

Keeping the SABBATH

Finding an eighth day in the week

A Lenten worship service this year at Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis

COURTESY OF KARA ROOT



In *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Walter Brueggemann writes: “Sabbath . . . is not about worship. It is about work stoppage. It is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one’s life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being.”

For Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church (LNPC) in Minneapolis, Brueggemann’s work stoppage has become more than an idea; it has become a practice.

Seven years ago, this church of 94 members was considering whether or not it could keep its doors open. The people felt that God wasn’t through with them yet, but the question was “Where do we go from here?”

With its new pastor, Kara Root, the congregation entered a season of discernment.

“We began by celebrating, then letting go, of what we were in the past,” says Root. “We also refused to compare ourselves to other congregations, looking instead at our own uniqueness.”

Out of this time, three themes emerged: worship, hospitality, and Sabbath. Together they read *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* by Wayne Muller. It led to an unorthodox experiment.

They changed their worship schedule to include only two Sundays a month. On the other weekends, they gather for an evening Sabbath service, sharing food, contemplation, and prayer to prepare for their day of rest.

Root explains the underlying idea. “At LNPC, we say that Sabbath does two things: it reminds us ‘whose we are’ and it shows us ‘who we are.’ When we withdraw from a system that defines us mostly by what we produce or consume, we return to our essential belonging in God, the One who calls [us] into freedom and wholeness. This is sometimes intimidating or painful. But in the space it creates, we discover that time stretches out, [that] joy goes deeper, and we

gratefully recognize God’s presence in the moments of an ordinary day.”

To help people remember their purpose, the children of the church created a card with the acronym REST: R (relax), E (enjoy), S (see), and T (take your new insights and awareness into the week).

“Another practice,” says Root, “is to have a piece of paper in the worship bulletin that says two things. First, ‘Today I say yes to . . .’ What would give me joy and peace and fill me with delight? What do I long for today that connects me to God, myself, and others? Second, ‘Today I say no to . . .’ What can I stop doing to remember I am free? What worry, task, belief, or practice do I feel owned by? What can I put down so that I [will] recognize I belong to God and not to anything else seeking to dictate my life?”

Members have experienced Sabbath in a rich variety of ways: touring a butterfly exhibit, visiting relatives, taking leisurely walks, baking cookies with a grandchild, reading poetry on the front porch. Some engage in deep conversations, while others experiment with silence and solitude.

Cyndi Wunder (see article on p. 22) says her time at LNPC was seminal to seeking her call as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Sabbath emphasis was part of this.

“Initially, I planned to visit other churches on those [Sabbath] days, but the opportunity to rest in God’s presence—to have nothing required, nothing to do—was simply too attractive. I often sat on park benches watching the squirrels run, sipping a latte, soaking up the sun. Like many people, my life is often hurried. Sabbath Sundays ushered me into a different way of being, a gentle openness to God’s presence. It was delicious, and now I seek to continue this practice, especially when things get hectic.”

Carolyn Cochrane moved with her husband and three children from a large downtown church to LNPC five

years ago. They got involved immediately.

Carolyn values the intergenerational family at the congregation and its artistry in worship. She calls LNPC “the little church that could.”

“Our Sabbath focus has shown me,” she says, “the need to quiet my distracted mind and listen for that ‘still, small voice.’ It has taught my children that it’s OK to just *be* and not *do*. I particularly enjoy our Saturday services. The entire liturgy—from the music to the readings to the message—helps me center myself for the next day. I am grateful to LNPC for helping us in this discipline. It is essential for our continued journeys in relationship to God.”

Kara Root says that Sabbath is like discovering an eighth day in the week. And she is touched by the response of other congregations.

“We frequently get questions about our Sabbath practices. It’s so amazing that this small church—just trying to connect more meaningfully with God—is having an impact far beyond.”



During Lent, the children of the congregation were invited to take a hands-on approach to worship.