹⁴⁸ And, according to the same study, pastors who are new to ministry and some long-tenured pastors who are close to retirement seem especially prone to burnout.¹⁴⁹ In *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving*, the result of a seven-year study of faithful and fruitful pastors, educators Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie highlight the importance of spiritual formation and self-care as vital components in developing resilience and avoiding burnout. Of particular interest are the emphases on Sabbath and rest as ways of developing greater resilience and longevity in pastoral ministry. The authors note the difficulty in finding clarity as to how and when various pastors take time for Sabbath but underscore the absolute necessity of rest and Sabbath-keeping for the mental and spiritual health of clergy.¹⁵⁰

Self-care is described as “the ongoing development of the whole person, including the emotional, spiritual, relational, and physical areas of life.”¹⁵¹ It includes things like adequate sleep, time away from work, regular exercise, and a nutritious diet. These may seem like obvious human needs, but many pastors neglect self-care. In *Pastor as Person*, author and consultant Gary Harbough states: “Nutrition, physical exercise, and other forms of self-care were at lower

¹⁴⁷ Bloom, *Flourishing*, 18

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁵⁰ Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 94-95.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 61.

levels for pastors than for the general population.”¹⁵² Another study shows that 76 percent of clergy were either overweight or obese compared to 61 percent of the general population.¹⁵³ As another example, a survey of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina, revealed alarmingly high rates of obesity, diabetes, asthma, arthritis, hypertension, and depression among the pastors studied.¹⁵⁴ Why are self-care and resting so difficult for pastors? *Resilient Ministry* poses three answers to this question: 1) unrealistic expectations of the pastoral role; 2) pastors don’t view self-care as an ethical imperative; and 3) pastors may “spiritualize away” their need for it.¹⁵⁵ Hester specifically describes the pastoral struggle with rest: “Whether it’s an urgent passion to introduce people to Christ and help them grow in the faith... or because of workaholic tendencies, the Savior Complex, a sense of false guilt, a bad habit of people-pleasing, etc., many pastors have a hard time going “off-duty” and resting.”¹⁵⁶

The idea of self-care may sound selfish. But taking the time for responsible self-care is vital to flourishing in ministry. In *The Flourishing Pastor*, author and pastor Tom Nelson reflects on responsible self-care motivated by a healthy self-love:

“When I speak of proper self-love fueling proper self-care, I am not talking about carnal narcissism or egocentric self-absorption. Nor am I suggesting there are not times for pastoral leaders to sacrifice in serving others and moving the mission forward. What I now realize is that proper self-care is not selfishness; it is a primary stewardship of God-honoring servant leadership. Without proper self-care, the integral life is not possible, and neither is effective leadership over the long haul of the pastoral calling.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Gary L. Harbaugh, *Pastor as Person: Maintaining Pastoral Integrity in the Choices and Challenges of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 47.

¹⁵³ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 61.

¹⁵⁴ Hester, *Enduring Ministry*, 22.

¹⁵⁵ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 61-62.

¹⁵⁶ Hester, *Enduring Ministry*, 105.

¹⁵⁷ Tom Nelson, *The Flourishing Pastor: Recovering the Lost Art of Shepherd Leadership* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 111.

An essential component of self-care is rest. “Rest isn’t a sign of weakness. And it isn’t a dereliction of your pastoral duties. Rest is vital.”¹⁵⁸ In *Subversive Sabbath*, Swoboda confesses his limitations, and points readers to the example of Jesus: “In living for everyone else, I had been trying to be omnipotent and omnipresent, neither of which God desired for me to be. As I read the Gospels, it became clearer and clearer to me that Jesus himself was not selfless... Jesus ate. Jesus drank. Jesus slept. He took care of himself. And never once was Jesus hurried from place to place, controlled by a busy schedule.”¹⁵⁹

The root idea behind *Sabbath* is to: stop, quit, rest, pause, or take a break. Yet for many pastors, the idea of taking a sabbath (let alone a day off) is foreign. For many in ministry, working seven days a week has become the norm rather than the exception. In *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson laments pastoral neglect of the fourth commandment:

“It is diagnostically significant that of all the commandments not one is treated with such contemptuous disregard as this one... we conscientiously catechize our people on the fifth commandment and without a blush flaunt our workaholic sabbath-breaking as evidence of an extraordinary piety.”¹⁶⁰

Hester concludes: “The pastor who works 70 hours a week doesn’t deserve our praise, he (she) deserves our pity. If he (she) burns out, he (she) won’t be able to help anyone.”¹⁶¹

Sabbath Steps

Matt Bloom and his team suggest three essentials for avoiding burnout and boosting wellbeing: *small steps, step back, and step together*.¹⁶² These steps are described in *Flourishing in Ministry* with a distinctly “Sabbath style and flavor” of stopping to rest and reflect. First,

¹⁵⁸ Hester, *Enduring Ministry*, 107.

¹⁵⁹ Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 33.

¹⁶⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 50-51.

¹⁶¹ Hester, *Enduring Ministry*, 107.

¹⁶² Bloom, *Flourishing*, 102.

taking small steps refers to simple practices that often take just a few minutes each day, yet add up over time to big positive changes in wellbeing. Just as burnout happens one stressful event at a time, research also shows that wellbeing improves one small step at a time. Bloom's team has provided a fantastic resource to improve clergy wellbeing at www.flourishinginministry.com that offers "wise small step wellbeing practices" from seven different categories: tranquil (calming); receptive (appreciative); engaged (active); joyful (encouraging); confident (self-assuring); dedicated (spirited); and connecting (relational).¹⁶³ Pastors can use this resource to choose and experiment with practices that best fit their style, preferences, or ministry context. Examples include suggestions like taking five minutes each day to engage in some form of contemplative or mindfulness practice. As Matt Bloom notes:

"All that is necessary is to find a practice that helps you quiet your mind, calm your body, and focus your attention on something positive. So five minutes of lectio divina or singing a praise hymn or sitting quietly in the presence of God is not only a good spiritual discipline, but is also a wise wellbeing practice."¹⁶⁴

Stepping back is an important move too. Bloom goes on to say: "The second essential for building and sustaining wellbeing is step back from the flow of life to gain perspective on your good days and bad days."¹⁶⁵ Stepping back is pausing to reflect on our day, becoming more aware of the highs and lows that make it feel like a good day or a bad day. What are today's positive activities, events, and interactions? What stressful tasks, experiences, and exchanges occurred today? Our days move so fast, we often lose track of the highs and lows that lead to good days or bad days. Bloom suggests an activity called "Map Your Day" that helps pastors track each day's highs and lows.¹⁶⁶ Over time, this activity helps a person see patterns so that

¹⁶³ Ibid., 103.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 104.

he/she can begin to take small steps to bring in more highs and mitigate the lows, leading toward greater daily wellbeing.

Stepping together is the last essential Bloom lists for improving daily wellbeing.

“Whenever possible, join with at least one other person to either support you in taking small steps to take small steps together.”¹⁶⁷ Pastors, for example, might find a group of clergy who would be willing to map their days. Sharing ministry highs and lows with peers “could create opportunities to support each other and yield new insights” that would enhance wellbeing.¹⁶⁸ In fact, Bloom believes so strongly in stepping together that he dedicates two chapters in *Flourishing in Ministry* to the importance of social support that fuels positive wellbeing.

Finishing the Race

“... *I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me...*” *Acts 20:24, NIV*

Welch preacher Christmas Evans proclaimed: “I would rather burn out than rust out in the service of the Lord.”¹⁶⁹ One of Evans’ contemporaries, James Berkeley, responded:

“I admire the bravado. It sounds dedicated, bold, and stirring. However, when I view the burnt-outs and almost burnt-outs who lie by the ecclesiastical road, the glory fails to reach me. Is there not a third alternative? ... (Acts 20:24) is the model I choose to follow. I want to neither burn out nor rust out. I want to finish the race.”¹⁷⁰

We want and need pastors to finish the race. And yet, with so much stress, burnout, and attrition today, what are the paths to greater wellbeing that will enable clergy to go the distance? This dissertation suggests that one of the critical routes to flourishing and finishing is learning to practice Sabbath and its rhythms, especially with a supportive community.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶⁹ Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 61.

¹⁷⁰ Peter Brain, *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit for a Lifetime of Ministry* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2004), 24.

Part Two: Clergy and Community

*“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone...’”*¹⁷¹

We were created for community. An intense, innate need for social connection is “actually wired into us as part of our survival strategy.”¹⁷² The Bible is full of examples about the importance of having strong, positive, relationships. As Matt Bloom notes:

“... with Adam and Eve, the Bible begins a long series of stories – Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Naomi, Abraham and Lot – about the importance of strong families, abiding friendships, and loving kindness toward others... Aaron held up Moses’ arms when he grew tired. Elisha and his mentor, Elijah, were devoted friends. David’s friendship with Jonathan strengthened his faith and leadership. The fullness of our social nature is manifest in Jesus and his ministry...”¹⁷³

Researchers affirm the Bible’s emphasis on the importance of relationships.

Psychologists Mary DuChene and Mark Sundby write: “There are literally thousands of studies that show the many ways relationships are vitally important to health and wellbeing.”¹⁷⁴ The need to be loved, accepted, and cared for is a fundamental human need. On the flip side the absence of supportive relationships can have devastating effects on our health and wellbeing.

The evidence shows that loneliness has reached epidemic proportions among the general public. Cigna, a prominent health insurance company, completed two large studies on loneliness in 2018 and 2020.¹⁷⁵ The fact that an insurance company would sponsor extensive studies on loneliness research speaks volumes about the importance of relationships to emotional and physical health. Here are some of the startling results of those surveyed: 61 percent felt lonely; 43 percent reported feeling socially isolated; 43 percent described their relationships as not being

¹⁷¹ Genesis 2:18a, NIV

¹⁷² Mary Kay DuChene and Mark Sundby, *A Path to Belonging: Overcoming Clergy Loneliness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 14.

¹⁷³ Bloom, *Flourishing*, 81.

¹⁷⁴ Bloom, *Flourishing*, 81.

¹⁷⁵ “Loneliness Is at Epidemic Levels in America,” Cigna Newsroom. <https://newsroom.cigna.com/loneliness-in-america>. Accessed November 28, 2022.

meaningful; 27 percent believed that others rarely or never understand them; and 20 percent felt like they have no one in whom they can confide.

Clergy Loneliness and Isolation

Pastors are certainly not immune to loneliness. In 2019, LeaderWise conducted a national study of five hundred U.S. clergy across denominations. The central finding of this study was that clergy loneliness scores are on average the same as those of the general population. So, as the general population suffers from loneliness, so do clergy.¹⁷⁶ As Matt Bloom emphasizes, “So pastors, as persons created in the image of God, need to be in relationship.”¹⁷⁷ And yet, the unique role of clergy often leads to loneliness and isolation. Bloom’s research found that isolation was a common theme among pastors, denominational leaders, and seminaries. Clergy isolation is “usually described as being disconnected from other clergy, especially lacking friendships with other pastors.”¹⁷⁸ But there are other forms of clergy isolation. One of the most common forms is isolation from members of the congregation the pastor serves. This is sometimes referred to as being lonely in a crowd.¹⁷⁹ In their research on clergy loneliness, DuChene and Sundby describe the plight of pastors in particular:

“Clergy have unique relationships with their parishioners. We immerse ourselves fully in the lives of those in our congregations and communities as we live our lives amid theirs, and yet we must keep them, to some degree, at arms’s length, due to the professional ethics of our role... This tension – to be simultaneously dedicated to and immersed in our communities, which can often bring great joy, and yet not be fully known by them is inherent in clergy life. Ultimately, this can contribute to our experience of isolation.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ DuChene and Sundby, *A Path to Belonging*, 31.

¹⁷⁷ Burns, *Resilient Ministry*, 81.

¹⁷⁸ Bloom, *Flourishing*, 82.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 82.

¹⁸⁰ DuChene and Sundby, *A Path to Belonging*, 38-39.

This same study also describes several other factors that fuel clergy isolation and loneliness: unrealistic expectations, moving around a lot, the need to maintain boundaries, an inability to be authentic, and theological and ideological differences.¹⁸¹

“Stages” of Ministry

Clergy wellbeing and relationships are multifaceted and intertwined. Bloom’s “stages” of ministry metaphor is especially helpful in identifying relationships that can cultivate clergy wellbeing:

“The metaphor of a theater is very useful for understanding many aspects of flourishing in ministry, and it is especially helpful for describing the role of social support in wellbeing. The *front stage* is where the performance happens. The *back stage* is the place to support and nurture great front stage performance. And *off stage* is a place to step away from performance roles and engage other parts of life.”¹⁸²

A pastor’s front stage includes things like preaching, teaching, caring, and leading meetings. In order for pastoral wellbeing to flourish, these public and visible front stage responsibilities must be supported by a back stage of supportive relationships and healthy off stage involvement.

Flourishing in Ministry has identified three essential supportive activities of a healthy back stage for pastors. First, a good back stage provides a safe place to evaluate front stage performance. “It is a place to unpack what happens on the front stage.”¹⁸³ Next, healthy back stage relationships provide support and care for pastors. “It is a place where genuine expressions of caring and understanding are offered.”¹⁸⁴ Finally, a good back stage “helps pastors grow and develop as persons and as pastors.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 39-50.

¹⁸² Bloom, *Flourishing*, 93.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 96.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 97.

Clergy certainly need the support of significant others, such as family and close friends.

However, Bloom's study's finds that "similar others" are most important to a good back stage:

"... while significant others can *sympathize*, similar others can *empathize*. Because of their previous experience on the front stage, similar others have an in-depth understanding of the many dimensions and nuances of the front stage. They can really imagine what a stressful or challenging situation is like."¹⁸⁶

Pastors, churches, and denominational leaders must be intentional about cultivating healthy back stage relationships. Obstacles like workload, geographic location, or limited resources can make it difficult for pastors to form and sustain a good back stage. Bloom notes: "This is one area of wellbeing where local churches and denominations can play a significant role in helping create opportunities that pastors can then act on."¹⁸⁷

Off stage is also vital to clergy health and wellbeing. This is the place "where we as clergy can completely take off our professional identity and be vulnerable around trusted friends and family."¹⁸⁸ While off stage, we engage in hobbies and spend time with deeply loved ones. Bloom adds: "Not only are we not performing the role in any way; the goal is to not think about the role at all."¹⁸⁹ Too often, pastors don't have enough time off stage, which amplifies feelings of exhaustion and burnout.

What if we could find a way to bring all these "stages" of ministry together? Is there a path that promotes clear integration of these "stages" and honors pastors as persons created in the image of God? This project believes that pastors learning to practice Sabbath's rest and rhythms in community with other pastors (similar others) is just such a path.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 100.

¹⁸⁸ DuChene and Sundby, *A Path to Belonging*, 59.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 59.

Sabbath and Community

There is a lot of chatter today, even in the church, about self-care and rest. The pain of burnout and loneliness is evident. Many pastors are evaluating the frantic pace of ministry and re-examining the divine gift and command of Sabbath. And yet, the communal aspect of Sabbath is so often minimized or ignored. As A.J. Swoboda concludes: “God’s intention for the Sabbath was, and is, that we would be drawn into the richness of community.”¹⁹⁰

Further, Scripture repeatedly testifies that Sabbath is not only about our relationship to God but also our relationships with others. As an example, consider Leviticus 23:3: “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, *a day of sacred assembly*. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath to the LORD.” Pastor A.J. Swoboda further notes:

“The Sabbath, alongside other celebrations such as Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and the Festival of Weeks, was not celebrated individually or in isolation but was a sacred day for the community to gather. Such a rhythm offered a texture in the yearly and weekly calendar for people to enter into enriching, life-giving relationships around shared worship. Sabbath as such has never existed as individualism or isolationism.”¹⁹¹

In sum, Sabbath points us to the Triune God in whose image all humans are created. Father, Son, and Spirit are coeternal and demonstrate that God is relational. Sabbath, a divine rhythm practiced by the three persons of the Trinity, is designed to be practiced in community. Author Ruth Haley Barton also emphasizes the communal nature of Sabbath: “So many individuals and families are trying to figure out sabbath all by themselves, when, in fact, sabbath-keeping is a communal discipline that needs to be led and practiced in community.”¹⁹² When

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹⁹¹ Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 66.

¹⁹² Barton, *Embracing Rhythms*, 41

churches and ministries lack a communal embrace of Sabbath, it leaves people to their own devices.

So, why do so many churches struggle with Sabbath-keeping? Perhaps some view Sabbath as a duty, obligation, option, interruption, or hold-over from the past instead of as “a gift we are invited to open and enjoy today, let alone a commandment that is meant to hold society together.”¹⁹³ But Barton also suggests a darker possibility:

“... many communities simply don’t want their priorities, their schedules, and their growth plans to be messed with. They’ve set visions, goals, and strategies that always seem to require more – more programming, more ministry, more financial and numerical growth – and packing Sundays with church-related activities seems like the only way to get it all done.”¹⁹⁴

Furthermore, Sabbath-keeping communities need Sabbath-keeping leaders. Many of us need to confess and repent from our Sabbath-breaking ways. It is nearly impossible for people to consistently live out Sabbath rhythms if church leaders don’t embrace and intentionally organize community life around Sabbath-keeping principles. If pastors and church leaders want their communities to keep Sabbath, then we must keep Sabbath. But this will require learning and support for both pastor and people. Barton suggests that the first step in cultivating a Sabbath-community is for the leader to practice Sabbath-keeping:

“There is no substitute for the inner authority that comes from your own mature practice of sabbath-keeping. I suggest you have at least six months to a year of substantive practice under your belt before you begin teaching, leading, and advising others... the solid conviction that comes from knowing how important and necessary this is for you will give you a calm presence as you teach and lead. You may need to bolster your resolve by continuing to read and reflect on sabbath.”¹⁹⁵

Clergy today face many unique challenges. Sabbath-keeping, as an act of resistance to culture’s demands,¹⁹⁶ leads to greater clergy wellbeing and flourishing. Sabbath-keeping pastors

¹⁹³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁹⁶ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, preface.

also become a gateway to Sabbath-keeping churches and communities. The proposed path for this project is to provide tools for pastors to gather with other pastors for several weeks to evaluate, learn, and practice Sabbath-rhythms. May every pastor find a supportive and empathetic backstage of similar others as a springboard to greater Sabbath-keeping joy.

CHAPTER 5: “FELLOWSHIP OF THE REST” A WESLEYAN APPROACH TO PRACTICING SABBATH IN COMMUNITY

“I can’t do that!” That’s how I responded when Pastor Lewis Stark approached me in 2018 about hiking the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim-to-rim. Jokingly, I told him he was “delusional.” While I always wanted to see this wonder of God’s creation from the inside-out, I reminded Lewis that I was familiar with walking or running a few miles in my neighborhood, but not at all prepared to hike fifty miles in extreme elevation and unpredictable conditions. Lewis smirked and said, “You can do it. You won’t be alone. There is a group of us who will be with you. We will help you learn how to prepare, practice, and journey with you. *You can do this, but you need to go with a group.*”

Thereafter for five years straight, I hiked the Grand Canyon with a group of friends. What once seemed impossible to me is now is a life-giving hobby that has provided amazing memories, wonderful friendships, and great joy. I’m so glad that Lewis invited me to this adventure! And I am grateful for the “Fellowship of the Rim,” a group of friends who laugh, cry, hurt, rejoice, and encourage each other on this exhilarating and exhausting journey.

Practicing Sabbath seems impossible to many pastors and church leaders. While many pastors dream of Sabbath rest and the joy and refreshment it could bring, they are faced with numerous barriers that seem impossible to overcome. Endless demands of ministry, constant connectivity, unrealistic expectations, financial pressure, isolation, and anxiety are a few of the thieves that have robbed ministers of joy, energy, and rest. We are invited (even commanded) by God to embrace and practice the gift of Sabbath, but scream: *“I can’t do that!”*

And yet, the fourth commandment (“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”) and Jesus’ teaching (“The Sabbath was made for [humans], and not [humans] for the Sabbath.”)

remain.¹⁹⁷ There is a day of rest built into the rhythm of creation that helps revive and restore us. Sabbath is a divine gift and command that we abuse and neglect to our own peril. Clergy and congregants are desperate for rest and need to reclaim Sabbath peace and joy. But, with screens in our faces, packed calendars, and cultural pressures stacked against us, we need help resisting such formidable opposition to practicing Sabbath.

“You can do this, but you need to go with a group.” This is good advice for conquering “impossible” canyons and “impossible” calendars. Much like learning to hike the Grand Canyon, pastors and church leaders need a community as we learn to practice Sabbath. This Sabbath journey requires preparation, practice, support, accountability, and encouragement along the way. As we train our bodies and minds for Sabbath practice, there may be some pain. We will say “no” to some events, people, and tasks in order to make the trip. But the joy we experience from the “Fellowship of the Rest” will far outweigh any pain we experience along the way.

“Fellowship of the Rest”

Ministers themselves, family, friends, churches, and denominational leaders all contribute to the support needed in order for clergy to flourish.¹⁹⁸ We really do need each other. In my role as a District Superintendent, I want to encourage pastoral wellbeing and flourishing. What if pastors and ministry leaders gathered to intentionally encourage wellbeing? What if ministers helped each other practice the gift of Sabbath? Pastors practicing Sabbath together is a path toward greater joy, peace, health, and wholeness that is well worth pursuing.

¹⁹⁷ Exodus 20:8; Mark 2:27, NASB2020.

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter 4 for more information.

In my research, I have presented chapters on: 1) our desperate need to embrace the divine gift of Sabbath; 2) some of the biblical and historical background of Sabbath; 3) how humans and Sabbath are affected by the digital age; and (4), the well-being of pastors in particular and how Sabbath-keeping can be a step toward clergy flourishing. Now, I am proposing in this fifth chapter a Wesleyan approach to practicing Sabbath in community with other pastors. My research includes an artifact and a Leader's Guide for a retreat-type gathering of ministers called "Fellowship of the Rest." This resource can be used by facilitators to guide pastors through experiencing and implementing Sabbath practices. I believe it is an ideal path for recapturing the joy of practicing Sabbath and a catalyzing clergy wellbeing.

Part One: Standing Together - A Wesleyan Approach to Sabbath-Keeping

*"Even a giant redwood cannot stand when it has to stand alone."*¹⁹⁹

The giant redwoods of California have stood tall for centuries. Experts have determined that these amazing trees survive so long because they grow in groves where the roots of many trees intertwine. When a redwood does fall, it's usually because its roots could not reach those of other trees. In *The Upward Call*, a Wesleyan approach to spiritual formation and the holy life, several Nazarene professors and writers link the "redwood community" to Wesley's vision for Christian discipleship:

"Christians are like that too. We cannot stand alone; we really do need each other. The holy life is not a journey for solitary souls. The church is a called-out *community*, a group of sinners saved by grace who help each other on the way.... John Wesley was right when he organized his converts in societies, classes, bands, and in twin soul and mentoring relationships. No one can travel this road alone."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Wesley D. Tracy, E. Dee Freeborn, Janine Tartaglia, and Morris A. Weigelt, *The Upward Call* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 135.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 135.

A Brief Historical Background of Wesleyan Small Groups

Wesley's emphasis on the importance of small group meetings and accountability was rooted in his early experiences with his parents. John's mother, Susanna, modeled intentional, loving discipleship with John and his siblings by meeting with them weekly for Bible study and prayer. Sam Barber, Global Director of Discipleship for the Church of the Nazarene, notes that these "weekly sessions with his mother created the furrows in the mind of young John where the seeds of group accountability would one day germinate."²⁰¹ In addition, John's father, Samuel Wesley modeled the importance of gathering for encouragement and accountability by his involvement in early English societies. By 1732, John had joined the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and later he formed the Holy Club at Oxford. These early expressions of small group involvement and accountability were a "forerunner of future expressions of accountable discipleship" under Wesley's leadership.²⁰²

Wesley's early experiences with his parents, societies in England, and the Moravians played a part in the development of organized small groups which would later characterize the Methodist movement. As revival started to sweep the country, Wesley believed that small groups were a way to conserve and disciple converts. So, Wesley began to divide larger societies of believers into smaller groups as various communal and spiritual needs arose.²⁰³ In 1742, Wesley discovered his plan for smaller groups or "classes" somewhat by accident. As he developed a plan to pay off building debt in Bristol, this large society was divided into groups of twelve. When chosen leaders followed up on fundraising with the twelve in their class, they began to discover other needs for pastoral care and accountability including confronting sin:

²⁰¹ Sam Barber, *A People of Grace: Becoming Disciples Together* (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2023), 111.

²⁰² Ibid., 111.

²⁰³ Timothy J. Crutcher, *John Wesley: His Life and Thought* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2015), 50.

“In the course of visiting their members to obtain these collections, some class leaders discovered evidence of sins or improper behaviors, and so the class leaders were given responsibility for pastoral oversight of their members as well. This served to both strengthen the accountability with the community and to provide positions of substantial lay leadership within the group.”²⁰⁴

Eventually, Wesley created a system of small group nurture that included class meetings, band meetings, spiritual guides, select societies, a penitent band, and an excellent system of family worship.²⁰⁵ The only requirement to become a member of a society was to desire salvation in Christ. However, every member of a society was required to join a twelve-person class and could volunteer to participate in a five-person band. Spiritual guides, faith mentors, select societies, and penitent bands were available as needed. Family worship was taught and encouraged as a daily habit. In summary, “Wesley devised a system for spiritual nurture that has yet to be improved on. In fact, most successful nurturing churches use some form of Wesley’s spiritual formation structures.”²⁰⁶

Accountability and Sabbath-Keeping

One of the great needs of our day is loving accountability. We see evidence of this all around us every day in successful life-transformation programs related to addiction-recovery, weight loss and management, fitness, financial planning and spending, and much more. And yet, it seems that accountability is largely missing from the discipleship efforts of many churches today. Barber pleads for churches to recover a Wesleyan approach to discipleship that emphasizes loving accountability that leads to life transformation:

“At the very core of the success of the Methodist revival was John Wesley’s insistence on *accountability*. It was Wesley who, after preaching, gathered together those who had been awakened and organized them into smaller groups where there would be ongoing *accountability* toward holiness. It is precisely this *accountability* that made spiritual awakenings stick and grow

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 50.

²⁰⁵ Tracy, et. al., *The Upward Call*, 141.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 141.

into holiness of heart and life. It is this *accountability* that will provide a loving environment for discipleship renewal in our churches.”²⁰⁷

But, what about accountability and Sabbath? Should we be accountable for Sabbath-keeping or faithful Sabbath practice?

In Genesis and Exodus, the Israelites come face-to-face with Sabbath accountability.²⁰⁸

Sabbath is introduced by God in Creation and reinforced in the stories of Israel’s enslavement and wilderness wanderings. God expects His people to rest on Sabbath and promises to provide all they need on the other six days of the week. In fact, God provides a double portion of manna on the sixth day so that Israel can rest and observe Sabbath, knowing the Lord will provide everything they need. In the book of Numbers, we see that God’s command and provision are so important that God punishes those who disobey. Author and professor Dana Trent reflects on this incident and the Sabbath accountability that baffles and offends us today:

“... the Israelites come upon a man chopping wood in the forest on the sabbath. Moses and Aaron ask God what to do. God says the man must be stoned to death, and the decision shocks the entire camp. The consequences feel too steep for modern hearts, but God is keen on teaching the Hebrews a lesson in dependence, accountability, and solidarity. If God allows one person to labor on the sabbath, others will feel they cannot afford to cease from their own work.”²⁰⁹

Even though the observation and practice of Sabbath have evolved in the Judeo-Christian tradition over the centuries,²¹⁰ and we no longer stone people to death for breaking Sabbath, the command to observe Sabbath remains. And yet, many people of faith – even pastors – have lost their sense of what it means to practice Sabbath. Trying to observe Sabbath in a culture that is not supportive of taking a full day to connect with God, ourselves, and one another is an uphill

²⁰⁷ Barber, *A People of Grace*, 112.

²⁰⁸ J. Dana Trent, *For Sabbath’s Sake: Embracing Your Need for Rest, Worship, and Community*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2017), 39.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 39.

²¹⁰ See Chapter 2.

climb, especially when we try to climb this hill alone. How do we begin to practice Sabbath in a culture where the economy, technology, expectations, and consumerism reign? Again, Dana

Trent points us back to our Jewish roots:

“Perhaps we should seek the wisdom of our Jewish brothers and sisters who – amid persecution, secularism, and minority views - remain committed and countercultural, drawing strict lines around their sabbath observance. The time is ripe for Christians to revisit the very heart of sabbath practice in order to create a more meaningful weekly observance of who we are and whose we are.”²¹¹

Wesley’s Class Leaders and Sabbath-Keeping Groups

In today’s culture that wars against Sabbath practice, the best way to “draw strict lines” around Sabbath observance is by helping to create a community of loving accountability. This paper further suggests that we can nurture this loving accountability by adapting and implementing the structures and ideas of John Wesley’s class and band meetings. However, though District leaders should encourage this loving accountability, they may not be the best ones to facilitate the group meetings. As a District Superintendent, I must remember that my role can create a “power dynamic” in a small group that could hinder the development of a safe space for self-disclosure and open dialogue for pastors. I would encourage District Superintendents to find other facilitators for Sabbath-keeping clergy groups on their district.

Acceptance, love, and commitment to each other were the key elements of a Wesleyan class meeting that provided Christian *koinonia*. One purpose of the class was for the members to “inspect their outward walking, to inquire of their inward state; to learn what are their trials; and how they fall by or conquer them.”²¹² This “inspection was not that of a religious bully policeman, but the pastoral work of a caring class leader.”²¹³ Some believe that the class leader

²¹¹ Trent, *For Sabbath’s Sake*, 39.

²¹² Tracy, *The Upward Call*, 149.

²¹³ Tracy, *The Upward Call*, 149.

was the key to the success of the Methodist movement. Wesley wrote that these leaders were to “visit each person in his class... to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort as occasion may require; and to receive what they were willing to give to the poor.”²¹⁴

I would suggest that this approach can be adapted by districts as they carefully select facilitators who lovingly help clergy evaluate their Sabbath-breaking and Sabbath-keeping practices. These facilitators could be other pastors, professors, counselors, mentors, coaches, spiritual directors, or those who have some experience with clergy and leading small groups. As group members share their struggles and victories with Sabbath, the facilitator and other group members should encourage honest vulnerability as the group learns from each other.

Sabbath-Keeping Bands and Accountability Questions

Besides being a member of the society and a class, any Methodist intent on growing in Christian holiness could become a member of a band. Bands were optional and typically about twenty-five percent of society members chose to participate in these groups. The spiritual growth observed in those who participated in bands was remarkable. Wesley noted one person who had “learned more from one hour’s disclosure than in ten years of public preaching.”²¹⁵ Bands were usually composed of four to six people who met weekly to share their spiritual journeys in very intimate fellowship. Typically, bands were organized by commonalities (gender, age, marital status, etc.) and led by one who served more as a facilitator than a teacher. No visitors were allowed in these bands (without permission) where hard questions were asked, and strong bonds of love and mutual accountability were forged.

²¹⁴ *The Works of John Wesley*, 8:270.

²¹⁵ Charles L. Goodell, *The Drillmaster of Methodism: Principles and Methods for the Class Leader and Pastor* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1902), 239.

For this project, I am proposing the creation of a Wesleyan-influenced version of bands where the commonality is pastors who desire to practice Sabbath. At these “Fellowship of the Rest” band meetings, pastors will practice Sabbath together, and lovingly “inspect” each other’s wellbeing through acts of affirmation and questions of loving accountability. The hope is that these bands will combat isolation, loneliness, and encourage the development of ongoing Sabbath-keeping practices that can lead to greater wellbeing. Participants in the “Fellowship of the Rest” will covenant to three months of meeting together weekly (four face-to-face gatherings and eight online meetings) to learn and encourage Sabbath practice. The four face-to-face gatherings will be a “retreat-type” Sabbath day together, every other week for the first two months. On alternating weeks, when the face-to-face gathering does not occur, participants will meet together online for one hour of encouragement and Sabbath accountability. Following the first two months (four face-to-face gatherings and four online meetings), participants will continue weekly online meetings for one additional month (four more online meetings) to encourage and hold each other accountable for ongoing Sabbath practice. At the weekly online meetings, accountability questions regarding Sabbath will be asked based on five questions Wesley designed for use in every band meeting:²¹⁶

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said or done of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?

These bold questions seemed like an invasion of privacy to many Englishmen of Wesley’s day. He was criticized by some for being too radical, and by others for being too much like the Roman Catholic confessional. And yet, there was undeniable power for personal spiritual

²¹⁶ Tracy, *The Upward Call*, 156.

growth and formation in these bands of loving accountability. One modern writer lauded the Church's rediscovery of Wesleyan band-like small groups by suggesting that "one group of ten persons, learning to truly love one another, experiencing an ever-deepening commitment to Christ...will exert far more redemptive influence in a community than a church of one thousand uncommitted members."²¹⁷ Noting the impact of Wesley's five questions for bands, I've adapted them here to encourage Sabbath-keeping practices and accountability in clergy peer groups:

1. How have you rested or practiced Sabbath since our last meeting?
2. Have you neglected Sabbath or been tempted to ignore Sabbath? If so, how?
3. What recent Sabbath-keeping victories can you report?
4. In what ways are you struggling to find or discern your Sabbath rest?
5. Is there anything you are struggling with regarding Sabbath that you haven't been able to share with anyone?

As group members respond to these questions and lovingly listen and support others in the group, I believe Sabbath appreciation and accountability will rise. This prediction is based on my research including Sam Barber's citation of a recent study on accountability by the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) where they discovered that if an individual commits to another person for the completion of a goal, that individual has a sixty-five percent chance of completing the goal. However, that percentage jumps to ninety-five percent if that commitment is coupled with a specific accountability appointment. According to their study, the most challenging goals can be achieved if a person commits to regular accountability.²¹⁸ By meeting weekly in a "Fellowship of the Rest" Sabbath-keeping group, participating clergy are more likely to make great progress toward Sabbath rest and greater wellbeing.

²¹⁷ G. Byron Deshler, *The Power of the Personal Group* (Nashville: Tidings, 1979), 6.

²¹⁸ Barber, *A People of Grace*, 127-128.

Part Two: “Jesus Invited Me” – Learning Sabbath Practice by Retreating

*“If you don’t come apart awhile, you will come apart after a while.”*²¹⁹

I have a friend who was radically delivered from a life of addiction, sin, and shame. After his Christian conversion, he was still attending recovery meetings. One day, after a meeting, as he walked through a Nazarene church’s yard, he heard what seemed like the voice of the Lord: “Emory, I want you to attend church here.” When Sunday arrived, Emory obeyed God’s direction and showed up at the church. Upon his arrival, he was greeted by an enthusiastic lady who said: “My name is Betty* and I’m so glad you are here today. What’s your name? Did someone invite you to worship with us today?” Emory smiled at the lady and replied with his slow Southern drawl, “Yes m’aam, my name is Emory Corley and Jesus invited me.”

I love the clarity of Emory’s response: “Jesus invited me.” I often wonder how it might improve my outlook and sensitivity to the Spirit if I approached the events of my life like Emory approached church that day: “My name is Kyle (or insert your name), and Jesus invited me (to this place, event, meeting, or conversation) today.” Ruth Haley Barton’s *Invitation to Retreat* captures this same joy of being invited by God, and she masterfully connects it to times of retreat, or stepping away for a time from life’s demands to encounter the voice and heart of our Creator:

“And that is what makes the invitation to retreat so compelling. It is the winsome call from this intriguing person we call God – the One who loves us, the One who is inexplicably drawn to us, the One who knows so intimately what we need in order to be well. It is an invitation straight from the heart of Jesus to us – his enthusiastic disciples who routinely wear ourselves out with good things and with lesser things, and we don’t even know we’re doing it half the time!”²²⁰

²¹⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), quoted in Ruth Haley Barton’s, *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 1.

* “Betty’s” name has been changed in this dissertation to protect her identity.

²²⁰ Barton, *Invitation to Retreat*, 4.

Far too often, our modern notion of “retreat” is actually time away from home or work that is filled with more activities. Business retreats are often extended strategy sessions away from the office where employees work more hours than usual. And many church “retreats” repeat this unfortunate formula. Instead of being time away from distractions to rest our bodies and renew our relationship with Jesus, church retreats are often jam-packed with programs and events, leaving us even more exhausted. In a world desperate for rest and replenishment, it is time to reclaim retreat as a spiritual practice.

Theologian and priest Ronald Rolheiser describes three biblical images of retreat: 1) in Mark 6:30, Jesus invites his disciples to “Come away to a deserted place... and rest awhile.”; 2) throughout Scripture, the “wilderness” is described as a place a place of intimacy where God tenderly speaks what our souls need to hear; and, 3) Sabbath, the first of all retreats in which God introduces rhythms of work and rest and the way we order our time.²²¹ This project aims to encourage the development of retreats for clergy that merge all three of these biblical images. “Fellowship of the Rest” participants are invited to “come away” from busyness and the demands of ministry to a place of rest with Jesus, where they can hear God speak tenderly to them in the wilderness, so that they can learn to practice divine Sabbath rest and rhythms that help replenish them.

Over the centuries, Christian leaders have discovered that retreats offer pathways that help people to experience new encounters with God, others, and creation.²²² “Fellowship of the Rest” retreats are designed as Sabbath days for ministers to “come apart” together where a facilitator guides participants toward each of these three encounters. Retreats offer a unique

²²¹ Ron Rolheiser, *Creating Sabbath Space in Our Lives: A Video Retreat with Ron Rolheiser* (Oblate Media and Communication, 2009).

²²² Nancy Ferguson and Kevin Witt, *The Retreat Leader's Manual: A Complete Guide to Organizing Meaningful Christian Retreats* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006), 17.

“change of pace, place, and face”²²³ where participants leave familiar surroundings of predictability and comfort to experience an alternative way of living. While initially uncomfortable because they are outside of normal routines, retreat experiences open participants to new insights and greater learning.

“Retreat experiences ask folks to launch from their harbors into the unknown that characterizes any adventure. All this produces powerful potential. As people move through their initial uncertainty, it opens a host of new horizons. Biblical stories are full of persons who encountered God or gained greatly expanded awareness through new situations and excursions.”²²⁴

Sabbath Retreat Encounters with God

People are exhausted. Pastors are no exception and too often the prime example.²²⁵ Today, we live in an era when never-ending motion, constant connectivity, and full schedules rank high as signs of cutting-edge productivity. However, there is a high price to pay for this way of life. The frantic pace of many pastors leaves them spiritually dry and physically and emotionally depleted. So, many will arrive at retreats tired and overwhelmed. Jesus promises rest for their bodies and souls (Matthew 11:28-29) and thus these Sabbath retreats will include intentional times for rest, silence, solitude, reflection, and community – all designed to help participants encounter God as they break away from the breakneck speed of life and ministry. The schedule for “Fellowship of the Rest” retreats will be designed to keep its title in mind - there will be times for *fellowship* and times for *rest* with the goal of encountering God and others in ways that open up new insights and joy. The hope is that these Sabbath retreats will become the occasion to learn how to allow God to nurture our souls so that participants will be

²²³ Ibid., 16.

²²⁴ Ibid., 17.

²²⁵ See Chapter 4.

encouraged “to return with new perspective and practices to incorporate within their weekly and daily rhythms.”²²⁶

Further, it is my hope that these Sabbath retreats will enhance understanding of a minister’s need for God and give time and space to encounter God in new and meaningful ways. But, in order to encounter God through retreat, participants must make the decision to set aside time, limit their use of technology, and “leave behind the everyday of their lives and to come away... the decision to move away [from daily responsibilities and distractions] is the first necessary step toward encounters with God.”²²⁷

Here’s a list of suggested practices for encountering God on retreats: Bible study, worship, prayer, Christian meditation, journaling, Lectio Divina, solitude, and silence.²²⁸ For “Fellowship of the Rest” retreats, these practices for encountering God will be tailored specifically for clergy learning Sabbath practices and rhythms. There will also be suggestions for limiting technology on the retreat and for developing a rule of life in our digital age.²²⁹

When all is said and done, these Sabbath retreats will not be about getting things done. The focus will not be planning or networking. Participants may find clarity, make friends, build community, and have fun, but the primary purpose of these spiritual retreats will be time with God. Spiritual director Jane Vennard summarizes the purpose of retreat well when she writes:

“... a retreat is about God. A retreat places God and the things of God in the foreground of our attention. A retreat opens the time and space so that we may hear God’s still, small voice. A retreat is about listening and waiting, receiving and being. A retreat is not about getting anything done.”²³⁰

²²⁶ Ferguson and Witt, *The Retreat Leader’s Manual*, 19.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-59.

²²⁹ See Chapter 3.

²³⁰ Jane E. Vennard, *Be Still: Designing and Leading Contemplative Retreats* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 2014), x.

Sabbath Retreat Encounters with Others in Community

God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone...”.²³¹ We were created for community. And yet, recent studies show that “loneliness has reached epidemic proportions among the general public.”²³² DuChene and Sundby studied the epidemic of loneliness and remind readers that clergy are not immune to this scourge on our society:

“Because clergy are a part of the general population, it is reasonable to conclude that they are not immune to the widespread experience of loneliness. Our research at LeaderWise bears this out... the central finding is that clergy loneliness scores are on average the same as those of the general population. As the general population suffers, so do we.”²³³

Clergy often face additional, unique challenges with loneliness.²³⁴ Even though ministers are in a helping profession with a built-in network of people, it doesn’t mean clergy are not lonely. Pastors often find that friendship with members in the congregation is challenging. Often, “friendship is one-sided, if present at all, as we can never fully share our most vulnerable selves with congregation members.”²³⁵ Since denominational leaders have some influence on a pastor’s current and future assignments, this can also create barriers to authentic friendship and vulnerability between judicatory leaders and ministers. This does not mean that district leaders cannot be friends with pastors on their district, but that district leaders should cultivate and encourage other safe spaces and relationships for ministers as well. Small groups of pastors gathering to encourage peers as they practice Sabbath (“Fellowship of the Rest”) is a way to combat loneliness, isolation, and depletion. While a District Superintendent may not be the best

²³¹ Genesis 2:18, NASB2020.

²³² Mary Kay DuChene and Mark Sundby, *A Path to Belonging: Overcoming Clergy Loneliness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 30.

²³³ Ibid., 31.

²³⁴ See Chapter 4.

²³⁵ DuChene and Sundby, *A Path to Belonging*, 15.

person to facilitate a Sabbath accountability group, this ecclesial leader can advocate for pastors by encouraging and providing resources for these Sabbath-keeping groups.

Additionally, retreat leaders who aim to provide an environment conducive for encountering others in community must be intentional in their planning. Christian community does not just happen. Christian education experts Nancy Ferguson and Kevin Witt write: “It [community] is birthed by a willingness to be open to each other and to God.”²³⁶ Furthermore, intentionality to encounter others in community begins with prayer and hospitality. Ferguson and Witt also emphasize the necessity of the practice of hospitality:

“Hospitality encompasses anything you do that helps people feel welcome, safe, and accepted. It helps folks feel you are glad they have come and that you want them to be comfortable during the retreat. Hospitality is intentional and carefully thought out. It does not just happen.”²³⁷

Thus, hospitality begins long before the retreat happens. Clear promotional information and a smooth registration process are the first steps to helping people feel welcome at the retreat. As the leader discovers the names of registered participants, the group can begin praying for each other and their time together. Hospitality continues at the retreat through a warm welcome, name tags, maps, facility information, comfortable temperatures, good food, and clear communication. After adjournment, hospitality continues through ongoing prayers, care, communication, and feedback.

Another vital aspect of encountering others in community is table fellowship. Throughout Scripture, we see Jesus sharing meals with his disciples and all kinds of people. Of course, there is the Eucharist where we follow Jesus’ command to break bread and share the cup, a means of grace where we remember and participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But there

²³⁶ Ferguson and Witt, *The Retreat Leader’s Manual*, 62.

²³⁷ Ibid., 65.

is also the importance of sharing of common meals with friends, strangers, and even enemies. As Ferguson and Witt write: “In our busy lives there is so little opportunity to eat together. Once upon a time, families ate together every day. Now it is a rare occasion for many families.

However, within a retreat setting there is time and space to just talk, ask questions, and to tell stories.”²³⁸ Therefore, “Fellowship of the Rest” retreats will make time for the Lord’s Supper and for unhurried meals together where Christian table fellowship can be enjoyed. It’s often at the table where stories are shared, friendships are formed, laughs are abundant, and tears flow freely. Table fellowship has a unique way of building bridges, breaking down walls, and restoring weary travelers. Meals characterized by Christlike hospitality feed our stomachs and our souls.

Other community building practices that could be incorporated into Sabbath retreats include opportunities for group worship and prayer, listening and affirmation sessions, non-competitive games, and non-strenuous group work projects. Any and all community building activities selected should be strategically designed to include and affirm all participants and never dominate the schedule. It is vital to balance times of solitude and silence with times of human connection and engagement. We need time alone, but we also need each other.

Perhaps none can better understand and express the impact of embracing others in community than martyrs of the Christian faith. From an underground seminary in Nazi Germany, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned these words:

“It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”²³⁹

²³⁸ Ibid., 66-67.

²³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 18.

Sabbath Retreat Encounters with Creation

No longer an agrarian society, many people work indoors all week. Additionally, modern technology and an array of entertainment options easily distract us and keep our faces and attention fixed on screens. Trent asserts that we suffer from “Nature Deficit Disorder” and that worshipping in nature solves two problems: “1) the modern yearning for being outdoors and 2) the longing to praise God while doing it.”²⁴⁰ In *The Sabbath Experiment*, Azusa Pacific

University Professor Robert Muthiah unpacks Sabbath’s connection to creation:

“Sabbath calls us to remember that God is the one who created this world. Sabbath calls for all of creation to rest and be refreshed. Sabbath invites us to slow down and notice God’s creation all around us... When we step into Sabbath time, we have time to slow down and notice. This is but a first step, but it is a step that leads in the direction of caring well for the world entrusted to us.”²⁴¹

There is nothing quite like being outdoors. Noticing and appreciating nature stirs our senses and awakens our souls. Author Wayne Muller reflects on his Sabbath research: “Almost every person who spoke to me about Sabbath said some time in nature is essential – it is singularly the most nourishing, healing Sabbath practice.”²⁴² Consequently, most camp and retreat centers are located within or adjacent to, natural surroundings because for centuries, faith communities have discovered that “the natural world assists individuals to sense the presence of the Divine.”²⁴³ For Sabbath retreats it is highly recommended to choose a location where participants can spend time outdoors, enjoying creation. Nature displays the glory of God, and part of the experience is to invite participants to notice divine creativity and to praise the Creator.

²⁴⁰ Dana Trent, *For Sabbath’s Sake*, 98.

²⁴¹ Rob Muthiah, *The Sabbath Experiment: Spiritual Formation for Living in a Non-Stop World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 60.

²⁴² Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, 80.

²⁴³ Ferguson and Witt, *The Retreat Leader’s Manual*, 35.

As we notice the beauty and interconnectedness of God's creation, we become more aware of our responsibility to care for creation. Sabbath is not primarily about personal fulfillment but honoring God and blessing all of creation. As Ferguson and Witt note: "When we realize this, then every seventh day is a celebration of God's creation and a reminder of our role in caring for it."²⁴⁴ Sabbath retreat planners are encouraged to include practices that explore nature and encourage stewardship and care of creation.

Seasons of growth, change, and rest in nature remind us that we are created beings that have divinely designed rhythms and seasons. Muller underscores this in his book on Sabbath:

"Yes, we are strong and capable people, we can work without stopping, faster and faster, electric lights making artificial day so the whole machine can labor without ceasing. But remember: *No living thing lives like this*. There are greater rhythms that govern how life grows: circadian rhythms, seasons and hormonal cycles and sunsets and moonrises and great movements of seas and stars. We are part of the creation story, subject to all its laws and rhythms."²⁴⁵

Noticing the rhythms and seasons of creation reminds us of our potential and limitations.

When we practice Sabbath, we embrace our identity as humans created in the image of God.

Ruth Haley Barton underscores this truth when she writes:

"... the first order of things is that we are creatures and God is the Creator. God is the one who is infinite; I, on the other hand, must learn to live within the physical limits of my own strength and energy. There are limits to my relational, emotional, mental, and spiritual capacities. I am not God... God is the only one that can be two places at once. God is the one who never sleeps. I am not. We can't remind ourselves of this enough."²⁴⁶

*"O, Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made;
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee...
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!"²⁴⁷*

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 60.

²⁴⁵ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (NY: Bantam, 1999), 69.

²⁴⁶ Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 122-123.

²⁴⁷ Carl Boberg and Stewart K. Hine. "How Great Thou Art," 1885, 1949. <https://hymnary.org/text/o-lord-my-god-when-i-in-awesome-wonder>.

Conclusion

Busy, tired, stressed, anxious, lonely, distracted, depleted, and desperate for rest. These words describe so many people and pastors today. And yet, there is a divine gift and command called *Sabbath* awaiting our attention. Sabbath is God's rest and rhythm, designed to restore our bodies and souls. The crush of cultural pressure and church leadership is immense: constant connectivity, unrealistic expectations, and unhealthy visions and paths of success fight against Sabbath. Reclaiming Sabbath practice, peace, and joy in this atmosphere will require resolve, resistance, accountability, and encouragement. Traveling alone, the road to Sabbath-recovery is dim. But, a loving, supportive community brightens the path to Sabbath practice and greater wellbeing.

This paper proposes that ecclesial leaders implement, encourage, and advocate for Wesleyan-influenced clergy groups for the purpose of practicing Sabbath in community. "Fellowship of the Rest" groups will adapt the structure and questions of early Methodist bands in order to practice Sabbath in a group of loving and accountable colleagues. These groups aim to catalyze the practice of Sabbath while combating loneliness that is far too common among clergy. This paper further proposes that a retreat setting conducive to encounters with God, others, and creation is the best way to model and encourage Sabbath practice. Retreat encounters will be followed by online small group meetings where Sabbath accountability questions will be asked in an encouraging and supportive atmosphere. A curriculum (facilitator's guide) for "Fellowship of the Rest" groups has also been developed as part of this research project with the hope that this resource will honor God, help clergy, and bless the Church and world Jesus loves so much.

In conclusion, there are some limitations to this project noted here. First, as “Fellowship of the Rest” cohorts gather, particular attention should be given to bivocational pastors and those serving in economically challenging situations. While this dissertation did not research these factors, taking time off from work and affording participation in these group meetings could create added scheduling and financing obstacles to overcome. District leaders and local church boards are encouraged to advocate for these pastors, explore scholarship opportunities, and to consider adapting group arrangements for those facing these types of circumstances.

Another worthwhile consideration for the future of this project is to evaluate, measure, and study the impact of “Fellowship of the Rest” Sabbath groups on the wellbeing of participating pastors. Since this project is still in a “pilot phase” of development at the time of writing, evaluative tools could be developed to gauge the effectiveness of this project on the long-term health and wellbeing of participating clergy. Also, as the project is implemented with pastors, another future consideration is for the material to be adapted for laity use as well. In fact, clergy who complete the three month “Fellowship of the Rest” journey could be encouraged to adapt and lead the same type of Sabbath-keeping groups in their local churches.

Sabbath is a divine gift to humanity. Imagine what our lives and spiritual lives could look like if we would learn to accept and apply this gift in the digital age. Felicia Wu Song describes what Sabbath resistance could look like:

“... in this vision, the Sabbath is no longer merely a gift of negation — defined as not working; not checking our social media feeds or email; not using our digital devices; not being efficient; not being productive. Instead, as a liberating and life-giving force, the observance of Sabbath becomes a counter-liturgy. It functions as a form of resistance against the harried and hurried existence we experience as cogs in the industrialized machinery of contemporary digital life and gives us a chance to recover our humanity as it calls us to lift our eyes and fill our souls with renewed sense of God’s goodness through his promise of rest and security.”²⁴⁸

“The Sabbath was made for man , and not man for the Sabbath.” – Jesus, Mark 2:27, NASB2020

²⁴⁸ Wu Song, *Restless Devices*, 100.

“Fellowship of the Rest” Leader’s Guide

Invitation to Participants:

A district, denominational, or other clergy development leader invites 5-9 ministers to participate in three months of weekly “Fellowship of the Rest” meetings (four in-person “retreat days” and eight one-hour online meetings). A sample calendar is included below. A sample invitation letter and other retreat preparation resources are included in this Leader’s Guide.

Sample Calendar:

Specific days and times should be scheduled based on each group’s needs and availability.

Monday, October 7: Sabbath Retreat Day
 Monday, October 14: Sabbath Group Meeting (Online)
 Monday, October 21: Sabbath Retreat Day
 Monday, October 28: Sabbath Group Meeting (Online)
 Monday, November 4: Sabbath Retreat Day
 Monday, November 11: Sabbath Group Meeting (Online)
 Monday, November 18: Sabbath Retreat Day
 Monday, November 25: Sabbath Group Meeting (Online)
 Monday, December 2: Sabbath Group Meeting (Online)
 Monday, December 9: Sabbath Group Meeting (Online)
 Monday, December 16: Sabbath Group Meeting (Online)
 Monday, December 23: Sabbath Group Meeting/M meal (In Person)

Sample Sabbath Retreat Day Schedule:

Overnight lodging prior to the retreat day is recommended as driving distance may be a factor.

8-8:50 am: Breakfast (optional depending on driving distance to the retreat site)

8:50-9 am: Coffee & Conversation

9 –10 am: Opening Group Session

10-11:30 am: Outdoor Activity - Encounter with Creation

12-1 pm: Scripture & Lunch

1-3 pm: Solitude: Rest & Reflection (outdoors if possible)

3-4 pm: Closing Group Session and Communion

Sample Invitation Letter / Email #1:

Hello, Pastor __(name)__:

I am thankful for you and all the ways you serve our Lord and His church!

My reason for this email is to invite you to participate in a small group of pastors who will meet weekly for three months to evaluate, learn, and lean into God's good gift of Sabbath. This group of pastors is part of a Sabbath project called: "Fellowship of the Rest - Practicing Sabbath Together: A Wesleyan Approach to Help Pastors Rest and Flourish."

Our exhausted and lonely culture is desperate for rest and community. Pastors are no exception. In fact, a pastor's unique role can make Sabbath-keeping an even greater challenge. My prayer is that this project will be used by God to encourage, refresh and renew you as we experience God's good gift of Sabbath in a group of encouraging and supportive colleagues and friends.

Our "Fellowship of the Rest" group will meet weekly for 12 weeks.
(4 face-to-face "Sabbath-retreat" days and 8 one-hour Zoom meetings.)

October 7 - Camp Adrian (8am-4pm)
October 14 - Zoom (TBD)
October 21 - Camp Adrian (8am-4pm)
October 28 - Zoom (TBD)
November 4 - Camp Adrian (8am - 4pm)
November 11 - Zoom (TBD)
November 18 - Camp Adrian (8am - 4pm)
November 25 - Zoom (TBD); December 2 - Zoom (TBD); December 9 - Zoom (TBD);
December 16 - Zoom (TBD); December 23 - Zoom (TBD)

The Sabbath-retreat days at Camp Adrian (8am-4pm) are crucial and would need to be "guarded" on your calendar. These days are only for the pastors participating, and technology use will be limited. There will be times for worship, prayer, and meals together, but also times for individual rest, reflection, and enjoying God's creation.

The district will cover the cost of your lodging for one night (Sunday night is recommended), and two meals (breakfast and lunch on Monday). The only cost for you is time, transportation, and if you decide to stay an additional night, or need any additional food/meals.

Pastor, your wellbeing, family, and ministry are so important! I hope you can arrange your schedule to join this group. If not, there will be more "Fellowship of the Rest" groups in the future. Please let me know by next Thursday, August 15 if you can take part. Once group members are finalized, I will follow up with more details prior to our first Sabbath-retreat day on Monday, October 7.

You are loved and appreciated!
Kyle

Sample Follow-up Letter / Email #2:

Hello, Pastor ____ (name) ____:

I am so glad you have decided to join the “Fellowship of the Rest” Sabbath group! I am praying that this will be a wonderful time of rest and renewal for you and your clergy colleagues. Here’s a list of those who will be participating in this cohort:

(List names here)

Begin praying now that you and each pastor listed will experience the joy and refreshment of God’s good gift of Sabbath.

As a reminder, our first Sabbath retreat day is Monday, October 7 at Camp Adrian (37 Meeks Road, Adrian GA). Breakfast begins at 8am. Our first group session starts promptly at 9am. If you are planing to arrive Sunday evening and stay overnight, please contact Jeff Croft at _____ to reserve your room.

Emergency Contact Information:

(List group leader’s phone number here)

(List camp/host’s phone number here)

You will be encouraged to turn-in and/or turn-off your phone during the Sabbath retreat day, and should leave the emergency contact information with family, church secretaries, etc. If desired, group leaders will monitor your cell phones throughout the day in case of an emergency.

How to Prepare:

Notify your family and church staff/board that you will be unavailable except for emergencies on the Sabbath retreat days. On the way to the retreat, begin to disengage from your digital devices and pray and/or worship in preparation for Sabbath. Get a good night’s rest and arrive at the retreat expecting God to speak to you and other group members.

Please notify the group leader / host if you have any food allergies.

Be prepared to spend time outdoors (worship, prayer, and a brief, non-strenuous work project).

What to Bring:

Comfortable clothes and shoes, bathroom/hygiene supplies, light jacket, Bible, journal, hat, sunscreen, bug spray, gloves, any needed medications, a lawn chair or blanket, and an attitude of hopeful expectation.

Please feel free to contact me at _____ with any questions.

I am praying for you, and for a great “Fellowship of the Rest” experience.

See you soon!

Kyle

Plan for Retreat - Day One: Sabbath Rest (in a nonstop world)

Breakfast (30-45 minutes) - Optional depending on driving distance to retreat site.

Coffee & Conversation (15 minutes)

Greet and welcome each participant as she/he arrives.

Collect phones and any needed registration or contact information.

Opening Group Session (60 minutes)

Welcome and Introductions

After the leader welcomes the group and introduces herself/himself, invite each participant to introduce themselves to the group by sharing their name, basic information about family, church and ministry role, and favorite food.

Prayer

Scripture, Readings, and Reflection (see Appendix for suggestions)

Statement of Purpose (see Appendix)

Basic Guidelines (see Appendix)

Review Daily and Weekly Schedule

Clarifying Our Hopes and Expectations

Invite participants to respond to the following scenario and questions: *Imagine packing for a trip. You must decide what to bring with you and what to leave behind. In this case, think in terms of your life and not your luggage. What attitudes and expectations are you packing for this 'Sabbath trip'? What habits, worries, or attitudes are you hoping to leave behind? How might you begin to eliminate hurry from your life?*

Praying for Each Other

Gather in a circle. Ask each participant to pray for the person on their left.

Outdoor Activity – Encounter with Creation (90 minutes)

Arrange a guided, silent nature walk, or a non-strenuous outdoor project with the property manager or owner. Ideas include planting seeds, cleaning tools, light “touch-up” painting, gathering sticks, rocks, pinecones, etc.

Scripture & Lunch (60 minutes)

Arrange tables for conversation. Leader shares a 10-minute devotion or reflection on Sabbath. Pray, eat, and laugh together. This is a wonderful time for informal storytelling. Prompt question: *What is the funniest thing that has happened to you when you have been in a hurry?*

Solitude: Rest & Reflection (120 minutes)

Distribute a map or describe places outside where participants can be alone. Suggest places to walk and sit. Provide chairs and/or blankets if needed. Provide a list of Scriptures and readings about creation/nature and encourage journaling. Remind them that naps are a gift too.

Closing Group Session and Communion (60 minutes)

Listening to Each Other

Invite participants to share what they are experiencing and hearing from the Spirit.

Communion and Closing Prayer

Plan for Retreat - Day Two: Sabbath Resistance (in a digital age)

Breakfast (30-45 minutes) - Optional depending on driving distance to retreat site.

Coffee & Conversation (15 minutes)

Greet and welcome each participant as she/he arrives.

Collect phones and any needed needed registration or contact information.

Opening Group Session (60 minutes)

Welcome and Introductions

Tell a brief story about a unique gift you have received (past or recent) and why it is special to you. Invite participants to share about a gift they have received and why it is special to them.

Prayer

Scripture, Readings, and Reflection (see Appendix for suggestions)

Statement of Purpose (see Appendix)

Basic Guidelines (see Appendix)

Review Daily and Weekly Schedule

Clarifying Our Hopes and Expectations

Remind participants that Sabbath is a precious divine gift for us to receive. *Ask: "How is Sabbath a gift to us? Has the practice of Sabbath been a gift to you this week? If so, in what way(s) has Sabbath blessed you? Has practicing Sabbath been a challenge? What limits to you need to implement with technology in order to practice Sabbath?"*

Praying for Each Other

Gather the group in a circle. Ask each participant to pray for the person on their left. Wrap-up the prayer-time and session by praying the Lord's Prayer in unison.

Outdoor Activity – Encounter with Creation (90 minutes)

Arrange a guided, silent nature walk, or a non-strenuous outdoor project with the property manager or owner. Ideas include planting seeds, cleaning tools, light "touch-up" painting, gathering sticks, rocks, pinecones, etc.

Scripture & Lunch (60 minutes)

Arrange tables for conversation. Leader shares a 10-minute devotion or reflection on Sabbath. Pray, eat, and laugh together. This is a wonderful time for informal storytelling.

Solitude: Rest & Reflection (120 minutes)

Distribute a map or describe places outside where participants can be alone. Suggest places to walk and sit. Provide chairs and/or blankets if needed. Provide a list of Scriptures and readings about creation/nature and encourage journaling. Remind them that naps are a gift too.

Closing Group Session and Communion (60 minutes)

Listening to Each Other

Invite participants to share what they are experiencing and hearing from the Spirit.

Communion and Closing Prayer

Plan for Retreat - Day Three: Sabbath Resilience (for life and ministry)

Breakfast (30-45 minutes) - Optional depending on driving distance to retreat site.

Coffee & Conversation (15 minutes)

Greet and welcome each participant as she/he arrives.

Collect phones and any needed needed registration or contact information.

Opening Group Session (60 minutes)

Welcome and Introductions

Share a story about something (hobby, event, relationship, etc.) that refreshes and renews your energy and passion. Invite participants to share something that refreshes or renews them. Remind the group that Sabbath is a gift that renews and restores us.

Prayer

Scripture, Readings, and Reflection (see Appendix for suggestions)

Statement of Purpose (see Appendix)

Basic Guidelines (see Appendix)

Review Daily and Weekly Schedule

Clarifying Our Hopes and Expectations

Invite each participant to respond to the following: *“Have you experienced anything lately that has renewed your energy or restored your soul? If so, describe the activity. If not, what renewing or restoring activities do you hope to experience this week?”*

Praying for Each Other

Gather the group in a circle. Ask each participant to pray for the person on their left. Wrap-up the prayer-time and session by praying the Lord’s Prayer in unison.

Outdoor Activity – Encounter with Creation (90 minutes)

Arrange a guided, silent nature walk, or a non-strenuous outdoor project with the property manager or owner. Ideas include planting seeds, cleaning tools, light “touch-up” painting, gathering sticks, rocks, pinecones, etc.

Scripture & Lunch (60 minutes)

Arrange tables for conversation. Leader shares a 10-minute devotion or reflection on Sabbath. Pray, eat, and laugh together. This is a wonderful time for informal storytelling.

Solitude: Rest & Reflection (120 minutes)

Distribute a map or describe places outside where participants can be alone. Suggest places to walk and sit. Provide chairs and/or blankets if needed. Provide a list of Scriptures and readings about creation/nature and encourage journaling.

Closing Group Session and Communion (60 minutes)

Listening to Each Other

Invite participants to share what they are experiencing and hearing from the Spirit.

Communion and Closing Prayer

Plan for Retreat Day Four: Relationships (of loving accountability)

Breakfast (30-45 minutes) - Optional depending on driving distance to retreat site.

Coffee & Conversation (15 minutes)

Greet and welcome each participant as she/he arrives.

Collect phones and any needed needed registration or contact information.

Opening Group Session (60 minutes)

Welcome and Introductions

Share a brief story of something you could not have accomplished alone. Invite participants to share about a time they had to rely on others. Remind the group that we best learn to practice Sabbath in a community of loving accountability.

Prayer

Scripture, Readings, and Reflection (see Appendix for suggestions)

Statement of Purpose (see Appendix)

Basic Guidelines (see Appendix)

Review Daily and Weekly Schedule

Clarifying Our Hopes and Expectations

Invite each participant to respond to the following questions: *“How do you feel about being in a group of Sabbath accountability? In what ways is the accountability encouraging? In what ways is the accountability uncomfortable? Are there certain aspects of Sabbath-keeping you are especially struggling with?”*

Praying for Each Other

Gather the group in a circle. Ask each participant to pray for the person on their left. Wrap-up the prayer-time and session by praying the Lord’s Prayer in unison.

Outdoor Activity – Encounter with Creation (90 minutes)

Arrange a non-strenuous outdoor work project with the property manager or owner. Ideas include planting seeds, cleaning and sharpening tools, light “touch-up” painting, gathering up yard debris (sticks, rocks, pinecones, etc.), cleaning sidewalks, etc.

Scripture & Lunch (60 minutes)

Arrange tables for conversation. Leader shares a 10-minute devotion or reflection on Sabbath. Pray, eat, and laugh together. This is a wonderful time for informal storytelling.

Solitude: Rest & Reflection (120 minutes)

Distribute a map or describe places outside where participants can be alone. Suggest places to walk and sit. Provide chairs and/or blankets if needed. Provide a list of Scriptures and readings about creation/nature and encourage journaling.

Closing Group Session and Communion (60 minutes)

Listening to Each Other

Invite participants to share what they are experiencing and hearing from the Spirit.

Communion and Closing Prayer

Plan for Weekly Online Meetings: Sabbath Accountability

Each week (except for weeks with Sabbath retreat days), “Fellowship of the Rest” participants will meet for one hour online (Zoom, Teams, etc.) to pray and encourage one another toward greater Sabbath accountability. (A total of eight online meetings are suggested during this three-month experience). At these weekly online meetings, participants will engage in peer-to-peer accountability by praying for one another, and through utilizing Wesleyan accountability questions adapted specifically toward Sabbath-keeping practices.

The group leader/facilitator should send an online invitation/link to all group members at least 48 hours prior to the scheduled meeting time.

Sample Schedule for Online Sabbath Accountability Meetings (60 min):

9am – 9:10am: Welcome and Prayer

(The facilitator may find it helpful to review the “Covenant for Conversation” found on the Group Guidelines page of this Leader’s Guide.)

9:10am – 9:50am: Accountability and Encouragement

Group members take turns asking and responding to the following questions:

1. How have you rested or practiced Sabbath since our last meeting?
2. Have you neglected Sabbath or been tempted to ignore Sabbath? If so, how?
3. What recent Sabbath-keeping victories can you report?
4. In what ways are you struggling to find or discern your Sabbath rest?
5. Is there anything you are struggling with regarding Sabbath that you haven’t been able to share with anyone?

9:50am – 10am: Prayer for One Another

These times are simply a guide for an hour-long meeting. If the group is large and/or more time is needed for prayer and conversations, the facilitator should adjust times accordingly.

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” - Proverbs 27:17 NIV

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” - Ephesians 4:29 NIV

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” - Hebrews 10:23-25 NIV

Readings & Reflections for Retreat Day One: Sabbath Rest (in a nonstop world)

Scripture Readings:

“By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because on it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.”
Genesis 2:2-3 NASB2020

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; on it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male slave or your female slave, or your cattle, or your resident who stays with you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; for that reason the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” Exodus 20:8-11 NASB2020

“Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30 NASB2020

“Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even of the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27-28 NASB2020

Prayer:

“Creator God, you have given me the weekly gift of sabbath. Help me to step out of this chaotic world and into sacred space and time, May I keep my intention of rest, worship, and community – seeking always to listen for your voice and to number my days rightly. Amen.”²⁴⁹

Quotes:

“Sabbath is the most precious present humankind has received from the treasure house of God.”
– Abraham Joshua Heschel

“Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes, it is the pause that transforms.”
– Walter Brueggemann

“The world is not dying for another book. But it is dying for the rest of God.”
– Mark Buchanan

²⁴⁹ Trent, Dana J., *For Sabbath's Sake*, 134.

Readings & Reflections for Retreat Day Two: Sabbath Resistance (in a digital age)

Scripture Readings:

“And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to celebrate the Sabbath day.” Deuteronomy 5:15 NASB2020

“If, because of the Sabbath, you restrain your foot From doing as you wish on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a pleasure, and the holy day of the Lord honorable, And honor it, desisting from your own ways, From seeking your own pleasure And speaking your own word, Then you will take delight in the Lord, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Isaiah 58:13-14 NASB2020

“Also I gave them My Sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, so that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. Sanctify My Sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between Me and you, so that you may know that I am the Lord your God.” Ezekiel 20:12, 20 NASB2020

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Matthew 6:24 NASB2020

Prayer:

“Father in heaven, who made us, who came to find us, who is redeeming us, we praise you! You took on the limitations of being human that we might become children of God. May we see that our freedom comes only in service to you. May we embrace good limits with technology and discover the beauty of being present with each other. Amen.” ²⁵⁰

Quotes:

“If you aren’t resting, you are a slave to something.” – Adele Calhoun

“When we are at altitude, even if our minds don’t grasp it, our bodies do and they send out distress signals. Similarly, when we are living in a digitally saturated society, even if our minds don’t recognize it, our bodies and spirits know, and arguably, they’ve been sending out distress signals for more than a few years now.” – Felicia Wu Song

“Rest is not the reward of our liberation, nor something we lay hold of once we are free. It is the path that delivers us there.” – Cole Arthur Riley

“Nothing is better for your computer or your body than a complete shutdown and restart. Each Week.” – Tiffany Shlain

²⁵⁰ Earley, Justin Whitmel. *The Common Rule*, 179.

Readings & Reflections for Retreat Day Three: Sabbath Resilience (for life and ministry)

Scripture Readings:

“Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30 NASB2020

“Consequently, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore, let’s make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following the same example of disobedience.” Hebrews 4:9-11 NASB2020

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of God’s grace.” Acts 20:24 NASB2020

Prayer:

“Help us as pastors to find security in our belonging to You and not in the whims of the culture in which we live or the opinions of the beloved people we serve. I pray for clarity of call and clarity of conscience. I pray for physical health and spiritual vitality. I pray for emotional stability and spiritual sensitivity. Restore unto us both the joy of our salvation and the joy of ministry. I pray that the fire in our bones will be transformed into the energy and enthusiasm with which we serve. In the name of the One who calls us, encourages us, empowers us, and has permission to be with us to the end of the age and beyond. Amen.” – Barry Howard²⁵¹

Quotes:

“Pastors do not get into difficulty because they forget they are pastors; they get into difficulty because they forget they are persons.” - Chris Adams

Nineteenth century Welch preacher Christmas Evans is noted for saying: “I would rather burn out than rust out in the service of the Lord.” One of Evans’ contemporaries, James Berkeley, responded: “I admire the bravado. It sounds dedicated, bold, and stirring. However, when I view the burnt-outs and almost burnt-outs who lie by the ecclesiastical road, the glory fails to reach me. Is there not a third alternative? ... (Acts 20:24) is the model I choose to follow. I want to neither burn out nor rust out. I want to finish the race.”²⁵²

²⁵¹ Barry Howard, “A Pastor’s Prayer for Pastors,” Center for Healthy Churches, October 18, 2016; accessed October 23, 2024, www.chccchurches.org.

²⁵² Peter Brain, *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit for a Lifetime of Ministry* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2004), 24.

Readings & Reflections for Retreat Day Four: Sabbath Relationships (of loving accountability)

Scripture Readings:

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’” Genesis 2:18 NASB2020

“And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.” Ecclesiastes 4:12 NASB2020

“For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” Matthew 18:20 NASB2020

“If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has arranged the parts, each one of them in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But now there are many parts, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; or again, the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, it is much truer that the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those parts of the body which we consider less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor, and our less presentable parts become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable parts have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that part which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same care for one another. And if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if a part is honored, all the parts rejoice with it. Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it.” 1 Corinthians 12:15-27 NASB2020

Prayer:

“May our friendships be a fire around which all the lonely can gather. May we choose stories that form us into people who seek beauty, who love justice, and who find each other. May our lives become lights in the darkness so that all may see your beauty. Amen.”²⁵³

Quotes:

“This quality of permanent connectivity that our online capacities offer us has not proven to grant is peace. To the contrary, we remain restless and hungry for something we can’t put our fingers on. Why? Because even though we desire connection, what we long for and are created for is actually something far deeper. What we actually need is communion.” – F. Wu Song

“Even a giant redwood cannot stand when it has to stand alone.”- Wesley D. Tracy

²⁵³ Earley, Justin Whitmel, *The Common Rule*, 170-180

Statement of Purpose

“Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man (humans), and not man (humans) for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27 NASB2020

‘Fellowship of the Rest’ is a small group of Christ-following clergy who gather with their peers for three months to encourage each other in life, ministry, and the practice of Sabbath-keeping.

In a digital age of constant connectivity, we are profoundly shaped by technology and cultural liturgies of consumerism and productivity. While this context presents tremendous challenges for everyone, pastors face unique pressures that make them particularly vulnerable to depletion and burnout. Therefore, recapturing an understanding and appreciation of Sabbath is vital.

“Fellowship of the Rest” Sabbath Creed

We believe Sabbath is a divine gift.

We believe Sabbath-keeping is a holy command.

We believe Sabbath rest helps us receive God’s wholeness and peace.

We believe that we neglect Sabbath to our own peril.

We believe that loving accountability in a Christ-centered community is the best way to resist the crush of culture and embrace the practice of Sabbath-keeping.

*“And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him.
A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.” Ecclesiastes 4:12 NASB2020*

Group Guidelines²⁵⁴²⁵⁵

Becoming a “Fellowship of the Rest” Sabbath community will require the guidance of the Holy Spirit, unity, loving accountability, and a shared desire to take steps toward Sabbath-keeping.

Community and Commitment

We are grateful that you have committed to being part of “Fellowship of the Rest.” As part of this Sabbath-keeping group, we ask that you block out the dates provided on your calendar. Your presence at each meeting is important to others in the group. We realize that emergencies arise, but we hope that you will make this group a priority.

Technology

We encourage all participants to “unplug” for the retreat days and online meetings. On Sabbath retreat days, consider turning your cellphone over to the group leader for safekeeping until the end of the Sabbath retreat day. Disconnecting from your phone will mean that you are not instantly available to your family and parishioners. Plan for pastoral coverage for your congregation on your retreat days. You may give your family and the person you designate to cover for you (church secretary/layperson/other clergy) the phone numbers for your “Fellowship of the Rest” leader(s) for emergencies. If you need to make a phone call or check messages on a retreat day, please do so away from others in your cohort so that you do not disturb them.

Covenant for Conversation

- Be present in our time together.

That may require prayers for peace, taking a deep breath, and setting aside something that has been weighing heavily upon you, occupying mental or emotional space.

- Extend and receive welcome.

We relax best in spaces that welcome us. Know that you are welcome in this group and, in turn, extend welcome to others. Keep your ears and heart open for conversations that may make others feel like outsiders. Extend welcome and hospitality by the topics you discuss with others. It may be helpful to avoid “church talk.”

- Share the air.

It is vital to make sure that each person is heard. Give each person a chance to speak.

- Silence is okay.

We may need to sit and hold the silence at times. You are always welcome to “pass” and be silent if you need to do so, rather than share.

- Observe confidentiality.

This is especially important since you are here with colleagues and friends.

- Believe that you may be refreshed and renewed.

Expect God to bless our time together, and that the Spirit will use Sabbath to provide holy perspective on our lives, relationships, and ministries.

²⁵⁴ These group guidelines are adapted from: Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest: From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 228-230.

²⁵⁵ These group guidelines are adapted from: Laura Hamrick, *Sabbath Life: A Participant's Guide*, (Life Around the Table, 2022).

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