

Editorial – Observing the Principle of Sabbath

Revd Dr Paul Beasley-Murray

Relaxation is part of being a man or woman of God. To be a person of compassion is not necessarily to be strung out by every human need that comes along. Sometimes ‘No’ needs to be said in order that caring can continue. The Greeks had a proverb: ‘The bow that is always bent (i.e. always stretched taut) will soon cease to shoot straight’.

The example of Jesus is significant. On one occasion notable for its busyness, when there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his disciples “had no leisure even to eat”, Jesus said to his disciples, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mark 6.31). Here Jesus exemplifies a doctrine of rest. To paraphrase the words of the Preacher: ‘There is ... a time to work, and a time not to work’.

Relaxation needs to be viewed as a discipline. It is part of God’s order for humankind. Ideally, every day needs to include some time for relaxation. Indeed, the English Methodist Church exhorts its ministers to take “an hour’s break each day for relaxation and exercise”.¹⁰⁶ Even on a very busy day, where there are commitments morning, afternoon and evening, it should be always possible to take an hour – Monday often used to be my busiest day, but this did not stop me from going for an hour’s walk with a friend at 7 o’clock in the morning!

Every minister needs a Sabbath day

The fourth commandment declares: “Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. You have six days in which to do work, but the seventh day is a day dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work” (Ex 20.8-10). Although the division of time into a week of seven days was not a Jewish invention, only the Jews exalted one day above the others; it was only the Jews who turned the seventh day into a day of rest. This day of rest was connected with the creation story. According to Ex 31.17, “In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” (NRSV), literally, ‘God took a deep breath’. If God

¹⁰⁶ See Ann Bird, *Great Expectations* (Methodist Church Division of Ministries, London 1990) 5.

needed to take a deep breath, then surely all the more we need to do the same!

Pastors need more than a day off: they need a Sabbath day. Judith Schwanz makes the point: “A day off conjures images of chores and simply doing whatever needs to be done, substituting home pressures for church pressures – hardly a picture of renewal. Sabbath implies a deliberately restful day focused on God and filled with just the right amount of people and activities to refresh you and restore your soul”.¹⁰⁷ Clearly there is no place for legalism, and doing the odd errand for one’s spouse is one thing, but having to work one’s way through a long ‘to do’ list is another.

Sundays cannot be a day of rest for ministers: another day instead must be found. As we have noted, traditionally Monday has been the ministers’ day-off. However, Monday is not necessarily the best day to take off: in my experience at least, all kinds of pastoral matters come to my attention on a Sunday, so that on a Monday there is always so much to do. My own preference was to go for a Friday, not least because, with a working wife, Friday evenings were the end of her working week and so she could afford to be more relaxed. Whatever day a minister chooses, that day should be sacrosanct, and – death apart, nobody should be allowed to trouble a minister. Some ministers observe a moveable ‘day of rest’ – the day varies from week to week. If it works for them, perhaps fair enough, but I confess I would have found it a difficult discipline to maintain.

Some ministers take Saturday as a ‘day of rest, but with so many church events taking place on a Saturday, that is a bad day. Saturday should be a bonus day, a day sometimes to work, but sometimes to work just a little, or even better, sometimes an additional day to take off completely. According to researchers at Duke University, one day off a week is not sufficient for pastors to cope with the stresses and strains; ideally the body needs at least two consecutive days if it is to regain its balance.¹⁰⁸ If it is not

¹⁰⁷ Judith Schwanz, *Pastoral Sabbath Keeping* (An Alban Institute Conversation Paper, 28 April 2008).

¹⁰⁸ The findings of the Duke Clergy Health Initiative as reported in an on-line article in *Faith & Leadership* 6/12/2011.

possible to soft-pedal on a Saturday, then there is something to be said for taking off the evening before one's free day.¹⁰⁹

One thing is for certain: having a day of rest once a week is a sacred duty. Ministers owe it to themselves, as well as to their family and to the church. Surprisingly some ministers seem to struggle to keep the Sabbath. According to a 2010 survey of 1,671 United Methodist ministers in the USA, 27% reported that they didn't regularly take a day off each week.

Holidays are to be enjoyed

Years ago one of the great perks of ministry was the holidays. At a time when many people were lucky to have two weeks off a year, ministers had four weeks. Nowadays, five weeks of holiday is increasingly the norm.

In the meantime, the basic holiday entitlement in Britain has increased substantially, with the result that most ministers have less holiday entitlement than members of their congregations. According to the British government's websites, "all workers have a right to at least 5.6 weeks' paid annual leave [i.e. 28 days for someone working five days a week]. But add on the eight public holidays, and the total comes to 36 days a year – or 10% of each year. Although British companies are allowed to include the eight public holidays as part of the 28 day entitlement, the reality is that many do not, with the result that workers in Britain, along with workers in Poland, have the most generous statutory employee holiday entitlements in the world.

By contrast, workers in the USA have no statutory holiday entitlement at all. A Duke University Clergy Health survey in 2010 revealed that, of the 1,671 United Methodist pastors surveyed, on average pastors took slightly fewer than 12 days of vacation, while nearly a quarter had taken fewer than seven. Amazingly, 6.2% had taken no vacation days that year.

Whatever their length, holidays are a great and necessary institution. Hard-working ministers need to take every day due to

¹⁰⁹ According to Martin Dudley & Virginia Rounding, *The Parish Survival Guide* (SPCK, London 2004) 12, "A priest should take at least one full day off a week and should aim for this to be evening to evening, giving a full day and two evenings off".

them. With the pressures of ministerial life, I'm a great believer in the long summer holiday. I know that many take a week here and a week there, but I believe a holiday needs to be at least three weeks long if it is to be a true break, for many of us find it takes a week to unwind. Traditionally, ministers have taken off the whole of August, and in my judgment rightly so, but time too needs to be taken off after Christmas and after Easter. Busy pastors – for their own sake, for the sake of their families, and ultimately for the sake of their churches – need to ensure that regular holidays are built into their diaries. Along with working hard, they need to play hard too!

Sabbaticals are to be taken

In most denominations, ministers can take a paid sabbatical leave every so often. The Baptist Union of Great Britain encourages its ministers to take a three-month period of sabbatical every seven years or so after ordination. And what a gift these sabbaticals are! Ministers can become “weary in well-doing”. In the words of Roy Oswald, a distinguished American church consultant: “Like Sisyphus and the rock, there is a repetitive intensity in ministry that exacts its price in weariness of spirit, diminished enthusiasm, a dulling of the capacity to be creative, and a loss of vision and perspective. These are serious defects in any profession, but especially critical in the ministry with its challenge to provide spiritual, intellectual, ethical and institutional leadership”. ¹¹⁰

A sabbatical is an occasion for taking a break from the everyday round of ministry and for being set free to re-charge one's batteries, physically and mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It is an occasion for nourishing one's soul and for encountering God anew through un-pressurised times of prayer and Bible study. It is an occasion for broadening one's horizons and for developing fresh skills through reading and study, through experimentation and travel; it is an occasion for reflecting on and taking stock of the past, with all its apparent successes and failure, and for gaining new hope and new vision for the future. Or, in the words of Richard Bullock, an American Episcopalian bishop: “A sabbatical gets one off the treadmill and provides an opportunity for renewal of vision and hope. It's more than just a chance to recharge your

¹¹⁰ Roy Oswald quoted by Richard Bullock, *Sabbatical Planning* (Alban Institute, 1987) 1

batteries for another year. It can be a life and soul changing time – a time when perspective and the Holy Spirit can come together”.

111

The Old Testament speaks not just of ‘Sabbath’ days when humans were to rest, but of ‘Sabbath’ years, when the land was allowed to rest and replenish itself (see Exod 23.10-11; Lev 25.17). “Just like the soil, we humans need a sabbatical, a time to lie fallow”, wrote Dave Ellingson. “We require a time to receive rather than give, to get input rather than give output, to carefully nurture and cultivate our lives so that the soil of our spirits might be rid of weeds and have an opportunity to receive nourishment”.

¹¹² Ministers need to understand that a sabbatical is not an extra holiday, but a sacred duty. It concerns me that many ministers treat a sabbatical as an option, with the result that they might only experience a sabbatical once or twice in their ministry. For the sake of their ministry, they need to go on sabbatical.

Churches too need to understand the nature of a sabbatical. To this end, ministers need to make themselves accountable to their church both in terms of the planning as also in the reporting. They need to help their churches see that sabbaticals are not just a blessing to individual ministers, but ultimately they are a blessing to the church itself. What more could a church want than to welcome back a minister rested and refreshed, renewed and restored, ready to serve God with fresh energy and vision!

Why We Shouldn't Commemorate World War 1

Richard Dormandy

Vicar of Holy Trinity, Tulse Hill, South London and Board Member of Ministry Today

When the news began to filter through the media that "we" were going to be commemorating the centenary of the outbreak World War One, my heart sank. Remembrance is already a muddled time

¹¹¹ Richard Bullock, *Sabbatical Planning*, 2

¹¹² Dave Ellingson, *Remember the Sabbatical to Keep it Holy* (Lutheran Church in the USA, Chicago 1980) 2.