



Sabbatical Handbook

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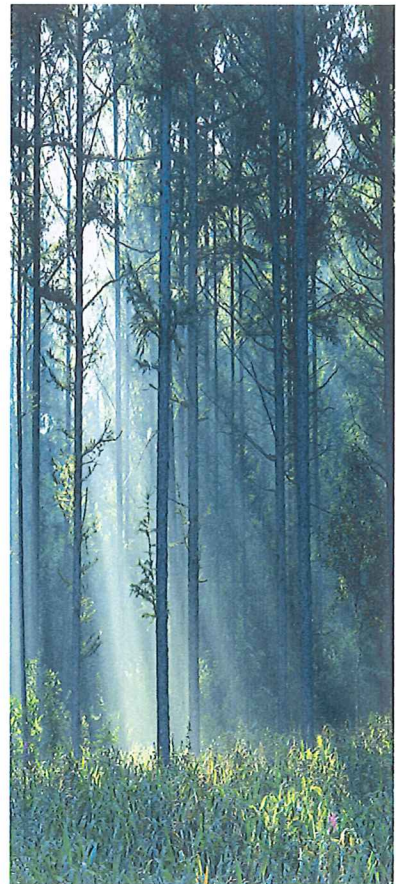
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CT Classic: Fallow Time

The Sabbath can protect us from the temptations of wealth
David Neff

*This article originally appeared in a Christianity Today Series book, *The Midas Trap*, published in 1990.*

Wealth is stored-up work. In its various forms-savings accounts, insurance policies, bonds, cash, and commodities-it is an economic battery, charged up by yesterday's labor, and able to be converted to provide both tomorrow's needs and its delights.

By storing up the results of our labor, we are able to bridge the gulf of time: we set aside something "for a rainy day," we insure against catastrophic medical costs, we prepare for retirement or save for a college education.

Money gives us power over the future, or at least the illusion of power. For although money can be used to pay tuition, it cannot buy wisdom; although money can purchase medical insurance, it cannot buy health; although money can stake out a space for us in a sunny community on the Florida coast, it cannot buy us a long and happy life. All our attempts to bridge time and control the future can be foiled in the vulnerable moment when a vagrant blood clot hits the brain or a speeding vehicle hurtles across the expressway median to intersect our own trajectory.

God alone is Lord of time. He has given to us, his human creatures, dominion over space, over earth and sea, to be stewards of the species for their well-being and our own. But only Yahweh is the Lord of time, moving as he will through history, unhindered by the boundaries of sunsets and equinoxes. Our attempts to shackle time, to squeeze from the moments every drop of value, to control the clock by storing up labor, often become a tasting of forbidden fruit, a savoring of the vacant promise that we shall be as gods. And when we store up treasure on earth, God says to us, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you" (Luke 12:20).

A bridge across time

To spare his people that judgment, God gave them the **Sabbath**, a weekly rift in time across which is laid a bridge of grace. It was to be a time in which no work was done, and thus in which no future value was to be milked from it. All other time is a passage away from the past and a groping toward the future; but the **Sabbath** is pure present. The **Sabbath** is pure present moment because it is filled with the Shekinah, the Presence of God. As Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "[W]hen the **Sabbath** is entering the world, man is touched by a moment of actual redemption; as if for a moment the spirit of the Messiah moved over the face of the earth." And again, he speaks of the **Sabbath** as a time "when a beautifying surplus of soul visits our mortal bones and lingers on." And as both pure present and pure Presence, the **Sabbath** deflects us from our hurtling course toward an uncertain future, and it assures us of love and grace in this moment.

The Lord of Time showed this day of Presence with a sign and with sustenance. Here is the tale of the giving of the **Sabbath**:

The Israelites, freed from oppression, from the exploitation of their labor by their Egyptian masters, had walked for six weeks through the desert toward the wilderness where Moses, their leader, had once tended sheep. They had felt the oppression of thirst, but at Marah and Elim they had drunk the sweet, liberating waters. But now they felt the sting of hunger's lash and murmured their discontent.

The Lord chose the occasion to show them his Presence: "That I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not" (Exod. 16:4b). He fed them quail at twilight, and he feasted them at the dawn with bread—bread, fine as hoarfrost and white as coriander, and sweet, sweet as wafers made with honey.

Miraculously, this bread from heaven was given the same to all. No matter how much a person gathered, when it was measured out, it was the same as everyone else's—about half a gallon.

But divine benevolence is not without its limits. The Lord through Moses instructed them to clean their plates, to hoard not a mouthful of the supernatural food for another day. In the tents of those who did conserve, hedging against hunger by storing up the day's labor against the morrow's feared absence of miracle, sweetness turned bitter as the manna "bred worms and became foul" (Exod. 16:20). But there was indeed a miracle on the morrow, for the Lord of Time is never absent.

On the sixth day, the rhythm changed. When they measured out their gatherings, they had a full gallon for each person. "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest," Moses relayed to the people, "a holy **sabbath** to the Lord" (Exod. 16:23). He bade them prepare what they would, by baking and boiling, and to lay it by till morning, for there would be no heaven-sent food on the ground on the **Sabbath** morn. Indeed, it came to pass: those who stored it as they were told found their food fresh; while those who went forth to gather in the seventh day's early light found nothing.

*Thus is the **Sabbath** a day of both fullness and emptiness. To those who trust the Lord's sufficiency for the present, it is a day filled with sweetness. But to those who must relentlessly squeeze the teat of today to find milk for the morrow, it is emptiness. Those who go forth to gather find nothing to harvest.*

"See! The Lord has given you the **sabbath**," said Moses. "Remain every man of you in his place ... on the seventh day," he instructed. "So the people rested on the seventh day," he recorded (Exod. 16:29-30).

Just a few weeks later, the people trembled and the mountain quaked as Yahweh uttered ten words that initiated his covenant with Israel. In those words, he liberated them from the tyranny of inflamed desire. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house," he commanded. "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exod. 20:17). These words warn against the fever that drives us to possess what must never be ours, whether that be the means of production (oxen and asses) or labor (manservants, maidservants), the fruits of someone else's work (thy neighbor's house), or his exclusive delights (thy neighbor's wife). And the word "You shall not steal" warns us away from clothing desire in action. It is a word to the dishonest and the bent among us.

But the **Sabbath** command is a word to the honest and hardworking, a warning to those who work happily to earn their rewards. The **Sabbath** warning is directed not to the slacker but to the one who takes responsibility-responsibility for family, for employees, for strangers, caring for them by providing rewarding and creative opportunities. It is addressed to those who, in their status as imago Dei, are compelled to bring order and to fight chaos. Fighting chaos means controlling tomorrow. Thus the temptation never to rest, never to let go and leave a minute fallow.

But it is precisely in his role as Subduer of Primordial Chaos that Yahweh identifies with his people and urges them to follow him not only into work, but also into rest. "Remember the **sabbath** day, to keep it holy ... for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the **sabbath** day and hallowed it" (Exod. 20:8, 11).

Harvesting time and reaping fields

The **Sabbath** command is a parallel to the harvest laws of Leviticus 19: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God" (vv. 9-10).

The first command is about harvesting time; the second, about reaping fields. Both embody two principles: care for the future and care for the poor. Anxiety for the future is discouraged; but concern for the poor is cultivated.

Many who have been raised in strictly sabbatical homes were nurtured on the parable of the grasshopper and the ant. However, that parable was not spoken by our Lord, but inscribed in the gospel according to Aesop. And there is a great gulf fixed between the spirit of the slave fabulist and that of the Lord of Freedom, him who said:

Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day. (Matt. 6:25, 30-34)

Of course, Scripture also contains the Book of Proverbs, which chastises the sluggard for his sloth and prophesies reward for the hard-working. The key is found in knowing the difference between, on the one hand, working hard enough and resting often enough to face the uncertainty of the future in confidence, and, on the other hand, facing the future with fear and, in desperation, working in self-defense, never resting in grace.

The land shall keep a Sabbath

The connection between the **Sabbath** and the harvest is carried further by the laws concerning the sabbatical year (Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:1-7, 20-22; Deut. 15:1-11) and the year of jubilee (Lev. 25:8-17, 23-24).

Yahweh's command concerning a sabbatical year is that the land itself "shall keep a **Sabbath** to the Lord." In an agrarian society, land is the fundamental form of wealth. On this foundation can be erected a modest estate or a fabulous fortune in cattle and corn. But without land, the agrarian is unable to amass wealth. Thus, if the people are to rest, the land too must keep a **Sabbath**. Just as the human parties to the covenant are to work six days and keep **sabbath** on the seventh, the soil of the covenant land is to be cultivated and planted for six years, and in the seventh year to lie fallow. The crops that grow of themselves in that seventh year are not to be harvested, but to be gleaned by the poor and the wild beasts (Exod. 23:11) and to feed not only the landowners and their servants, but the sojourners, the cattle, and wild beasts (Lev. 25:6-7).

The sabbatical year was also the occasion for the forgiveness of debts, although such an amnesty applied only to fellow Hebrews (according to Deuteronomy 15:3, one could still exact payment from a foreigner).

For the creditor, debt is an asset, an account receivable. Like all forms of wealth, it can enslave its owner, for debt grants power to the creditor. It is not only money owed, but potentially people owned. Thus to be a creditor is to wield power, and to have power is to risk corruption.

For the debtor, debt is a binding to the past, a forced living with regret for actions long gone or with mourning for mishaps. As long as debt exists there is no rest, for tomorrow threatens to compound yesterday's sorrow. Thus if the covenant people—both debtors and creditors—are to experience rest and grace, debt must periodically be abolished.

The Lord understood the terrors that bind people to their assets, and he addressed those fears. Fear of not being repaid, because of an approaching sabbatical year, was not to discourage one from lending to a fellow Israelite in need: "Take heed lest there be a base thought in your heart, and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye be hostile to your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and it be sin in you. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake" (Deut. 15:9-10).

Likewise, fear of insufficient food was not to discourage one from letting the land lie fallow. Just as the sixth day's manna harvest lasted through the seventh day, the Israelites were promised that the sixth year's crop would be sufficient to tide them over the fallow year: "And if you say, 'What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?' I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, so that it will bring forth fruit for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating old produce; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old" (Lev. 25:20-22).

In Matthew 6:25, Jesus surely echoed this promise, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on." In Matthew, Jesus' teaching about anxiety follows hard on his warning about the absurdity of trying to serve both God and Mammon (v. 24). And it initiates the paragraph that climaxes in his admonition to seek first the kingdom of God (v. 33). Both the sabbatical year and the Lord's teaching about anxiety are framed on the one side by freedom (from debt, from slavery), and on the other by responsibility to live out the covenant (the kingdom).

The sabbatical year is replete with gifts that, like Friday's excess manna, allow the Israelites to let time lie fallow. And as always, God ties the lack of taking care for the morrow to the necessity of caring for the poor. At the very time one is to show trust in God for the future, one is asked to stretch one's generosity in the present, to forgive freely and to lend without grudging. Thus generosity is piled onto generosity.

After seven sabbatical years was to come a year of jubilee. In the fiftieth year, not only was the land to lie fallow, but Israelites who had sold themselves into slavery because they were deep in debt were to be freed, and land was to be returned to the family of the original owner. The jubilee was a time of fresh starts and new beginnings. If the jubilee laws were observed, neither enormous wealth nor grinding poverty could be perpetuated through the generations. There could be no "culture of poverty" in which the collective memory of work and productivity had been erased.

In caring for the covenant people in this way, Yahweh said, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine" (Lev. 25:23a). Thus he refused to grant his people an absolute right to foundational wealth. The illusion of ownership easily evolves into the mirage of independence. But Yahweh did not wish his people to exercise independence; he wanted them to learn continued dependence on him. Thus he said, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23).

The sojourner's rootlessness cultivates dependency in the believer. The **Sabbath**, by suspending the daily routine, disorients the believer and encourages trust and dependence. The sabbatical year, by suspending the use of the land, disconnects the believer from terra firma, making him depend on God. The jubilee, by disrupting the relational world of property owners and indentured slaves, returns people to dependence on grace. The sojourner's experience of rootlessness is at the base of Israelite religion. In what is thought to be the earliest liturgical confession, the worshiper identifies himself thus: "A wandering Aramean was my father ... " (Deut. 26:5).

Likewise, the experience of sojourn is a repeated theme in Mosaic ethics, from being a precursor of the Golden Rule, "You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9); to being a reason to keep the **Sabbath**, "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the **Sabbath** day" (Deut. 5:15).

Jesus and the jubilee

Just as Jesus' teaching on anxiety and trust echoed the sabbatical year, so his proclamation of his own ministry echoed the jubilee. In Luke's gospel, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah and then boldly claims that this message of liberation finds its fulfillment in him:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

John Howard Yoder comments that whatever the phrase "the acceptable year of the Lord" may have meant to Isaiah, "for rabbinic Judaism, and thus for the listeners of Jesus it most likely meant ... the jubilee year, the time when the inequities accumulated through the years are to be crossed off and all God's people will begin again at the same point. ... that there is to come into Palestine the equalizing impact of the **sabbath** year."³

Yoder goes on to cite Andre Trocmé's book *Jesus-Christ et la révolution non-violente* in which the author "has gathered the evidence that Jesus' concept of the coming kingdom was borrowed extensively from the prophetic understanding of the jubilee year."⁴

Scholars debate to what extent Israel ever experienced the full equalization of the jubilee. But at least once, during the time of Jeremiah, an Israelite king enforced the ancient law and declared all Hebrew slaves freed. Unfortunately, the slaveowners did nothing to help the slaves become economically self-sufficient, and they were soon back in bondage. Jeremiah protested this sad outcome and promised his countrymen punishment because they had failed to realize the jubilee's full liberation. Isaiah, writing of Israel's hope of restoration following the Babylonian captivity, used the jubilee language of economic readjustment to describe the fast that will draw Yahweh's attention:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ()

In the same passage, the prophet urges the people to keep the **Sabbath** by avoiding their own business on God's holy day. But in the prophetic vision, harmony (shalom) is not restored to Israel simply by the observation of religious feasts or fasts. It is restored by the implementation of justice. Amos announces God's woe on those "who trample upon the needy," saying, "When will [the **Sabbath**] be over that we may sell grain ... and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver

and the needy for a pair of sandals?" (8:5-6). It is not alone the weekly cessation of commerce that sanctifies the seventh day. It is the extension of the **Sabbath** liberty from avarice throughout the week.

In the prophetic vision of a restored Israel, the principles and the practice of jubilee are realized. Each man sits under his own fig tree (Mic. 4:4); each plants his own vineyard and eats its fruit; each builds his own house and lives in it. No one is deprived of the fruit of his labor. No one is enslaved. All are brought to liberty (Isa. 61:1). And all observe the **Sabbath** together in the presence of the Lord (Isa. 66:23).

Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God likewise drew on **Sabbath** and jubilee imagery to present, in Yoder's words, "a visible sociopolitical, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by his intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed and endowed with the Spirit."⁵

In Jesus' model prayer, a sequence of petitions explains his understanding of the plea "Thy kingdom come." *First comes the petition for "daily bread," an obscure word in Greek, which may very likely be the equivalent of the Latin diaria, the daily food ration given out for the next day. Thus, according to a footnote in the Revised Standard Version, we pray, "Give us today our bread for the morrow." This petition grasps the assurance of pre-Sabbath manna and of the presabbatical year bumper crop. "Give us our bread for the morrow in order that we may confidently enter into the jubilee."*

Next comes release from debt. *"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" recognizes the enslaving power of economic subordination. Debt in this prayer, says Yoder, is the "paradigmatic social evil."⁶ This mutual entering into forgiveness of debt, of at once forgiving and being forgiven, is the only petition our Lord took the trouble to underscore with a warning. After finishing the prayer, he said, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14-15).*

That Jesus' vision of the kingdom involved economic restructuring along jubilee lines is clear from the number of parables he told relating to the forgiveness of debt and the alleviation of poverty and oppression:

The story of the unforgiving servant centers on the remission of debt and the proper response to forgiveness. The hardened servant was only too willing to plead for mercy and to accept gratefully forgiveness for his own enormous debt. But he was unmoved by the king's graciousness and threw into jail someone who could not pay him a debt only one twenty-thousandth of 1 percent of his own (Matt. 18:23-35).

The parable of the workers hired at different times, but all paid equally by the householder, employs an economic metaphor to stress God's desire to deal graciously and sovereignty with all of his creatures, and to see his grace experienced equally (Matt. 20:1-16).

The prodigal son wasted his inheritance and sold himself into servitude, but when he returned home asking to be a household servant in his father's house, the father restored him to the position of a son. How the money had been spent, or even that it

had been spent, was not an issue for the father. The homecoming was a time for rejoicing (for that is what jubilee means), and therefore it was a time of debt remission and manumission (Luke 15:11-32).

The parable of Dives and poor Lazarus stresses the penalty the well-heeled will pay for ignoring gross economic suffering as well as the way God's justice in the afterlife will reward those who, in this life, have been victims of economic oppression (Luke 16:19-31).

The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) displays the folly of the one "who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." What does it mean to be rich toward God? The next pericope (Luke 12:22-34; cf. Matt. 6:25-34) urges trust in God and concludes with these familiar words: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Jesus' understanding of being "rich toward God" clearly involved more than an inner attitude of trust. It involved outer trusting activity that would enter into jubilee-like sharing.

The parable of the unrighteous steward is subject to various interpretations, but an important element in the story's structure is the forgiveness of debt (Luke 16:1-13).

Luke caps the telling of these parables by relating Jesus' encounter with a crooked tax collector (Luke 19:1-10). Zacchaeus' response to that encounter was "Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." Jesus' reply? "Today salvation has come to this house."

At least since Augustine's time, the church has promulgated a largely spiritual interpretation of these parables. And, in view of the oppressive sense of the kingdom delayed, such spiritualizing was to an extent necessary. But it seems clear from the gospel records that early in his ministry Jesus and his followers expected the kingdom to come within their lifetimes and that a jubilee-style economic reordering would not only be the result of the kingdom, it would be a mode of entrance into it. Indeed, when at Pentecost the Spirit fell upon the church, inaugurating the kingdom in this present age for those who would enter it, the automatic response of the believing community was one of economic leveling (Acts 2:43-47).

The possibility of a recovery

The spiritual meaning of wealth is the domination of time and exaltation of the self. The spiritual meaning of the **Sabbath**, the sabbatical year, and the jubilee is the dominion of Yahweh over time and the dependence of his people on his grace.

Wealth is an attempt to build a bridge across time, to store up the potential of labor to exercise control over the future. The **Sabbath** is a disciplined attempt to release control over time and to depend on grace.

Wealth is an attempt to gain independence from the community and from spiritual reality: He who has the gold makes the rules. But the jubilee and the sabbatical year

teach that in reality interdependence and trust in God reflect the true character of existence.

The status of the **Sabbath** has been ambiguous in the church's history. Jesus' followers abandoned it, along with anything else that might have branded them as belonging to a sect of Judaism, within a hundred years after his death. The hellenization of the second-century church, and the incipient anti-Semitism that accompanied that process, discarded much that is rich in the church's Jewish heritage.

Yet at various times the church has rediscovered the **Sabbath**. Not finding New Testament warrant for treating Sunday as a **sabbath**, the continental Reformers rejected sabbatarianism as a papal innovation. For Calvin, as for Luther, there was an obligation to worship and an obligation to rest, but one day was as good as another under the New Covenant. The English Puritans, however, argued that the **Sabbath** was a creation ordinance, not just a Jewish ceremonial. And since the obligation of observing a particular holy day existed before Sinai, it also existed after the Cross. Unfortunately, in "rediscovering" the **Sabbath**, the Puritan divines failed to unfold its economic and social meaning as spelled out in the seventh and fiftieth years. For them it was almost pure command, and became as it were a third sacrament, a holy thing to be revered!

Subsequent sabbatarianism in England and America, most notably under the influence of the Lord's Day Alliance and among Seventh-day Adventists, has continued this Puritan tradition that focuses on the holiness of a day and the ways to avoid transgressing it. Attention to the day's economic and social significance has surfaced only in recent years among Adventists and then only among that denomination's theologians. For the Adventist rank and file, the focus of **Sabbath** observance is on not transgressing the day's holiness.

The **Sabbath's** social and economic meaning may be largely lost to our atomistic society (although political changes such as Third World land reform may be undergirded by studying the jubilee). When only isolated pockets of believers incorporate the **Sabbath** discipline into their spirituality, it is nearly impossible to experience the **Sabbath** as freedom from economic bondage. It is possible, although difficult, for an individual to observe the holiness of a day. The support of a family and a congregation do much to reinforce that observance. But without a wide acceptance of the **Sabbath's** relevance for our time, the social and economic significance remain sealed off from experience. Nevertheless, the vision of the **Sabbath**, the seventh year, and the jubilee can do much to catechize us on our relation to wealth: Thou shalt remember the **Sabbath**, in order to exit anxiety and to enter into grace and trust, in order to leave behind the closed, grasping hand and to open the hand to generosity.

Notes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951, 1966), 68.
2. *Ibid.*
3. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 36.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 39.
6. *Ibid.*, 41.
7. M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism: A Chapter in the History of Idealism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 450.



From the book [Deepening Your Ministry Through Prayer and Personal Growth](#)

If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week, we take ourselves far too seriously. The moral sweat pouring off our brows blinds our eyes to the action of God in and around us.

— Eugene H. Peterson

Question: "Do you take a day off?"

Answer: "Unthinkable! In a world where a cobalt bomb might detonate any moment, how can the very people entrusted with the Word of Life to this doomsday population take a day off?"

This interchange took place in a seminary classroom while I was a student. The answer came from a prominent pastor whom, I thought, I had every reason to admire and therefore emulate. Thus, when I became a pastor, I practiced what had been impressed upon me: long hours, seven-day weeks, year after year. Most of my friends and mentors did the same. The only alternative I could imagine was sloth, by far the deadliest of the ministerial sins.

After a few years, pressure from my wife and children got me to take an occasional break. I began to realize I worked far better and got more done in six days if I had a change of pace on the seventh. Remarkable! The arguments and evidence mounted: I was persuaded to take a regular day off.

Then I noticed something (why it took so long I'll never know): my practice was not at all the same as the biblical practice of **Sabbath**-keeping. I had more or less assumed I was being biblical, but actually I stood in stark and utter contrast. My day off was basically utilitarian, a secularized **Sabbath**, making it possible to get more done on the other six days. It was also a commonsense contribution to family harmony and emotional health.

At that point I set out to keep a genuine **Sabbath**.

No other behavioral change has brought so many unintended but welcome benefits to my life of faith and my work as a pastor.

Daily and weekly rest

Sabbath means "quit." "Stop." "Take a break." The word itself has nothing devout or holy in it. It is a word about time, denoting our nonuse thereof, what we usually call "wasting time."

The biblical context is the Genesis week of creation. **Sabbath** is the seventh and final day, in which "[God] rested [*shabath*] ... from all His work which He had done" (NASB). As we reenter that sequence of days when God spoke energy and matter into existence, we repeatedly come upon the refrain "And there was evening and there was morning, one day.... And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.... And there was evening and there was morning ..." (NASB)— on and on, six times.

This is the Hebrew way of understanding day, but it is not ours. Our day begins with an alarm clock ripping the predawn darkness and closes, not with evening but several hours past that, when we turn off the electric lights. In our conventional references to day, we do not include the night except for the two or three hours we steal from either end to give us more time to work. Because our definition of day is so different, we have to make an imaginative effort to understand the Hebrew phrase *evening and morning, one day*. More than idiomatic speech is involved here; there is a sense of rhythm.

Day is the basic unit of God's creative work; evening is the beginning of that day. It is the onset of God speaking light, stars, earth, vegetation, animals, man, woman into being. But it is also the time when we quit our activity and go to sleep. When it is evening, "I lay me down to sleep and pray the Lord my soul to keep" and drift off into semiconsciousness for the next six or eight or ten hours, a state in which I am absolutely nonproductive and have no cash value.

Then I wake up, rested, jump out of bed, grab a cup of coffee, and rush out the door to get things started. The first thing I discover (a great blow to the ego) is that everything was started hours ago. All the important things got under way while I was fast asleep. When I dash into the workday, I walk into an operation that is half over already. I enter into work in which the basic plan is already established, the assignments given, the operations in motion.

Sometimes, still in a stupor, I blunder into the middle of something that is nearly done and go to work thinking I am starting it. But when I do, I interfere with what has already been accomplished. My sincere intentions and cheerful whistle while I work make it no less a blunder and an aggravation. The sensible thing is to ask, "Where do I fit? Where do you need an extra hand? What still needs to be done?"

The Hebrew evening/morning sequence conditions us to the rhythms of grace. We go to sleep, and God begins his work. As we sleep he develops his covenant. We wake and are called out to participate in God's creative action. We respond in faith, in work. But always grace is previous and primary. We wake into a world we didn't make, into a salvation we didn't earn.

Evening: God begins, without our help, his creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work he initiated.

Creation and covenant are sheer grace and there to greet us every morning. George MacDonald once wrote that sleep is God's contrivance for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are awake.

We read and reread the opening pages of Genesis, along with certain sequences of Psalms, and recover these deep, elemental rhythms, internalizing the reality in which

the strong, initial pulse is God's creating/saving Word, God's providential/sustaining presence, God's grace.

As this biblical rhythm works in me, I also discover something else: when I quit my day's work, nothing essential stops. I prepare for sleep not with a feeling of exhausted frustration because there is so much yet undone and unfinished, but with expectancy. The day is about to begin! God's genesis words are about to be spoken again. During the hours of my sleep, how will he prepare to use my obedience, service, and speech when morning breaks? I go to sleep to get out of the way for a while. I get into the rhythm of salvation. While we sleep, great and marvelous things, far beyond our capacities to invent or engineer, are in process— the moon marking the seasons, the lion roaring for its prey, the earthworms aerating the earth, the stars turning in their courses, the proteins repairing our muscles, our dreaming brains restoring a deeper sanity beneath the gossip and scheming of our waking hours. Our work settles into the context of God's work. Human effort is honored and respected not as a thing in itself but by its integration into the rhythms of grace and blessing.

We experience this grace with our bodies before we apprehend it with our minds. We are attending to a matter of physical/spiritual technology— not ideas, not doctrines, not virtues. We are getting our bodies into a genesis rhythm.

Sabbath extrapolates this basic, daily rhythm into the larger context of the month. The turning of the earth on its axis gives us the basic two-beat rhythm, evening/morning. The moon in its orbit introduces another rhythm, the twenty-eight-day month, marked by four phases of seven days each. It is this larger rhythm, the rhythm of the seventh day, that we are commanded to observe.

Sabbath-keeping presumes the daily rhythm, evening/morning—we can hardly avoid stopping our work each night, as fatigue and sleep overtake us. But the weekly rhythm demands deliberate action. Otherwise, we can go on working on the seventh day, especially if things are gaining momentum. **Sabbath**-keeping often feels like an interruption, an interference with our routines. It challenges assumptions we gradually build up that our daily work is indispensable in making the world go.

But then we find the **Sabbath** is not an interruption but a stronger rhythmic measure that confirms and extends the basic beat. Every seventh day a deeper note is struck—an enormous gong whose deep sounds reverberate under and over and around the daily percussions evening/morning, evening/morning, evening/morning: creation honored and contemplated, redemption remembered and shared.

Reasons for remembering

In the two passages where the **Sabbath** commandment appears, the commands are identical but the supporting reasons differ. Exodus says we are to keep a **Sabbath** because God kept it (). God did his work in six days and then rested. If God sets apart one day to rest, we can too. There are some things that can only be accomplished, even by God, in a state of rest. The rest/work rhythm is built into the very structure of God's interpenetration of reality. The precedent to quit doing and simply be is divine. **Sabbath**-keeping is commanded so that we internalize the being that matures out of doing.

The reason given in Deuteronomy for remembering the **Sabbath** is that our ancestors in Egypt went four hundred years without a vacation. Never a day off. The consequence: they were no longer considered persons but slaves. Work units. Not persons created in the image of God but equipment for making bricks and building pyramids.

Lest any of us do that to our neighbor or husband or wife or child or employee, we are commanded to keep a **Sabbath**. The moment we begin to see others in terms of what they can do rather than who they are, humanity is defaced and community violated. It is no use claiming "I don't need to rest this week and therefore will not keep a **Sabbath**"—our lives are so interconnected that we inevitably involve others in our work whether we intend it or not. **Sabbath**-keeping is elemental kindness. **Sabbath**-keeping is commanded to preserve the image of God in our neighbors so that we see them as they are, not as we need them or want them to be.

Every profession has sins to which it is especially liable. I haven't looked closely into the sins that endanger physicians and lawyers, woodworkers and potters, but I've had my eye on the snare from which pastors need deliverance: it is the sin of reversing the rhythms. Instead of grace/work we make it work/grace. Instead of working in a world in which God calls everything into being with his word and redeems his people with an outstretched arm, we rearrange it as a world in which we preach the mighty work of God and in afterthought ask him to bless our speaking; a world in which we stretch out our mighty arms to help the oppressed and open our hands to assist the needy and desperately petition God to take care of those we miss.

That, of course, is why so few pastors keep a **Sabbath**: we have reversed the rhythms. How can we quit work for a day when we must redeem the time? How can we pause when we have a fire in our mouth? How can we do nothing for a whole day when we have been commanded to be urgent in season and out of season, and there is never a season in which the calls for help do not exceed our capacity to meet them?

Perhaps that is why the **Sabbath** is *commanded* not *suggested*, for nothing less than a command has the power to intervene in the vicious, accelerating, self-perpetuating cycle of faithless and graceless busyness, the only part of which we are conscious being our good intentions.

Of all the commandments, not one is treated with such disregard by pastors as this one. We are capable of preaching good sermons on it to our parishioners, and we take great care to provide them a **Sabbath** of good worship and holy leisure. But we exempt ourselves. Curious. Not many of us preach vigorously on the seventh commandment and then pursue lives of active adultery. But we conscientiously catechize our people on the fifth commandment and without a blush flaunt our workaholic **Sabbath**-breaking as evidence of an extraordinary piety.

Pure preaching but Pelagian practice

Sabbath: uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from the frenzy of our own activities so we can see what God has been doing and is doing. If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week, we take ourselves far too seriously. The

moral sweat pouring off our brows blinds our eyes to the action of God in and around us.

Sabbath-keeping: quieting the internal noise so we hear the still small voice of our Lord. Removing the distractions of pride so we discern the presence of Christ "in ten thousand places,/Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/To the Father through the features of men's faces" (G. M. Hopkins).

Sabbath-keeping: separating ourselves from the people who are clinging to us, from the routines to which we cling for our identity, and offering them all up to God in praise.

None of us has trouble with this theologically. We are compellingly articulate on the subject in our pulpits. It is not our theology that is deficient but our technology—**Sabbath-keeping** is not a matter of belief but of using a tool (time), not an exercise for the mind but the body. **Sabbath-keeping** is not devout thoughts or heart praise but simply removing our bodies from circulation one day a week.

We are, most of us, Augustinians in our pulpits. We preach the sovereignty of our Lord, the primacy of grace, the glory of God: "By grace are ye saved ... not of works, lest any man should boast" (KJV). But the minute we leave our pulpits we are Pelagians. In our committee meetings and planning sessions, in our obsessive attempts to meet the expectations of people, in our anxiety to please, in our hurry to cover all the bases, we practice a theology that puts moral effort as the primary element in pleasing God.

The dogma produces the behavior characteristic of the North American pastor: if things aren't good enough, they will improve if we work a little harder and get others to work harder. Add a committee here, recruit some more volunteers there, squeeze a couple of more hours into the workday.

Pelagius was an unlikely heretic; Augustine an unlikely saint. By all accounts Pelagius was urbane, courteous, convincing. Everyone seems to have liked him immensely. Augustine squandered away his youth in immorality, had some kind of Freudian thing with his mother, and made a lot of enemies. But our theological and pastoral masters agree that Augustine started from God's grace and therefore had it right, and Pelagius started from human effort and therefore got it wrong. If we were as Augustinian out of the pulpit as we are in it, we would have no difficulty keeping **Sabbath**.

How did it happen that Pelagius became our master?

Our closet Pelagianism will not get us excommunicated or burned at the stake, but it cripples our pastoral work. And it is catastrophic to the church's wholeness and health.

Making good nonuse of time

The technology of **Sabbath-keeping** is not complex. We simply select a day of the week (Paul seemed to think any day would do as well as any other—) and quit our work.

Having selected the day, we also need to protect it, for our workday instincts and habits will not serve us well. It is not a day when we do anything useful. It is not a day that proves its worth, justifies itself. Entering into empty time, nonfunctional time, is difficult, for we have been taught that time is money.

Our secularized age is so fragmented that no consensus in the details of **Sabbath**-keeping is possible. We cannot prescribe a practice for each other. But lest the command dissolve into a fog of good intentions, I will risk autobiography. The risk is that someone will try to imitate the details of my practice, or (more likely) will say, "That's sure dumb; I don't see the point of that" and dismiss the whole business on the basis of my inept practice. I excuse my example with Thoreau's precedent: "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience."

Monday is my **Sabbath**. Nothing is scheduled for Mondays. If there are emergencies, I respond, but there are surprisingly few. My wife joins me in observing the day. We make a lunch, put it in a daypack, take our binoculars, and drive anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour to a trailhead along a river or into the mountains. Before we begin our hike, my wife reads a psalm and prays. After that prayer there is no more talking—we enter into a silence that continues for the next two or three hours, until we stop for lunch.

We walk leisurely, emptying ourselves, opening ourselves to what is there: fern shapes, flower fragrance, birdsong, granite out-croppings, oaks and sycamores, rain, snow, sleet, wind.

We have clothes for all weather and so never cancel our **Sabbath**-keeping for reasons of weather any more than our Sunday churchgoing—and for the same reason: we need our **Sabbath** just as much as our parishioners need theirs. When the sun or our stomachs tell us it is lunchtime, we break the silence with a prayer of blessing for the sandwiches and fruit, the river and the forest. We are free to talk now, sharing bird sightings, thoughts, observations, ideas—however much or little we are inclined.

We return home in the middle or late afternoon, putter, do odd jobs, read. After supper I usually write family letters. That's it. No Sinai thunder. No Damascus Road illuminations. No Patmos visions. A day set apart for solitude and silence. Not-doing.

Being-there. The sanctification of time.

We don't have any rules for preserving the sanctity of the day, only the commitment that it be set apart for being, not using. Not a day to get anything done but a day to watch and be responsive to what God has done.

But we do have help. **Sabbath**-keeping cannot be carried out as a private enterprise. We need our congregation's help. They need our help to keep their **Sabbath**; we need their help to keep ours. From time to time I say something like this to my elders and deacons: "The great reality we are involved in is God. Most of the people around us don't know that and couldn't care less. One of the ways God has provided for us to stay aware of and responsive to him in a world that doesn't

care is by **Sabbath**-keeping. At regular intervals we all need to quit our work and contemplate his, quit talking to each other and listen to him.

"God knows we need this and has given us a means in **Sabbath**—a day for praying and playing, simply enjoying what is, what he is. One of my tasks is to lead you in the celebration of **Sabbath** each Sunday. But that is not a **Sabbath** for me. I wake up on Sunday morning with the adrenaline flowing. It is a workday for me. Monday is my **Sabbath**, and I need your help to observe it. I need your prayers; I need your cooperation in not involving me in administration or consultation; I need your admonitions if you see me carelessly letting other things interfere with it. Pastors need pastors too. One of the ways you can be my pastor is to help me keep a weekly **Sabbath** that God commanded."

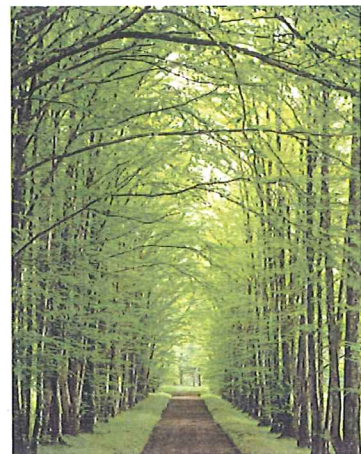
And they do it. They help. I don't think there are many congregations who would not help us do it if they knew we were committed to it and needed their help to carry it out.

My wife has been keeping, off and on, a **Sabbath** journal for many of the years we have been doing this. The journal is labeled, "Emmaus Walks." You wouldn't be greatly impressed, I think, if you read the sporadic entries. Bird lists, wildflowers in bloom, snatches of conversation, brief notes on the weather. But the sparseness records a fullness, a presence. For **Sabbath**-keeping is not primarily something we do, but what we don't do.

We got the phrase "Emmaus Walks" from Douglas V. Steere, who told us the story of an old Lutheran retreat master he once knew, very Prussian, whose speech was thick with German gutturals. He specialized in men's retreats. As the men would come into the lodge, he would make them open their suitcases, from which he would confiscate all the whiskey. Then he would pair them up and send them off on what he called *ee-mouse* walks.

Steere told us that for a long time he wondered what *ee-mouse* walks were, and then realized one day that the old Prussian drillmaster was sending his men out on *Emmaus* walks: two disciples walking and talking together and Jesus, unrecognized, with them. But afterward they knew: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (KJV).

It is this kind of unobtrusive alteration in perception that happens quietly but cumulatively in the practice of **Sabbath**-keeping.



Sabbatical Consideration for Pastors

Policy Statement

The Executive Presbytery recommends this sabbatical development model for local churches and network officers. The length of a sabbatical is to be based on the tenure of the minister, the minister's credibility, the felt needs of the minister and church or network, the financial situation of the church or network, and the availability of other leaders to fill the minister's role during the minister's absence.

Biblical Principle

Scripture shows that God created people with a need for balance and structure. It is important that ministers maintain spiritual, physical, social, and mental health. "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). According to Jesus, "the Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27). Six days of work and one day of worship and rest per week is God's formula for people to practice (Exodus 35:2). Every 7th year was to be a year of rest for the land. In addition, the Year of Jubilee was to be practiced in Israel every 50 years to give the land opportunity to rest. While the land was given these times of rest, it is clearly implied that workers would not be doing their customary work during those times (Leviticus 25:1-12). In a high-stress and pressure-filled culture, times of spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional rejuvenation are essential. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach for sabbaticals, the principle is that ministers need time to be refreshed and renewed.

Purpose

Sabbaticals provide an extended period of spiritual rest, study, and renewal for ministers who give so much of themselves week in and week out, year after year. A sabbatical is an extended time away from the normal routine of ministry and daily life. A sabbatical is a separate time away from the minister's ministry assignment and not considered as the minister's vacation time. A sabbatical should be viewed as a time of healing, restoration, and renewal in body, mind, spirit, and vision.

Church Board Responsibility

- Review the sabbatical timetable and usage plan as submitted by the minister.
- Mediate any concerns of the church, district, or minister regarding the sabbatical.
- Determine who will moderate, lead, and minister in church or network functions in the minister's absence.
- Determine, in consultation with the minister, the length of the sabbatical based on the tenure of the minister.
- Consideration may be given to adopting a graduated financial support structure for sabbaticals (example: \$ X00 per year times the number of years of tenure with a maximum of \$ X,000).

Minister's Responsibility

- Present a sabbatical plan to the church board for approval and input.
- Provide a contact source if needed.
- Provide a written plan for caring for the needs of the church during the sabbatical.
- Share highlights of the sabbatical with the church on completion.

Network Responsibility (Optional)

- Receive for approval the minister's proposal for a sabbatical, preferably 6 months in advance.
- Communicate to the congregation the importance and value of a sabbatical to the minister and church.
- Request a written overview of the sabbatical from the minister when he returns.

Typical Sabbatical Projects

- Continuing education at an accredited institution.
- Travel to other churches to receive fresh ideas and vision.
- A prayer/planned reading retreat.
- Attendance at various short-term seminars in areas of interest.
- A trip to a spiritual renewal center.
- Mini-sabbaticals or getaways at a network conference center or college dorm when space is available.

Note: A sabbatical's length can vary.

John Musgrave, Church Development

Suggested Local Church Sabbatical Policy

Purpose

Sabbaticals provide an extended period of spiritual rest, study, and renewal for ministers who give so much of themselves week in and week out, year after year. A sabbatical is an extended time away from the normal routine of ministry and daily life. A sabbatical is a separate time away from the minister's ministry assignment and not considered as the minister's vacation time. A sabbatical should be viewed as a time of healing, restoration, and renewal in body, mind, spirit, and vision.

Purpose

A sabbatical is an extended time away from the usual/routine work rhythm for the purpose of study, career development, personal renewal, quality rest, and spiritual development. It is intended to mutually benefit the credentialed minister and their place of service.

Eligibility

A sabbatical may be taken after six years of continuous full-time ministry with the church/ministry, and may be only taken during a consecutive year of service.

Length

The minister may be granted up to three months of sabbatical leave.

Request for Leave

The official board must receive and approve the request for a sabbatical leave not less than six months before the planned leave. Such requests should include a written proposal explaining how this will benefit the individual and the church.

Approval

The official board of the church/ministry will appoint from themselves a sabbatical committee, working with the pastor and making recommendations to the full official board.

Funding

- Regular salary and benefits will continue.
- If the sabbatical includes continuing education, the sabbatical committee will determine an appropriate amount to assist with those costs.

Considerations

- The timing of the sabbatical leave shall take into consideration the needs of the congregation and the scheduling needs from the pastor's request.

- Approved but unused sabbatical leave may not be used at another time and will not be considered unused vacation.
- Sabbatical leave is not charged to vacation time.
- No two members of the pastoral staff may be on sabbatical leave in the same calendar year

Minister's Responsibility

- Present a sabbatical plan to the church board for approval and input.
- Provide a contact source if needed.
- Provide a written plan for caring for the needs of the church during the sabbatical.
- Share highlights of the sabbatical with the church on completion.

Church's Responsibility

- Provide informational material to those fulfilling the pastoral duties during the sabbatical
- Provide remuneration for those fulfilling the pastoral duties during the sabbatical.
- Provide assistance in monitoring and maintaining the pastor's residence while on the sabbatical – (lawn, mail, papers, etc.)

Typical Sabbatical Projects

- Continuing education at an accredited institution.
- Travel to other churches to receive fresh ideas and vision.
- A prayer/planned reading retreat.
- Attendance at various short-term seminars in areas of interest.
- A trip to a spiritual renewal center.
- Mini-sabbaticals or getaways at a network conference center or college dorm when space is available.

Suggested Sabbatical Track

We would recommend the first 5-7 days of a 30 day sabbatical be a season of rest and disengaging from the rigors and routine of ministry.

We would hope in this first 5-7 days the ministry couple could spend time in a place they could enjoy together.

As the ministry couple move into the next 10-21 days we would suggest a season of prayer, meditation, reading, and contemplation. These 10-21 days might be spent doing some of the following.

Spiritual

- Scriptural Path
 - o Biblical Reading
 - Choose a path of Biblical reading that will direct you into a particular theme or personality.
 - o Journaling
 - SOAP
 - Scripture
 - Observations
 - Application
 - Prayer
- Meditation
 - o Special Insights – Rediscover the discipline of meditation. Take time to allow the scripture to speak to you and your life.
- Prayer
 - o Allow there to be disciplined seasons of prayer – confesion / petition / intercession / etc.
- Praise
 - o Allow time to enjoy seasons of personal praise unto your God!
 - o This may be aided by worship music or it may be praise and worship in quiet and solitude

Professional

- Visit 3-4 Churches
 - o Week One
 - o Week Two
 - o Week Three
 - o Week Four
 - Outline of Message
 - Positive Takeaways from these ministries
- Lunch with 2 Pastors
 - o Week One or Two
 - o Week Three or Four
 - Outline of meeting
 - Positive Takeaways from these meetings

Physical

- Dr.'s Physical
 - o Observations
- Exercise Routine - Continued or additional
 - o Walking
 - o Jogging
 - o Cardiovascular

Marriage / Family

- Spouse
 - o Date(s)
- Children
 - o Special Time

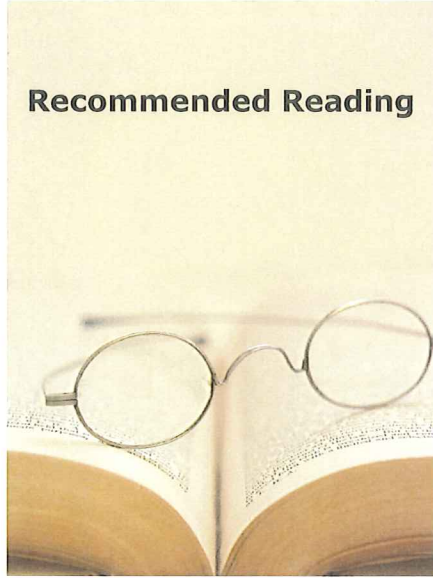
Recommended Reading:

- Refer to Recommended Reading List

Renewal Retreat

- Refer to Retreat Locations List

Recommended Reading



DNA of Relationships

Gary Smalley,
Greg and Michael Smalley

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Gary L McIntosh

Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives

Wayne Muller

Deepening Your Ministry Through Prayer and Personal Growth

Eugene Peterson

Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning

A. Richard Bullock
and Richard J. Bruesehoff

Invitation to Solitude and Silence

Ruth Haley Barton

The Rest of God

Mark Buchanan

Daily Life in the Time of Jesus

Henri Daniel-Rops

Inside Out

Larry Crabb

Courageous Leadership

Bill Hybels

Traveling Light

Max Lucado

Choosing to Cheat

Andy Stanley

Sabbatical Locations

Pastors Retreat Network

www.pastorsretreatnetwork.org

PO Box 180455

Delafield, WI 53018

1-866-703-9544

Beside Still Waters

A Valley View Inn

Telephone: 941-744-1976

Fax: 941-744-1973 Attn: Kathie Kittsmiller

E-mail tffkathie@verizon.net

Heartland Conference and Retreat Center

3201 County Line Rd 225

Marengo, Ohio 43334-9432

740-747-0220

info@heartlandretreat.com

Sue Nigh, Executive Director

Bed and Breakfast in Cambridge

Pastor Greg & Karen Black

410- 436-7001

Gkblack1@netzero.com

Additional Renewal Retreats and Locations

– Enrichment Journal

<http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/retreats.pdf>

