



# minister

## MAGAZINE

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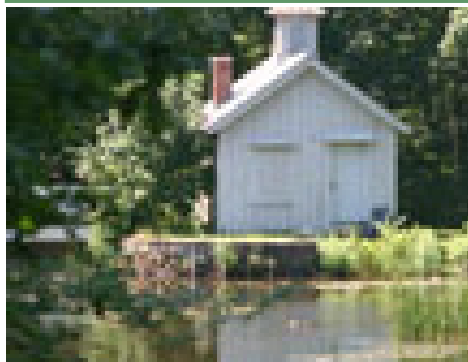


Photo Credit: Michael Sayer

## Self-care

## Demanding Sabbath

Forrest Cornelius



A few years ago, after almost two decades in the pastorate, I realized I was having a Sabbath crisis. Sundays were moving along smoothly, but my personal Sabbath practice was nearly non-existent. Although a proponent of the concept of Sabbath in my ministry, I had allowed the churches I pastored to limit my own Sabbath opportunities and had failed to be an advocate for my own well-being. The churches I pastored were full of good people who believed they were advocates for pastoral time off and

rest, but the reality often fell short of the good intentions. The common refrain from a caller on my day off was, “I know it’s your day off, but . . .” Because of my wife’s Monday-Friday job, we were having trouble finding quality time together as well.

I decided I needed to revisit the issue of Sabbath for myself, so I turned to Scripture to refresh my perspective. The Decalogue is central to the faith of Israel, and central to these foundational words is the command to keep the Sabbath. The Sabbath is, therefore, not just to be seen as an opportunity or gift from God, but as an integral part of the creative design that we ignore at our peril in becoming holistic beings. We must maintain a discipline of rest and balance-keeping in our lives in order to function as whole, complete and fulfilled persons before God. The very meaning of Sabbath is rest from or cessation of those activities that otherwise occupy our lives.

The use of Sabbath for the ancient Israelites as rest from physical labor was appropriate for a people whose daily work was very intense physically. But what about us? Most ministers are not involved in physical labor so much as we are in relational immersion. Our work days are full of communications, meetings, counseling, planning with others, leading and advising. This is especially true of the day we set aside to model and practice Sabbath. In fact, we who make up the clergy are not at rest on this day, but most fully immersed in our profession. On Sunday we preach and teach, we interact with those we haven’t spoken with since last Sunday in many cases, and we lead the worship experience which, by its design, is to be a refuge from the concerns and obsessions of the world we face every day. But for us, the worship event is not a refuge; instead it is a responsibility to complete. So on this day that we provide Sabbath for others we cannot fully model the discipline of Sabbath in a personal fashion.

There was another who had this dilemma, a spiritual leader who found such immense pressure to minister to the needs of others that it threatened his own spirit and the balance in his life. As ministers we often model ourselves on Jesus, trying to be the spiritual warrior for others, always available and ever attentive to others’ needs. But we forget about those times when Jesus simply refused to respond. When the iron was hot and the crowds were responsive and eager, Jesus might ignore them to go and pray. Or else he would shift the responsibility of feeding the hungry crowd by telling his disciples, “You feed them.”

What my biblical survey of Sabbath left me with was two pressing truths. First, Sabbath is not optional for those who seek to be whole before God. It is indeed as urgent a command as God could give. Sabbath rest is at least as critical as protecting life (“Thou shalt not kill”) or any other primary principle in the Decalogue. Second, the life of Jesus teaches the truth that Sabbath must be demanded, not just encouraged. For Jesus there was no debate — he did what he had to do to maintain balance and spiritual integrity, even if it meant the crowds and even the disciples were left grumbling over his apparent nonchalance toward pressing matters.

These were the challenges I faced several years ago. I had allowed the press of ministry and my responsibilities as pastor of a local church to fully occupy my life. Even when I took time off my cell phone was ready to ring, and my mind was often obsessed with the issues of the church.

In addition, the balance that Sabbath was designed to restore in one’s life was badly missing in mine. Whereas the ancient Sabbath was meant primarily for rest from physical labors, a time to meditate and think, my Sabbath needed to incorporate a return to physical well-being. I needed to break away from the issues of ministry and pay attention to my physical health.

When my wife and I discovered cycling as a recreational pastime most of my sabbatical issues began to be addressed. We were able to steal precious hours together on the trails and achieve a level of physical fitness neither of us had known previously. The trails in our county are some of the best around (when they are not flooded out), and we began to take advantage of these almost daily as soon as spring arrived. In addition to the adrenaline rush of exercise that renews the spirit, bicycling was my way of escaping, going to a different place, experiencing nature and the rush of the wind as I rode. It became my Sabbath (or at least a vital part of my Sabbath).

What our new activity also meant for me and my ministry was that for a couple of hours at the end of each day and even longer on the weekends, I would essentially find myself unavailable. Like a good pastor I would pack my cell phone in my belt pack, but I soon realized that I could neither hear it ring or feel it vibrate while riding. Once during a water break on a trail bench my phone rang and I fished it out of my pack. As I looked to see who was calling I realized it was either a true emergency I couldn’t respond to immediately (the car was an hour away), or else it was nothing that couldn’t be handled by taking a message. So, without looking at the display, I let it ring and go to voice mail.

By riding and escaping, I learned the art of demanding Sabbath. No longer would I let my cell phone ring “when-ever.” I began turning it off while focusing on Sabbath

activities, whether for a day off or for just a few hours. I also began “turning it off” on my days off, meaning that, unlike before, I began to more fully turn away from the issues of the church while taking Sabbath time. I turned away intentionally, as a demand I forced on myself because of the crucial role of Sabbath in creating wholeness before God. As a result I have also become a better minister, approaching my professional duties refreshed and renewed.

There are times when cycling is not possible in Iowa. Winter is out, of course, unless you want to try to invent a new extreme sport: ice-biking. Recently my wife had surgery and now cannot cycle for several weeks. She urges me to go out on my own, but there is an element that is lost when we do not experience it together. Nevertheless, what I learned about Sabbath through cycling will guide my Sabbath activities — most notably that it is essential, and that only I can demand it and advocate for it.

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*Forrest Cornelius has pastored two ABC churches in Iowa since 1995, and is now “on sabbatical” between ministry assignments, living in Waterloo, Iowa. He presently serves as Secretary/Treasurer for Ministers Council Senate.*

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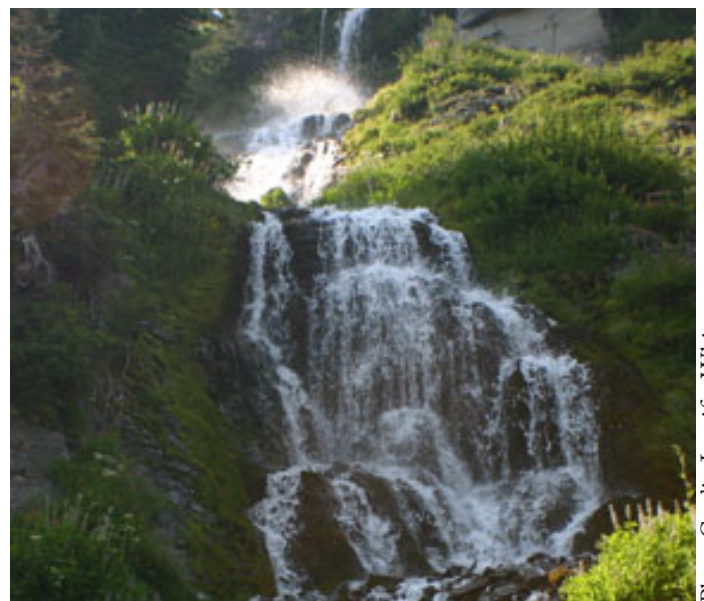


Photo Credit: Jennifer Whitmore



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Published periodically as a forum for issues and events that pertain to ministry as observed and practiced by ministerial leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA

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Join the Ministers Council through your local constituent council. Contact information is posted on the web at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org) under the "Who We Are" link.

# mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches USA. We are working together to:

Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry groups and Communities of Practice

- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional relations
- Resource ministry through our web site at [www.ministerscouncil.org](http://www.ministerscouncil.org)
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination, and to our local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means of expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling



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