

Keeping Sabbath



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Setting

Christian history reveals a wide variety of ways Christians have practiced the Sabbath, providing some landmarks that can be called upon for ideas as well as for warnings. This component presents several different, but recent, ways of practicing — and not practicing — the Sabbath.

About this Exploration

Throughout the history of the church the practice of Sabbath has run from narrow to broad. Certain faith traditions establish restrictions concerning a Sabbath day, limiting everything from household tasks to social activities. Other traditions focus on the intent of the practice: worship, study, and rest. All these traditions highlight rest and re-creation. Current understandings have broadened Sabbath to embrace the practices of justice and of devotion in and around the moments of our daily life. These various interpretations provide the foundation for our practices of Sabbath today.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56
Isaiah 58:9b–14

Leader Preparation

Place information about these practices in your church newsletter, e-mail, and website postings. Include the following, edited to meet the individual needs of your congregation: “A personal exploration of keeping the Sabbath is available through our Faith Practices resources. These activities will enable you to keep the Sabbath more deeply in your personal life, in family and home life, and in your community and work life.”

Individual and Personal Life

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Gazing upon Icons

Supplies:

- a journal and pen or pencil
- an icon that speaks to you about how to keep the Sabbath

Icons are religious images often painted on wood representing Jesus; Mary, the Mother of Jesus; saints; angels; and spiritual scenes. They were developed as a visual aid for communicating biblical events and ideas among preliterate people. Eastern Orthodox Christians have used icons extensively in their religious practices as a doorway to the Divine. The believer can meditate on the icon to enhance his or her spiritual life or to seek to imitate the life of the person depicted in the image. This inflow of spiritual energy is one way to keep the Sabbath.

Select an icon from the online resources, and spend quiet time deeply contemplating the rest of the Sabbath while gazing upon the image. Record your experiences and decisions in your journal.

Resources:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/2aaryjt>

<http://www.tinyurl.com/33braqz>

Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Guide to Imagery Series* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), <http://www.tinyurl.com/3575zj9>

Solrunn Nes, *The Mystical Language of Icons* (2nd edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), <http://www.tinyurl.com/2ucg42w>

Discerning & Deciding Activities



2 In and Out of a Labyrinth

Supplies:

- a journal and pen or pencil
- a labyrinth, Attachment: Activity 2

Labyrinths are designs that symbolize wholeness, using a circular or spiral pathway that takes one to its center and back out. In a walking labyrinth, one starts outside, meanders along the path to the center, and moves back out in the opposite direction. Labyrinths are different from mazes, which are playfully designed to confuse.

Find a labyrinth in your local area, or use a picture of a labyrinth. If you have a picture, place a piece of clear plastic over it so that you can use the labyrinth over again. If you do not have clear plastic, use your finger, the eraser end of a pencil, or the dry end of a ballpoint pen. Center yourself with a few long, slow, deep breaths. Then follow the path presented by the labyrinth. As you circle inward, contemplate the inward journey of the Sabbath through prayer and rest. As you spiral back out, meditate on how to bring the inward journey out into the world. Record your experiences and decisions in your journal.



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Resources:

<http://www.labyrinthlocator.com/>

<http://www.labyrinth-enterprises.com/chartres.jpg>

<http://www.lessons4living.com/labyrinth.htm>

Gailand MacQueen, *The Spirituality of Mazes and Labyrinths*
(Kelowna, British Columbia: Northstone Publishing, 2005)

Sending & Serving Activities



3 Exploring Mandorlas

Supplies:

- a journal and pen or pencil
- a mandorla, a spiritual image depicting two overlapping circles with a symbol in the almond-shaped center, Attachment: Activity 3

Medieval Christian artists sometimes brought two circles together so they overlapped, creating the shape of an almond in the center. This mandorla symbolized the halo around a holy person, an embryo, or the overlay of heaven upon earth. Often, an image of Christ or Mary the mother of Jesus appeared in this central shape. In a similar way, keeping the Sabbath involves bringing a bit of heaven into the earth plane through prayer that works itself out by reshaping our everyday lives.

Locate a mandorla and gaze upon it. Breathe slowly and deeply, looking through the almond shape in the center. Allow the image to speak to you of deeper realities, Sabbath truths that you can bring back into the world to share with others. Record your experiences and decisions in your journal.

Resource:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/23mlc33>

<http://www.tinyurl.com/246cuko>

Household and Family Life

Exploring & Engaging Activities

4 Early American Sabbaths

Supplies:

- a journal and pen or pencil

In the book *Little House in the Big Woods* (75th anniversary edition, New York: HarperCollins, 2007), Laura Ingalls Wilder's father tells how his grandfather endured the Sabbath. It started Saturday evening. From sundown until sundown, no meals were cooked or heated; horses couldn't be hitched; no one could even smile. In church, they had to sit perfectly still on hard benches for two hours. During the afternoon, they sat on a bench and studied their catechism. Finally, the Sabbath ended at sunset.

Why do you think the adults designed such Sabbath practices? What might have been the benefits and drawbacks of this practice? What brought about so many



Sample

changes during the past few generations? Consider how the Sabbath is different now for you and your family. In what ways is your practice of Sabbath a discipline that keeps you in tune with God? How might you amend your practice of Sabbath? Record your reflections in your journal.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

5 Tom Sawyer's Sabbath

Supplies:

- a journal and pen or pencil

Mark Twain (1835-1910) wrote, "Often, the less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it." His fictional nineteenth-century character Tom Sawyer hated Sunday school "with his whole heart." It lasted ninety minutes, and then came the worship service, during which children who memorized 2,000 scripture verses could receive a copy of the Bible. Tom managed to wheedle the necessary quantity of tickets from other kids who had memorized their verses, and he was called up in front of the congregation and given a Bible. When asked whom Jesus called as the first two disciples, he blurted, "David and Goliath!"

Tom well represents creative, energetic children who need other ways of learning about God besides memorizing verses. Many children today will not respond to traditional Sunday school formats. Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist and professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, formulated a list of multiple intelligences, different ways in which people learn:

- verbal-linguistic
- kinesthetic-bodily
- intrapersonal
- interpersonal
- logical-mathematical
- visual-spatial
- musical
- naturalistic

If you participated in church as a child, reflect on your experiences and memories. Which of Gardner's multiple intelligences were addressed in your experiences? Which of those is your primary way of learning? In what ways is your current congregational experience different? Consider how children's activities at church and in your home might be modified to accommodate the variety of children's educational needs. Work with the education or spiritual nurture committee of your church to bring about changes that will enhance the Sunday experience for children.

Resources:

Howard Gardner and multiple intelligences:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/88b38>

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Unabridged edition, New York: Sterling, 2004), <http://www.tinyurl.com/2btpqlg>

Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind, Intelligence Reframed, and The Disciplined Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), <http://www.tinyurl.com/2fqzum>



Sample

Sending & Serving Activities



6 Early African American Sabbath Practices

Supplies:

- poster “Going to Church” (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters8>) by William H. Johnson

African American slaves who wished to worship God in their own way and time sometimes had to do so in strict secrecy. They hung wet quilts around their worship space to deaden the noise. When they talked, they spoke into a large iron wash pot to quiet their voices. They developed methods of keeping the Sabbath that directly addressed their circumstances and met their needs.

In your community, where are there congregations that maintain their native cultural expression of Sabbath? In what ways have they adapted their services of worship to their current cultural context?

Study the art print “Going to Church.” In what ways have some African Americans preserved past cultural practices, and in what ways have they established new traditions?

Find a congregation of a culture different from your own. Visit on a Sunday with your family or a friend. Experience the differences and see how they feel. How does worship feel different from your church’s services?

Resources:

Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Revised edition, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), <http://www.tinyurl.com/248tm9o>

Work Place and Communal Life

Exploring & Engaging Activities

7 Blue Laws

Blue laws are legal restrictions on businesses during Sundays that have been part of the American landscape since the country was colonized by Europeans. These laws have covered a wide range of practices, from preventing the sale of liquor to closing businesses employing more than six people. Only during recent decades have many blue laws been repealed. Find out if there are any blue laws in your area. Are they different from other parts of the state where you live? Do the laws serve humans, or do humans seem to be serving the laws? Do blue laws support the idea of rest, or do they create more angst? Do we pity those who are forced to work on Sundays to keep their jobs, or those who would gladly give up a day of rest to obtain much-needed income? How do blue laws discriminate against religions that honor a day of rest other than Sunday?

Consider the following: When New Mexico repealed its ban on Sunday alcohol sales, residents experienced a 42 percent increase in alcohol-related traffic deaths and a 29 percent increase in alcohol-related car crashes on Sundays. Research indicates blue laws preventing alcohol sales on Sunday protect public health. How does this affect your view of working on Sundays?



Sample

Next time you shop on Sunday, start up a conversation with a store clerk. Keep the above questions in mind while keeping the tone friendly and caring. How does he or she feel about working on Sundays? See if the clerk adds some wisdom to your understanding of keeping the Sabbath.

Resource:

David N. Laband and Deborah Hendry Heinbuch, *The History, Economics, and Politics of Sunday-Closing Laws* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1987)

<http://www.tinyurl.com/38ojr3e>

Discerning & Deciding Activities

8. Chariots of Fire

Supplies:

- movie “Chariots of Fire” (info at <http://www.tinyurl.com/m9mkwp>)

Eric Liddell was on the British running team for the 1924 Olympic games. While he was slated to run the 100-meter dash, he refused to compete when he learned that he had to run a preliminary heat on a Sunday. Instead, he was switched to the 400-meter dash, and won an Olympic gold medal anyway. He believed it was better to honor God and keep the Sabbath free of work than to compete on a Sunday for an Olympic gold medal. His choice distressed his teammates and nation, but he stayed his course. At the height of his running career, he made another choice for God instead of for his running career: he went to China as a missionary. His life represents one type of conviction concerning the Sabbath.

Discuss with your coworkers or friends what choices they have made about what constitutes work and rest on the Sabbath. In what ways do they seek to honor God, rather than people or the community, in all they do on Sundays? How does this affect your local community?

Resource:

David McCasland. Eric Liddell: *Pure Gold* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2004), <http://www.tinyurl.com/3a2fqxa>

Sending & Serving Activities

9. Be Reconciled

The Didache: Teachings of the Twelve Apostles, written between 50 and 120 CE, includes instructions for the early Christians. Among them are Sabbath practices. These include not only gathering to break bread and give thanks, but also to confess sins so their sacrifice would be pure. In addition, they were not to let anyone join with them in worship that had a quarrel until they were reconciled. Everyone had to be at peace with everyone else so that their sacrifices would be pure. This commentary in the Didache probably was based on what Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24.



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This Sabbath-keeping practice enabled all those at worship to be at peace with one another, reducing conflict. Take time to examine if there is someone at church or in your workplace or community with whom you are not at peace. If so, take steps to reconcile with that person or group so your worship will honor God.

Reflect

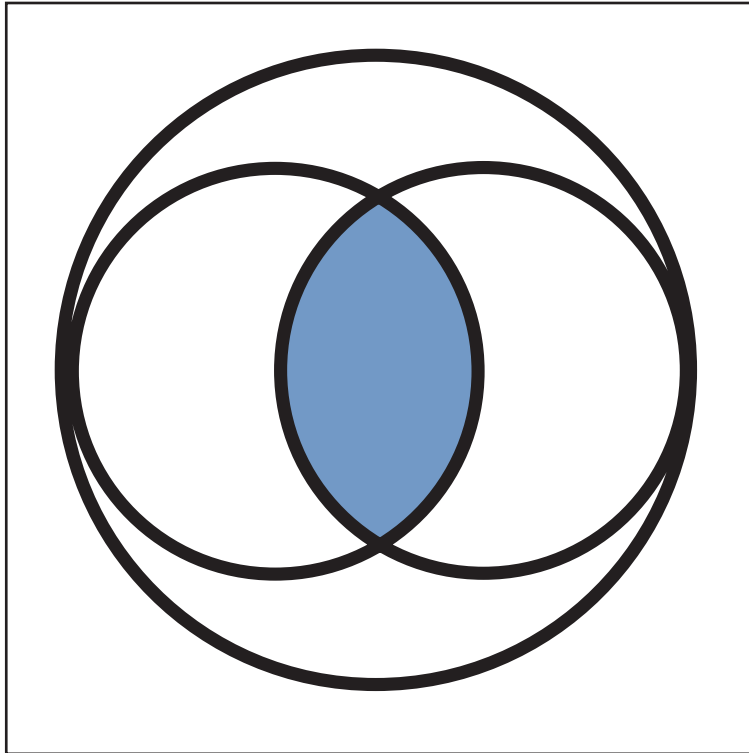
From the humorous to the sublime, Christians throughout history have found a variety of ways to keep the Sabbath holy. How have these different approaches affected your thinking about the Sabbath? Which have challenged you? Which have been easy to dismiss? Which have brought you comfort for your spiritual growth? Record your thoughts in your journal.

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Images of a Mandorla



<http://www.tinyurl.com/24a8bn8>