

Practicing the Sabbath: A Changed Imagination

Leadership in a Changing World

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Summary

The people of God in our congregations and neighborhoods are enmeshed in busy-ness: doing too much; or, at least, believing that doing more is better. This busy-ness – and expectations we carry about producing and accomplishing more – relegates God’s agency to the background. We are in charge; our modern world puts responsibility squarely on our shoulders. How can we instead – by practicing the Sabbath – discover a different imagination? What alternate practices might allow us to move from this existing imagination of anxiety and a perceived scarcity of time, energy, and resources to instead see God abundantly at work in our lives and our neighborhood?

This underlying sense of anxiety and scarcity stems from what authors Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson describe as “modernity’s wager”: the conviction that our lives and our identities – both individually and collectively – rest in our hands rather than God’s; that it is human – rather than divine – agency which will ultimately determine outcomes.¹ Because we allow God to play no essential part in this equation, the responsibility and pressure to create and produce falls on us.

We are unwilling or unable to practice the Sabbath because it means we would have to stop striving, achieving, and producing. It means that we need, instead, to better listen for and answer the Spirit calling us to a new imagination; to discern and live into God’s mission.

A missional theology teaches the people of God – who are *blessed in order to be a blessing* and *sent by Jesus in the same way Jesus was sent by the Father* – to pay attention to where God is at work in the world and in our neighborhoods. We have been blessed with God’s gifts; if we are willing to receive them.

In approaching this project, the question driving my research has been:

¹ Roxburgh, Alan J. and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God’s People: The Missional Challenge of the West*, New York, NY: Church Publishing, p. 1

How might I lead the people in and beyond my Praxis Team to exhibit a changed imagination for being God's people in the neighborhood?

My thesis, which this project was designed to test, is this:

Engagement with alternative Sabbath practices would begin to transform the existing imagination of anxiety and scarcity exhibited by people; and open up a new imagination for what it means to be God's people in a local context.

Along with a praxis team of church members, using a process of action and reflection, we experimented in practicing the Sabbath differently; to test whether it, indeed, would lead us into a new imagination of God's abundance.

Our planned 8-week experiment was interrupted by the pandemic in March of 2020. We paused for more than a year, finally concluding in May of 2021.

In the summer of 2021, I was given the opportunity to take a six-week Sabbatical, during which I was able to focus on my chosen personal Sabbath practice – silent walking – including two trips: to New Mexico and Kentucky.

In the concluding chapter of my thesis, I explore my research findings and offer proposals by responding to several questions:

- 1. Did this experiment of action-reflection with Sabbath practices open up a new imagination for being God's people among my participants? If so, in what ways?*
- 2. In what ways did my personal Sabbath practices open up a new imagination for leading the people of God?*
- 3. How did my leadership actions impact the potential transformation? Data analyzed will include the verbatim initial and final assessments and filed notes taken with the praxis team during the design and experiment phase.*
- 4. Drawing on this analysis, what leadership skills and practices can I propose for leading God's people into freedom from a sense of anxiety and scarcity that is common today as they learn to receive God's gift of Sabbath?*

Among those who write about the Sabbath, there is lively debate about whether it must be observed on Sunday (for Christians) and whether it needs to be for a full day. I made the decision not to place parameters around how praxis team members could experiment with Sabbath practices. To allow the possibility for discovering a new imagination – and assess the extent of their anxiety and scarcity – I committed to offering them permission to test how the Spirit would speak to each of them, individually. Team members periodically expressed some frustration about not being given more precise directions; but, in the end, they discovered new ways of practicing Sabbath – and understanding their relationship with God – with a changed imagination. As one member remarked, “I learned ways to work around obstacles and...acknowledge that a lot is out of our hands and God puts things in place.”

I can now see how this more flexible leadership style – which is different from the way I was trained to be a pastor – allowed team members to find a new imagination; to understand that beyond their feelings of anxiety and scarcity, they could acknowledge God’s agency; that we practice the Sabbath not only – and not even primarily – for ourselves, but for the Lord.

When given permission to imagine the Sabbath in new ways, we can break free from the anxiety of doing it (or not) in the right way. Sabbath can be a practice of worship or rest or resistance. It could be for a full day or two hours or fifteen minutes. It can be on Tuesday night, Sunday afternoon, or Thursday morning. It might be done alone or with others; still and silent or active and with music or laughter. What many of us were taught about keeping the Sabbath – or picked up from popular lore – was restrictive, limiting, or boring. Because we really did not want to do it – or felt we didn’t have the time to – it caused us to feel guilty, anxious, and disobedient.

We might feel that way; it may even seem safer and more comfortable to stay busy; but we can better honor God and be in community with one another when we confront that existing imagination of scarcity and anxiety with the Sabbath practices of worship, rest, and resistance.

I want to share with the people of God – and with other church leaders – our experience that the spiritual practice of Sabbath can be joyful, restful, and exciting. I also want to encourage other leaders to become cultivators of the particular soil upon which they stand.

Through this research project, I have come to realize that these two learnings:

- 1) That we are not too busy to practice Sabbath; and
 - 2) That I can strive to become a cultivating leader,
- are related.

For, without the Sabbath – and, without practices that allow me to stop to worship, rest, and resist – my reserves would run dry; I would eventually succumb to the existing imagination of anxiety and scarcity. Likewise, without an expanded vision for leadership – a departure from my primary mode of functioning as pastor, focused solely on leading the congregational flock – I do not imagine practicing the Sabbath in a sustained, meaningful, and God-focused way. And the people of God – myself included – would be poorer because of it.

Thus, my two central proposals for other leaders are these:

- 1) Do not limit God' agency by exercising too much control.

The people of God may want you to be a pastor, to be the expert, to relieve their anxiety by providing all the answers. Instead,

- 2) Seek to be a cultivator, yourself.

Look to allow the Spirit to be at work in different people in different ways. Plant and water and fertilize a variety of different fields. Allow your hands and your shoes to get dirty. Practice the Sabbath. Be patient. And pay attention to God who provides the growth.