

Discipleship Steering Committee Sabbath Recommendations

April 2017

Context

Regular Sabbath rest is essential for the long-term health of followers of Jesus, especially those in full time ministry. The practice of Sabbath reminds us that fruitfulness comes from the Lord, not our hard work. Sabbath is one of the practices that helps us to abide in Jesus (John 15).

The 2013 Barna study on Devotional Practice and Scripture Engagement in InterVarsity found 85% of staff indicated they had taken a Sabbath in the past 30 days. Only 1/3rd of InterVarsity students said they had observed Sabbath in the past 30 days. The survey did not ask what Sabbath looked like for these individuals or how many Sabbaths were taken in a month.

Might we provide a model to our students if we give more attention to this important feature of being a maturing disciple of Jesus Christ? Would our mission accelerate if our ministries were charged with and better supported in keep Sabbath? What might it look like for us to create resources and build accountability around Sabbath keeping?

Recent labor laws are bringing more scrutiny to faith-based non-profits whose staff do not have spiritual practices as a required part of employment. What differentiates us from secular non-profits? What ministerial practices make us a religious community? If we call all staff (including office personnel) to a certain level of common and requisite spiritual disciplines, we may more easily carve out space as a defined Christian community, with specific spiritual rhythms, sacraments, and faith-oriented behavioral requirements for all our staff.

The Experiment

In 2016, the Discipleship Steering Committee (under the leadership of Scott Bessenecker and Bethany Horvath) conducted two rounds of Sabbath pilots with a variety of InterVarsity field and office teams. Our purpose was to explore whether we, as a movement, could live out a common practice of the spiritual discipline of Sabbath.

With this in mind, we set out to define and implement a shared understanding of Sabbath across diverse teams. Our "clinical trials" involved approximately 50 individuals on 3 undergraduate field teams, 1 graduate/faculty team, and 3 office teams. In the first set of trials we sent copies of [Sabbath Keeping by Lynne Baab](#) for each participant, and a copy of [Sabbath Life Guide Bible Study](#) for staff directors. In the second set of trials we created a Sabbath resource (see Sabbath: An Invitation to Spiritual Rest) developed by Scott Bessenecker and Bethany Horvath. We also offered \$730 for each team to cover expenses related to a team retreat or for personal retreats.

The Recommendations

Staff in these trials responded favorably to the intentional focus on keeping Sabbath. In one team, a staff was challenged by her supervisor when reporting that doing certain household chores were restful Sabbath activities. She was forced to re-evaluate, to think

about her margins, consider household rhythms during the week, and to embrace new Sabbath rhythms which did not include certain chores. Nearly every team who took a team Sabbath retreat reported extremely positive results. Most indicated that accountability and communal thoughtfulness about Sabbath increased their faithfulness to this practice.

We recommend the following for review by appropriate leaders in our fellowship:

1. Each team discuss the costs and benefits of faithful Sabbath keeping, as well as a monthly spiritual retreat. They should also discuss the diversity of what Sabbath might look like for them while being gently challenged by one another to keep Sabbath activities regenerative. Teams should agree to hold each other accountable to weekly Sabbath baselines such as:
 - a. No work-related communication unless urgent.
 - b. No work-related meetings or travel.
 - c. Include/inform members of one's household as to their Sabbath desires so that the community in which they physically live can accommodate their Sabbath.
2. Weekly Sabbath and monthly spiritual retreats blocked out on their staff calendar.
3. Make available a list of Sabbath resources.
4. Supervisors add to their regular check-in with supervisees whether they have kept Sabbaths and a retreat day each month. If there are barriers, supervisors should explore solutions.

We propose these as starting points as People and Culture help staff and staff supervisors embrace common spiritual practices that define us as a Christian movement.