

## **2016: A SABBATH YEAR FOR THE PRESBYTERY OF WESTERN NEW YORK**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

At its September Stated Meeting, the Presbytery of Western New York approved the following motions from Council:

- a. Move that 2016 be a Sabbath year focused on building community.
- c. Move that the Council be charged with recruiting conveners for the branches and a facilitator to guide the conveners.
- d. Move that there be a six month discernment period beginning in January 2017 to chart the Presbytery's way forward.
- e. Move that the Presbytery meet at least three times, first quarter, May and October, in 2016.

The following substitute motion replaced the Council's original b:

- b. With gratitude for their service, it was moved that all existing teams and committees not named below, enter into a period of Sabbath beginning on December 31, 2015. If there are any projects for 2016 to which a team or committee has already made a full commitment, the Council will oversee its fulfillment if it cannot be delayed. The following committees will continue service in 2016 as needed: Committee on Ministry, Committee on Preparation for Ministry, Personnel Committee, Nominating Committee, Permanent Judicial Commission, and Trustees.

However, some confusion exists about what exactly will happen during the Sabbath Year. This paper seeks to clarify what may occur during 2016.

Previous presentations by the Task Force on Budget and Stewardship laid out an argument that the presbytery needs to do something different. We have fewer churches, fewer members, and fewer dollars with which to do our work. We find ourselves in an era of massive cultural change in which increasing numbers of Americans see themselves as having no religious affiliation. The church is undergoing a shift that happens every five hundred years or so, and we do not know what will emerge in the end.

So, how does the Sabbath Year address such sweeping issues? First, it may stop what we've been doing long enough to gain some perspective, to sort out what's essential to the health of the church going forward, and to let go of some things that no longer have a place. Second, a Sabbath Year may remind us that God reigns over us and provides for us. Too often, within the church, we suffer from what Parker Palmer calls "functional atheism." We say we believe, but we do not act on it, trusting instead our own efforts. Third, it may open us to the fresh movements of the Spirit, as we stop long enough to feel the wind, to catch

our breath, to find inspiration. Finally, the Sabbath Year may restore our connection with one another, as we learn to worship and work together and meet around tables to share common meals. In the branch meetings, we may begin to build trust in one another and that trust may lead us to dare and to do great things for God.

The use of the word “may” means there are no guarantees. The Presbytery of Western New York is charting new ground. We need to place our trust in God and one another, if we hope this Sabbath Year will succeed. The rest of this paper will deal with the need for Sabbath rest and the purpose behind the branches.

### **THE NEED FOR A SABBATH REST**

“So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his.”

*Hebrews 4: 9-10, New Revised Standard Version*

When people hear the plan for a Sabbath Year in the Presbytery of Western New York, the first question is “Why do we need a Sabbath?” Most people consider observing the Sabbath to be irrelevant. They would offer several reasons why it’s not realistic to keep the Sabbath anymore. They would cite team practices on Sundays and sporting events. They would point to the need to use Sunday to get ready for the week ahead. More than a few would say they work on Sunday. Others would say it’s their only day to sleep in and go to brunch. We could come up with more reasons—and we need to realize they are not only offered by people outside the church. Members, deacons, ruling elders, even teaching elders offer them. At the core of our culture seems to be an assumption: If you’re not doing something, then you’re wasting time. Over the last two decades, the growth of the internet and cellular technology turned all time into work time.

Yet, as Presbyterians, we acknowledge: failure to obey the Fourth Commandment is a sin, one which we need to confess and one of which we need to repent. If we claim Scripture as authoritative and the Confessions as reliable expositions of what it teaches, we can come to no other conclusion. Also, we need to face the cost of failing to observe the Sabbath. Failure to take one day a week to rest leads to the growing rise of stress-related illnesses. Failure to devote one day a week to remembering who we are and who God is leads to a loss of identity as daughters and sons of God and a lack of humility about our limitations as created, not Creator.

As we enter our Sabbath Year in the Presbytery of Western New York, we need to remember Scripture offers two different reasons for observing the Sabbath and both of them apply to why we need Sabbath. In his recent book, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the*

*Culture of Now*,<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann suggests that Exodus 20:11 points to God's act of creation as the reason for keeping the Sabbath. As a presbytery, we need Sabbath, so that we may stop and remember there is a God and we are not God. Even God took the seventh day for rest after creating all there is. When we attempt to work 24/7, we try to out god God. The word, "Sabbath" means "stop." As a presbytery, we need to STOP what we're doing and STOP worrying. No one needs to tell us that these are difficult days for the church, but doing more, even doing better may not be the answer. Worrying about declining money and membership won't change anything. We need a Sabbath to place our trust in God and not in our efforts alone.

Brueggemann turns to Deuteronomy 5:15, where God says, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." Brueggemann suggests Deuteronomy understands Sabbath as resistance against the overpowering need to produce. We need to realize how much we are bound to the need to produce, as the Israelites were bound to make bricks for Pharaoh.

Somewhere along the way, the church bought into the lie: We are nothing if we don't produce. So, we work and work, doing what we've always done. Yet, it's been said, "If we keep doing what we've always done, hoping for different results, it is the definition of insanity." We allow our overwhelming desire to produce lead us to more and more activity, producing only exhaustion. We become locked in ways of seeing things and seeing one another that lead to ongoing conflict. We need a Sabbath, so that we can stop and recall we are no longer slaves in Egypt; we can cast off our chains and live as free people in Christ; we can set others loose as well.

So, why do we need a Sabbath Year? We need a Sabbath Year to STOP, so that we can remember who and whose we are. We need a Sabbath Year to set ourselves free from the endless doing and learn to be together.

Another question: "How do we create Sabbath in the Presbytery of Western New York? Or, more correctly, how do we receive this gift?" In our decisions, we've made a start by reducing the number of stated meetings of presbytery, so that we may allow participation in the branches. Also, we've decided to only leave those committees in place that the *Book of Order* specifically mandates for this year. Finally, we chose to reduce our stress over finances by the elimination of the position of Presbyterian of Discipleship, Communication, and Transformation and by reducing other positions.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of NOW* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

For Sabbath to occur, each of us needs to make a conscious decision to rest and to resist. Several spiritual practices might help with this choice: meditation, daily reading of scripture, prayer, worship, and more. Whatever spiritual practice we choose depends on what works for us as individuals. Yet, the goal in whatever we do should be to remember who and whose we are, to practice our freedom in Christ.

While we will say more about the branches in the next section, they will be key to this Sabbath Year. The branches may be a new way of being together, but we need to acknowledge the way we are together now isn't working. In the branches, sharing meals, praying together, talking about our hopes and fears, we might begin to build an intentional Christian community. In such community, broken relationships might be made whole, greater trust might develop, and new ideas might blossom.

Now, you may wonder, "Why do you only say "might?" Well, "might" reflects something extremely important: If anything is to happen in the branches, each of us must share in this experience in an open way that avoids judgment and fosters mutual understanding. We need to encourage individuals and congregations to participate.

In conclusion, the Sabbath Year issues a call to prayer. At the September meeting of presbytery, Teaching Elder Phil Gittings spoke passionately about the need to pray. We need to seek God's healing for this presbytery. We need to ask God to bless our congregations in their witness to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Above everything, we need to pray to know and to do God's will. Let's face it: all of us have agendas and not only the printed ones. Each of us has our idea about what the church should do, what this presbytery ought to be. We imperil ourselves if we forget what the first chapter of the *Book of Order* says: God is on a mission and invites us to join in it. None of us are the head of the church, only Jesus Christ is. During this Sabbath Year, may we empty ourselves, so that God's Spirit may fill us. May we ask to know God's will, nothing less, nothing more, nothing else.

### **THE NEED FOR THE BRANCHES**

"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want

and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.”

*John 15:4-8, Common English Bible*

The image of the branches emerges from these words of Jesus. Jesus reminds us that we need to maintain a relationship with him and one another to live and to produce fruit. The branches seek to restore these essential relationships.

According to the *Book of Order*, the church has three responsibilities:

- Provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard;
- Provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received; and
- Nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ.

As a part of the church, every council from the session of a particular church to the General Assembly is responsible for these three things.

Turning to the council known as the presbytery, all Teaching Elders within its bounds and an equal number of Ruling Elders compose this council. The presbytery is everyone within its bounds—churches gathered in prayer on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening; a lectionary group or Bible study; a gathering of Presbyterian Women on a cold winter’s day, collecting pennies and dollars to promote the welfare of God’s children. The second part of our constitution, the *Book of Order* offers a bare-bones framework, which we may dress and adorn according to local needs and customs. Nothing prevents us from changing those adornments.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus offers the metaphor of Jesus as a strong vine, and we, his disciples are the branches that bear fruit, relying on our relationship to the Vine. “Without me, you can’t do anything.” Sometimes, we as individuals or churches think we’re independent of one another, but Jesus reminds us we’re dependent on him and each other. To be healthy, we need each other. As Presbyterians, we believe that connectional nature of our Church is one of our strongest features.

So in this new vineyard we’re entering, what will these branches look like? We offer some general instructions. They’ll follow the same guidelines as any council. Preaching and Sacraments as appropriate, but we hope the branches will concentrate on the third point—nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ.

The branches will gather over table fellowship. Perhaps a potluck meal, or a soup and bread dinner provided by the host church. A time to worship and pray together. A time of

discussion around a common theme throughout the presbytery, and then what we hope and dream will happen is ideas for mission and service will arise from the gathered flock.

What is a branch without buds in the springtime, without flowers as days warm, bursting into sweet fruit as days grow longer? We live in an area racked by poverty, huge influxes of refugees, homelessness and malnutrition. Most of our churches lack the resources to make a lasting impact on their own, but if a group of churches band together, pooling human and financial resources, they might be able to bear the light of Jesus Christ into a hurting world. Our possibilities are limited only by our imaginations.

That said, we can put more skin on the bones. The proposal is to have four regional branches: Niagara/Northeast; South/East; South/West; and Central (*see attached list*). We strongly urge each branch to meet *at least* three times with the following proposed themes:

- February—Lent—Letting Go
- April—Pentecost—Letting Grow
- November—Advent—Letting Arrive

All branches may meet as often as they desire! The Presbytery Council has found a Convener for each branch, who shall be either a Teaching or a Ruling Elder and trained to lead the branch meetings. The Convener will choose a partner to serve with him/her, who shall be the other brand of elder, so that each branch will have a matched set of Ruling and Teaching Elders. Each branch will also select a Scribe, who will keep track of ideas and decisions that come from each meeting, and also communicate with the rest of the presbytery through regular updates to the presbytery e-newsletter. We want to hear and share the good news coming out of these gatherings!

Additionally, Council has designated a Coordinator who will meet with the Conveners on a regular basis, for the sake of good communication, organization and follow-up.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Or at least, some of the questions we've heard.

1. *Why Sabbath?* We hope you will review the Biblical passages presented earlier in this paper and reflect on Sabbath as resistance and renewal.
2. *What will it look like?* Three stated meetings of the Presbytery, and *at least* three meetings of the branches, gathered together for fellowship and nurture.
3. *What will we do during the branch meetings?* Our deepest hope is that regional members will develop new friendships and relationships with Presbyterians from nearby churches, and through shared passion, find new ways to carry Jesus' mission and ministry to the least, the lost and the lonely. Oh, and there will be food (we ARE

Presbyterians, after all), prayer and worship, and spirited discussion based on a previously planned theme.

4. *Why is Council choosing the conveners?* We want to ensure those convening these branch meetings are well trained and enthusiastic about the new configuration.
5. *How will we know if this Sabbath concept is working?* Frankly, this concept depends on the willingness of Presbyterians to show up and try something new. In Isaiah 43:19a, the Lord announces, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” We need to step out into new territory. God has given us a wide open mission field, and we can respond in faith with new partnerships and fresh hope.
6. *How will we communicate our successes or obstacles?* We hope every branch will report to the presbytery email on a regular basis, so we can celebrate as a presbytery. Likewise, if there are difficulties, they can be brought back to Council or to the Committee on Ministry for more serious issues.

We are a people formed by Covenant, and each branch should form a mutual covenant based on faith, trust, and very importantly, confidentiality.

## CONCLUSION

While we grasp no document can provide all of the details of the Sabbath Year for the Presbytery of Western New York, we hope that this paper provides a clear understanding of the biblical and theological rationale behind it and offers greater clarity as to what it will look like. As a presbytery, we made decisions at our September Stated Meeting, so the time for debate is concluded. Now, we must move forward, trusting God will provide and guide us during the year ahead. Also, we need to begin to trust one another and treat one another with mutual forbearance.

Also, we need to remember that the Sabbath Year does not constitute an end, rather it represents a means to an end. The end, or new beginning, will come during 2017 after the Presbytery of Western New York engages in a time of communal discernment.

Now, “discernment” is a buzz word, nowadays, but seldom does anyone define it. In *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*, Teaching Elder Victoria G. Curtiss offers this definition:

Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit that orients persons to be attentive to the presence of God in our midst. In discernment, persons sift through the many spirits that vie for our attention to hear the One True Spirit. Discernment may be described as a means to:

- recognize and acknowledge what God is doing and what God desires;
- see a situation from God’s perspective;
- listen to the Holy Spirit, who prays within and among us;

- hear and obey God’s voice.

She continues to define “communal discernment,” “[It] engages a group of people to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. It involves prayer, a humble surrendering of control, reflection on Scripture, and listening carefully to one another as together we seek to hear God’s voice.”<sup>2</sup>

The Sabbath Year of 2016 lays important foundations for our communal discernment in 2017. Through the branches, we hope to:

- restore broken relationships;
- rebuild trust in the presbytery as a community of faith, hope, and love; and
- redefine what it means to be in mission together.

As we worship together, pray together, and reflect together in the branches and in our presbytery meetings, we hope to:

- remember God’s sovereignty and providence and
- recall our freedom in Christ.

During the Sabbath Year of 2016, we open ourselves to the Spirit, so that we may know and do God’s will, nothing less, nothing more, nothing else.

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<sup>2</sup> Victoria G. Curtiss, Guidelines for Communal Discernment (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Peacemaking Program), 4.