Sabbath Living Journey

Through the Blessed Earth Sabbath Living Initiative and evaluation, we learned from over 230 unique clergy plus 12 stakeholders.

Through surveys and interviews, we identified barriers and facilitators to keeping Sabbath, who is able (or trying) to keep Sabbath, and strategies for weaving Sabbath into your life. Here are some interesting findings that may also be helpful for you or anyone in their Sabbath-keeping journey.

With gratitude,
The Sabbath Living Initiative evaluation team

OUTCOMES

Increasing one’s Sabbath-keeping was associated with small, but statistically significant, improvements in: burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment), positive mental health, and anxiety. Those who kept Sabbath more often experienced these improvements to a larger extent. Compared to those who did not change their Sabbath-keeping frequency, participants who decreased Sabbath-keeping by 2–4 times per month simultaneously experienced worse spiritual well-being in ministry, burnout, positive mental health, and anxiety scores. We are not able to determine which came first, the decrease in Sabbath-keeping or decline in well-being. Interestingly, the decline in well-being when Sabbath-keeping was reduced was more pronounced than the improvements when Sabbath-keeping was increased.

CHANGES IN SABBATH-KEEPING

As clergy engaged more deeply in the practice of Sabbath-keeping, we heard a shift in their Sabbath activities. While quiet and contemplative activities were consistently reported, the longer people practiced Sabbath, the more active or communal their activities often became. We also gained insight from what clergy avoided doing with their Sabbath time—activities such as work-related email or visitations, and household chores or errands. Further into their Sabbath journey, we heard more clergy talk about taking a break from electronics.

CHANGES IN SABBATH-KEEPING FREQUENCY FROM BASELINE TO 9 MONTHS

Among the 40.4% reporting any increase at 9-months follow-up:

- 25.7% increased to 4 times/month
- 9.6% increased to 3 times/month
- 2.9% increased to 2 times/month
- 2.2% increased to 1 time/month

Sabbath-keeping increased
Sabbath-keeping was unchanged
Sabbath-keeping decreased
Facilitators to Sabbath-keeping

Four themes were voiced as facilitators to Sabbath-keeping: planning, support and mentoring, accountability, and intention.

Planning advice included choosing when to initiate Sabbath-keeping, with the suggestion of starting in the summer when church life is less busy. For those struggling to find Sabbath time, some recommended starting small, with a few hours of Sabbath regularly. As you develop a Sabbath routine, share it with others so that they can plan accordingly, too.

Support from a DS, PPRC members or church staff, as well as from family and spouse, was identified as strong facilitators of Sabbath-keeping. Colleagues can help protect your time at work or be an alternate contact. Many clergy recommended having a Sabbath mentor, especially for those establishing their foundation. Others recommended seeking a support group or network of other Sabbath-keepers. For many, external accountability was essential and included communicating your Sabbath plans with others — to your church community, family, and friends — so that they can ask about your Sabbath. Deciding in advance what you will be doing on your Sabbath — that is, choosing your Sabbath activities with intention — and having something to look forward to, were important to many people. For many, this included leaving town (whether getting into nature or visiting another city). Also important was the intention of keeping the same Sabbath day, so that it becomes a rhythm for yourself and others. The most common and yet most challenging facilitator voiced was embracing the notion that most needs can wait 24 hours for your return.

KEEPING SABBATH

These are some of the Sabbath activities shared with us:

**Connecting with loved ones:** date night, visiting grandchildren, talking with friends on the phone, visiting parents, walking around the neighborhood and talking with neighbors, walking the dog and playing with the cat.

**Spending time alone:** having “me” time, meditating, extended prayer, fishing, writing a gratitude list, getting up at 4am to be alone with God.

**Having fun with others:** watching old cartoons, visiting Thomas the Train, playing games, line dancing, competing in a horseshoe tournament or attending a music festival.

**Exercising:** yoga and cardio at the Y, running for miles through a wooded trail, racquetball, going to the gym.

**Working with your hands:** gardening, chopping wood (and then sitting by a campfire), knitting, painting, woodworking.

**Resting:** surrounding yourself with music from your favorite artists, napping, reading (for pleasure!), watching a movie, getting a massage.

**Getting out:** taking a walk in the woods along a mountain stream, riding a motorcycle to a distant town, having a quiet conversation while walking along the shore, going to the airport to clear your mind.

**Helping others:** volunteering, babysitting grandchildren, sharing communion with someone in need.

**Nourishing yourself and others:** cooking foods that are natural and healthy, going to a favorite place to get a favorite meal, cooking with children and family, having breakfast in bed.

► **MAKE A PLAN** When will you start? Who will be impacted? Who do you need to inform?

► **FIND SUPPORT** Who are your Sabbath allies? Who do you know that is already keeping Sabbath? How can your staff, your family, your church support you? Who can be your back-up when you are away?

► **SET UP ACCOUNTABILITY** Who will know you are keeping Sabbath? Who will you share your Sabbath joys and concerns with?

► **BE INTENTIONAL** What will you do for rest? What will you do for fun? What will you do to connect with God? How will you disconnect from work?
STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders across the state to gain a better understanding of the climate surrounding Sabbath-keeping in North Carolina, as well as shifts in attitudes and experiences that may extend beyond an individual church or community. These key stakeholders were people identified as leaders in the UMC community, who worked with multiple clergy in varying roles. Through these interviews conducted at the beginning of the project (early 2017) and the end (mid 2019), we heard some changes in the climate around Sabbath-keeping in North Carolina, all in a positive direction. UMC leaders were promoting Sabbath-keeping more, including dedicating resources. Large churches were facilitating pastors’ Sabbath-keeping. Institutions continued to prioritize Sabbath-keeping education even as time or financial limitations required programming to be scaled back. Ordination committees placed a stronger emphasis on Sabbath-keeping. Congregants were more vocal in their support of pastors keeping Sabbath.

Continuing the Sabbath Journey

Many clergy participated in more than one Sabbath Living Initiative event. Additionally, through the surveys and interviews, we heard of a variety of Sabbath conferences, support networks, books, speakers, and programming clergy engaged with to advance their Sabbath journey. This participation indicates a deep desire to keep Sabbath and also points to the challenge it can be and the need to continue strengthening support systems and one’s individual skills to achieve the Sabbath rhythm.

IN THE WORDS OF CLERGY*

“"If I go into the office on my Sabbath, the church staff are asking ‘what are you doing here?’ and tell me to go home and enjoy my Sabbath.

“Have something to look forward to — it is something to look forward to all week. Don’t just have a day blocked off for Sabbath but not think about what you want to do with it.

“There were pastors who would rotate their Sabbath every week depending on their schedule; it ended up making their congregants think they were always taking Sabbath and never available.

“Start in the summer, after Lent and Easter, you’ll need a break by then. You might have Bible school in the summer but usually you will have staff helping with that. Start integrating Sabbath when church is slower, then when things pick up in the fall and holidays come you will already have the habit in place.

“Don’t think your Sabbath has to look like someone else’s. Know yourself and pick activities that recharge you and you find restful.

“It would have been helpful to have someone to share advice and check in with during the time I was starting to keep Sabbath. Having someone waiting to hear about your Sabbath day helps with accountability.

*These are paraphrased and compiled selections from interviews
Challenges

While we heard a strong desire from clergy to keep Sabbath, almost everyone experienced barriers in their journey. Some described congregants who seemed supportive of clergy keeping Sabbath until it impacted their lives. For others, a lack of support from their family or scheduling demands outside the family (such as children’s activities or carpooling) broke up their Sabbath day. The ‘nature of the job’ was cited by many as a barrier to Sabbath-keeping, such as when congregants feel their pastor should always be available, or when the pastor is the go-to person for all church tasks. There is always someone in need. Clergy who are bi-vocational shared that the demands of a 40-hour a week job, in addition to their pastoral call, left them feeling there was no time for a Sabbath. From clergy who were not keeping Sabbath as fully as they wanted, we heard that Sabbath can feel like another obligation in their lives, and one they were not meeting adequately.

Thank you

The Sabbath Living Initiative was a partnership made possible by funding from the Rural Church program of The Duke Endowment, programming created and led by Blessed Earth, and the participation of clergy. The Clergy Health Initiative was honored to be a part of this collaboration. Nine months after attending a Blessed Earth event, 44% of participants were engaging in a weekly Sabbath and an additional 41% were engaging in Sabbath regularly (2 - 3 times per month). Wherever you are on your Sabbath journey, we wish you the best and thank you sincerely for being a part of the Sabbath Living Initiative.

Rae Jean, Beth, Heather, Kelly, Jessica, and Jia