

A pastor's journey toward Sabbath rest

Rudy Dirks

I'm beginning to realize that my whole life has been a journey toward Sabbath rest. A number of more recent markers on this journey stand out most strikingly.

Discovering the blessings of being still before God

The first of these markers was in 1998 in Botswana. In the midst of ministry with African indigenous churches under Mennonite

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Church Canada Witness, I found myself asking the question, how can I learn to better listen to God? When I asked a friend, a nun, she said, "You have to talk to Father Julian."

An Irish priest with the Passionist community on the outskirts of Gaborone, Botswana, Father Julian had ministered in the Kalagadi Desert for thirty-five years. He lived out of the back of a pickup truck, returning to the city from time to time to teach. For three months

I met with Father Julian every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon for one hour of silent meditation. He said he didn't know how to teach me to listen to God, but that he meditated and prayed every day for a couple of hours and I would be welcome to join him.

We would sit opposite each other in silence for one hour in the stone, thatched-roof chapel, which offered marginal respite from the hot desert sun. For the first couple of minutes he would tell me how he entered into the silent presence of God, and at the end of the hour we would talk for another few minutes about what the silence had been like for each of us. This experience profoundly shaped my relationship with God as I began to learn the spiritual blessings of being silent and still before the One who continuously and in perfect serenity holds all things in the universe together (Col. 1:17).

I learned that when I intentionally attend to the presence of God in moments and places of silence, I don't necessarily experience dramatic things—but I notice that the rest of the day changes somehow. At that point I had not yet recognized that this posture of stepping aside from the activity of ministry and life in order to “waste time” (to use Marva Dawn's wonderful phrase) in silence and stillness with God is part of Sabbath rest.

A Sabbath sabbatical pilgrimage

Another recent marker on my Sabbath rest journey came three years ago when my wife, Sharon, and I were able to take a four-month sabbatical from our pastoral roles as minister of pastoral care and lead pastor at Niagara United Mennonite Church, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.

Many years of college teaching, counseling, social work, mission service, and pastoring (all good and worthwhile experiences) had left us wondering how we could know the reality of Jesus's words that “my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” When we were finally able to take these four months, we devoted our sabbatical to learning about Sabbath rest—resting in God.

Inspired by Arthur Boers's pilgrimage book, *The Way Is Made by Walking* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), we turned our sabbatical into a pilgrimage (a physical journey with a spiritual purpose), traveling by car with a small camper trailer which I made for this purpose. We traveled lightly and simply, with no commitments or appointments other than spending time in communities where we could learn from others how to rest in God.

We began by visiting a Jewish messianic community in Brooklyn. We were graciously invited to experience Shabbat in a home, and there we observed the centuries-old traditions of the orthodox Jewish community. Key to this observance of the Sabbath is purposefully refraining from creating or doing any work on the Sabbath, in order to be reminded that God is the One who creates, and his handiwork is the universe; everything we do is simply a response to God's initiative.

We did this part of our pilgrimage with another couple from our church. When we came back, we experimented with a Mennonite Shabbat. We invited groups of about a dozen people to a

Saturday evening where we reflected on Sabbath rest and our faith stories. We shared a meal, a simple Russian-Mennonite *faspa*, which was familiar to most of us and simplified the preparation.

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When we returned, Christmas was approaching, so we treated our three recently married children and their spouses to a Taizé retreat at Loyola House in Guelph, Ontario. The retreat house had only single rooms, and it was a three-day silent retreat. We joked that our Christmas gift to our children was a family reunion where no one could say

anything. This experience of Sabbath gave each of us a profound appreciation for a very different way of relating to each other—through the silence and rest of Sabbath. Try eating a family meal in complete silence sometime. We were surprised at how difficult that was. That experience of Sabbath has become a spiritual reference point for our family ever since.

Then we embarked on the main part of our pilgrimage, a three-month journey including some weeks at Christ in the Desert monastery in New Mexico and Little Portion Hermitage in Arkansas (founded by John Michael Talbot.) Between visiting these communities, we camped for some weeks in state parks in Arizona and Florida as we sought to incorporate practices and perspectives we had learned. We began sharing morning and evening prayers at our campsite, following the Benedictine patterns of using Psalms and silence. When we hiked in the mountains, we selected a biblical phrase (*lectio divina*) and walked together for hours in silence, listening to the Spirit. Setting aside times and spaces for being with God (which is the heart of Sabbath) gradually began to awaken in us a heightened awareness of God in everything all around us.

And yes, we went to church every Sunday on our pilgrimage. We decided to really push the envelope of our newfound freedom from routine by praying on Sunday mornings for the Spirit to

guide us to a church, and then proceeding to try to follow the Spirit by going to whatever church seemed to be the right one. In this apparently random way we attended Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, Baptist, and rocking contemporary churches (the latter complete with dry ice and black lights in the sanctuary).

Two of the churches “just happened” to be talking about Sabbath rest the Sunday we visited them. In one southern conservative Baptist church the elderly pastor said he had never preached on Sabbath rest before, and he said the topic might be uncomfortable for some people, as he proceeded to quote Mother Teresa. In another church the pastor spontaneously asked any visiting pastors to come forward for prayer. Five of us came forward, and he proceeded to pray for us. He didn’t know Sharon and me or anything about our Sabbath journey, but he prayed that we would experience God’s Sabbath rest in our lives. We told him later how prophetic his prayer was. Just as I had learned from Father Julian years earlier, we found that when we set aside spaces and times to listen to God we didn’t necessarily notice anything dramatic in the moment, but things changed in the rest of our day.

Other experiments with Sabbath rest

Our sabbatical journey is now long over, but our pilgrimage continues as we learn more about the various manifestations of this wonderful gift of Sabbath rest that God offers us. Sabbath was woven into the fabric of Israelite life. At least the prophets make clear that it was meant to be, in their prophecies about laws

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relating to the seventh day, the economic and farming implications of the Sabbath year, and the financial and liberation implications of the year of Jubilee. Sabbath rest is meant to be woven into our lives as well. And it can be.

More recently Sharon and I have been experimenting with Sabbath rest in more subtle ways. We have been changing how we eat, with less processed food and more natural food in our diet, and we have been doing some fasting. Over the past three years we followed a tight

budget that enabled us to finally become debt-free the week before Easter, marking a Sabbath rest from debt.

We have become more intentional in creation care of our backyard in order to enable the land to experience more of God's Sabbath rest too. And whenever possible we spend time "just sitting with Jesus" (as Dallas Willard puts it). We are currently dreaming of downsizing in order to live in our basement apartment, and then we hope to build a "tiny house" in our backyard so we can enjoy a Sabbath rest from too much stuff and have more time to attend to God and to relationships with people.

Working at Sabbath?

I want to clarify something here. While I am happy to share my journey into Sabbath observance, I do not have it all together. Sharon and I often find ourselves forgetting what we have learned and returning to a busy, Sabbath-less life. And in our excitement about Sabbath rest and what it looks like in our lives, we sometimes find ourselves working hard at it—which of course defeats the whole purpose.

Once when we had shared our story and our excitement about what we were doing to incorporate Sabbath rest into our lives, a friend commented, "Sounds pretty exhausting to me." Perhaps that's why it's so important that we do Sabbath rest in community—so that others can help us when we get out of balance and don't see our own blind spots.

Sabbath and Anabaptist values

Mark Buchanan, in his book *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2006), makes the point that while the Sabbath is a sacred day and space as instructed in the Ten Commandments and the prophets, it is simply an expression—a discipline—intended to help cultivate a "Sabbath heart" for God. Reflecting on our calling as pastors and leaders in the Christian community, I wonder: what implications does having a Sabbath heart have for our understanding of biblical, Christian, Anabaptist faith? It seems to me that Sabbath rest resonates with some key Anabaptist perspectives:

1. Peace and justice are central to our expression of faith. We typically focus on peace and justice in relationships between

people in conflict, which is good and appropriate. And certainly practicing Sabbath where we set aside time to be attentive to God and others has great potential for promoting relational shalom. But Sabbath rest suggests that peace and shalom begins within our own inner person. As we rest in God, we begin to know an inner peace and a reconciliation of our own internal struggles. “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Prov. 4:23, TNIV).

2. *Community is another Anabaptist value at the heart of Sabbath.* In our Sabbath pilgrimage we noticed that our quest to learn about resting in God drew us to communities that were practicing such rest. While individuals can find rest in God in private ways, full Sabbath rest requires relationships for sustainability, encouragement, learning how to rest, and gentle correction when we find ourselves drifting back to the old rest-less ways.

3. *Perhaps one of the values most challenged by Sabbath is our work ethic.* In my Mennonite experience, service and ministry tend to trump everything. Mennonites emphasize doing. This can be wonderful; after all, what could be more attractive than a practical faith? But when doing is everything, our activity takes on a dark side that is evident when we feel guilt about not being seen to be accomplishing something tangible, and when our doing is marked by a need to control and by excessive use of power. In such situations Sabbath rest enables us to learn silence and receptivity to the Spirit, to accept mystery, and to receive each other’s gifts as they come to us by the work of the Spirit rather than just by our own strength. Sabbath, then, can be about the body, spirit, and soul being given respite from the struggle of ministry and the struggle of life itself.

At rest in God, source and sustainer of life

Sabbath rest teaches us our need to learn to not be in control, to not be responsible for the well-being of everyone else in the church. The Sabbath heart is a heart that is at rest in God. God initiates; we respond.

We were three weeks into our sabbatical before I could stop thinking about how the church was doing in my absence, before I could let go of my sense of being indispensable. We had agreed

with the church that as a sabbatical discipline, we would light a candle every Sunday morning, wherever we were, and pray for them. And every Sunday morning the church lit a candle and prayed for us. Apart from these prayers, we agreed not be in contact with each other at all—no exceptions—for three months. In our absence the church handled some crises, including several deaths, and they initiated some things we only found out about on our return. For our part, during long driving stretches we prayed through the church directory for every member, not having a clue

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about what was going on in their lives at the moment. Everything turned out just fine. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord” (Zech. 4:6, NRSV).

The beauty of Sabbath rest is that its focus is on delighting in God, receiving his rest, placing ourselves in God’s presence, and refraining from our own doing. The ways of exposing ourselves to God’s Sabbath rest are as varied as our personalities and life situa-

tions. And the fun in it is experimenting with how God may want to bring Sabbath rest into our lives. We won’t always get it right on the first try. We may change how we rest in God from season to season. And some aspects of Sabbath rest may become so precious that they remain ingrained in our lives for life.

Sabbath was made for humanity to find its place in God—and since God is the source of life, the sustainer of life, and the very expression of life itself, then resting in God can only be life giving. May God bring us, even now, to our destiny of Sabbath rest in him.

About the author

Rudy Dirks pastors Niagara United Mennonite Church, with his wife, Sharon, as minister of pastoral care. They get away as often as they can to hike, camp, bike, canoe, or kayak. They have three married children, and Rudy is delighted with his new status as grandfather—with all the treasures of the kingdom that go with it.