

## Negotiating Sabbath Observance in the Local Church

### Background

In my former life as an academician I wrote a small book on the Sabbath titled *A Day for Healing*.<sup>1</sup> That was almost thirty years ago. In it I argued that Jesus purposefully took the initiative to heal on Sabbath in order to teach about the Sabbath. Whereas the rabbis allowed healing on Sabbath only when life was in danger, those Jesus chose to heal on Sabbath had chronic infirmities that were as far from this standard as you could get. Jesus healed a crippled man who had been waiting beside a pool for thirty-eight years, a woman who had been stooped over for eighteen years, and an adult man who had been born blind, for example. Jesus also did this in public, certainly knowing that it would cause controversy. When He healed the man with the withered hand in the synagogue (Mark 3:1-6) Jesus called him into the center. Jesus was acting publically<sup>and</sup> purposefully.

By this action Jesus challenged the Sabbath rules of the day. Indeed he went further and challenged the whole system of Sabbath observance by keeping rules. His action, however, not only made a negative statement about rules, it also made a positive statement about the true purpose of the Sabbath: to experience the healing/salvation that Jesus brought in His ministry. I summarized it this way:

*Jesus Christ and salvation stand at the heart of the Sabbath. As the Sabbath begins we see ourselves as the captives whom Christ has freed. We are the spiritually blind whose eyes Jesus opens as we focus on the Light of the world. The Sabbath healing stories relate to our own stories. They describe our experience with Christ. And through these Gospel stories we see that our experience of salvation in Christ is linked with the Sabbath. We also see our neighbor in a new way. He or she also is a fellow captive in need of healing and salvation.*<sup>2</sup>

I went on to suggest that this should make a difference in our Sabbath observance. Rather than keeping Sabbath through a checklist of rules, we should focus on a relational mind-set that plans for Sabbath in a positive way, and fills the day with activities of rest, worship, and service that let us and those around us experience the healing and re-creation that Jesus intends for us and our neighbors on Sabbath.

I am no longer an academician, however. I am a pastor now. The issue of Sabbath observance is not only a theoretical question. Our pastoral team has to struggle with how we help people experience Sabbath in a positive, non-legalistic way within a very active community where many people, with different approaches to Sabbath, are often together, interacting with each other over Sabbath hours. So my question is: Does the kind of approach I argued for as an academician actually work in a real live church setting? In an attempt to answer this question I

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Brunt, *A Day for Healing: The Meaning of Jesus' Sabbath Miracles* (Washington D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981.)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

have limited myself to the one church I know best, the Azure Hills Church in Grand Terrace, CA, and have interviewed both associate pastors and lay leaders. First a description of the church.

### **The Azure Hills Church**

The Azure Hills Church has a little over two thousand members with a weekly average attendance of about 1400 divided in two identical services. Members are typically younger than those of a normal Adventist congregation. The church is filled with families who have young children. This year we have 168 4-9 year olds in our Adventurer club and a smaller Pathfinder club of about 60. We also have a youth group of about 70 and a large young adult group of about 200 university students and young professionals, mostly single. All these groups are active and have many weekend programs that bring people together on Sabbath.

The church also has a good bit of diversity. Although the conference classifies the church as "Anglo," it is very multi-cultural. It has large Spanish and Portuguese language Sabbath School classes, and large groups of Indonesian, Filipino, East Indian, Asian, and Middle Eastern members. It also has a diversity of views from very conservative to relatively liberal. The worship is multi-generational with all the different age groups worshiping together and participating in leadership. The worship service is made up mostly of congregational singing with a children's story and sermon.

### **Sabbath Activities at Azure Hills**

What kinds of activities produce the need for negotiating Sabbath observance, and how are these handled? One of the biggest events of the year for our congregation is an annual spring weekend outing our Adventurers and Pathfinders take to beach campground. The Adventurers have to have at least one parent along, the Pathfinders do not. The total group this year was about 350. They camp on a cliff overlooking the ocean with walkways down to a beautiful beach.

Our leaders work very hard to plan interactive worship experiences for the kids Friday night, Sabbath morning, and around sundown time Sabbath evening. The activities are creative and biblically oriented. No one says that the families have to come, but virtually everyone does, and they seem to enjoy it. This still leaves a few hours between Sabbath lunch and the evening activities for individual choices.

During this time some parents feel comfortable with their children going down to the beach and some do not. Of those who go to the beach, some feel comfortable swimming and some do not. The Adventurer leaders and parents have worked out an agreement that parents will be responsible for determining what their children do on Sabbath afternoon. They have no list of rules, but they do ask that no one disturb the Sabbath observance of others with loud radios, etc. The agreement includes an understanding that families who don't go to the beach won't criticize those who do, and kids who do go to the beach won't rub it in to those who don't. Parents try to take responsibility for communicating this standard of acceptance and tolerance to their children. On the whole it seems to work quite well. There has been very little controversy.

The same is true in our Pathfinder club. The leaders say they try to let the more conservative parents be the benchmark, so as not to offend. For example, they saw no problem with letting parents reimburse them for the food on Sabbath, but some parents objected quite strongly, so now they tell people to wait until after sundown to reimburse them. Before directing our club they were associate directors for the Pathfinder Club in an ethnic congregation, and admitted that Sabbath observance was quite different there. There was a fairly long list of rules. But in our congregation they have found little controversy over activities for the kids, even though they do some fairly strenuous activities on Sabbath, such as a ten mile hike. They also work hard to plan interactive worship activities for the kids throughout their Sabbath time together.

Our young adult group has a host of smaller interest groups within it. There is an off-road vehicle club, a surfing club, a hiking club, and several community service groups. Almost all of them take weekend outings. Our young adult pastor doesn't go with each group, but she does talk to them about Sabbath when they go. She does not lay down any rules, but urges them to do two things: Be intentional about making Sabbath special, so it isn't just like the other days of the week, and make it about God.

On a hot day this summer one of the activities for the whole young adult group was a potluck at a private home followed by an afternoon of fellowship in their large swimming pool. She told me that she had more significant, spiritual conversations with young adults in that setting than she had in any of their other activities.

Our youth group is also very active on Sabbath. The youth pastor tries to make Sabbath something the kids will look forward to. On Friday nights our youth room becomes a café where kids come eat, study the Bible together and visit.

All of the groups in the church do a significant amount of service on Sabbath. Adventurers, Pathfinders, youth, and young adults all visit rest homes and hospitals and gather on Sabbath afternoon to fill care packages for the poor. The youth and young adults also have a program called Kids Rock where they work with the poorest kids in San Bernardino. They begin with Bible study, singing, and interactive games, and end with very active outdoor games that are related to the Bible texts.

Our "Prime Time" Club, which is for the AARP age group, has a weekly food bank that passes out boxes of food every Sabbath to members who are in need (they serve 30-50 per week). (We also have a community food bank that serves about 200 families of non-members, but it operates on Thursdays.)

A unique feature of the congregation's Sabbath activity is that there are very few Friday night or Sabbath afternoon meetings. With so many children in the church, Sabbath activities outside of the morning Sabbath School and worship service time are only attended if they are interactive and include something for the children to do. Other Adventist churches in our vicinity have many Sabbath afternoon programs, seminars and concerts that draw good crowds.

When we have any kind of traditional meeting or concert in the church on Sabbath afternoon, it is virtually empty.

One fairly new Sabbath activity in the church has been a series of Sabbath afternoon “spiritual mini-retreats” where members are invited to spend an afternoon of quiet reflection and meditation. Child activities are provided so the parents can concentrate on the meditation. Our average turnout has been 15-30. It has been interesting to see the enthusiasm of the kids. They have been given a Bible text and a camcorder and are set loose (with some supervision, of course) to make a video. One Sabbath they took so long that the group was about to adjourn when they returned with their video, but they made their parents stay and watch it.

In summary, the congregation is very active and interacts frequently on Sabbath. This activity takes place without a set of rules, with very little controversy, and with a lot of satisfaction that people are enjoying and gaining something they consider spiritually healing on Sabbath. Therefore, the answer to my initial question (Does the kind of approach I argued for as an academician actually work in a real live church setting?) is “Yes.”

Perhaps the biggest criticism of corporate Sabbath observance at Azure Hills might be that it is very active and not very contemplative. That would even be true of the worship service. For example, there is little time in worship that is not filled with either talking (children’s story and sermon) or singing. The congregation sings even as the offering is being taken. The reason for this is the strong emphasis on children. Most four to nine year olds are not very meditative.

### **Why Does it Work?**

1. Preaching and Teaching. There is a theological mind-set that is non-legalistic in the church that has probably been influenced by ten years of preaching by Morrie Venden on righteousness by faith in the 90’s, followed by Calvin Thomsen and me with a somewhat different but also grace oriented approach. Also Alger Keough, the executive pastor has taught the largest Sabbath School class in the church for over a decade with a strongly grace oriented approach.

2. An Ethos of Appreciation For Diversity. Our children’s pastor suggests that one of the reasons there is so little controversy is a long history of developing an ethos of freedom and acceptance within the congregation. She notes that even those who are quite conservative seem to have bought into a culture of openness to diversity.

Our youth pastor offers some observations about how this has happened. He sees a very large buy-in on the part of members for the concept of diversity. People of all generations are pleased with the multi-generational nature of the congregation, and people of various ethnic and cultural groups are pleased with the multi-cultural nature of the congregation. Because they buy in to the overall vision, they are all willing to give up some of their own preferences to make the broader vision possible. For example, the older folks would prefer more hymns in our worship, the young adults would prefer more praise songs, but all are willing to live with the blend that we have because they like the inclusiveness. Since the various groups feel included

and not neglected, they are willing to give up their own little deal for the sake of the big deal they buy into.

3. An Appreciation for Sabbath. When I first started teaching, students expressed a lot of hostility to what they considered an oppressive Sabbath atmosphere when they were growing up. The generation in our church seems to be quite free of this. They think of Sabbath positively and look forward to it. The youth pastor observes that when he hears people object to something that is proposed for Sabbath, the typical response is not to cite a rule, but to say, "If we did that, Sabbath wouldn't be special."

4. Work and Planning. The leaders of the various groups put in an incredible amount of work and planning to make Sabbath special and enjoyable for the groups they serve. Pro-active planning goes a long way toward eliminating the need for rule setting. If people are doing well-planned enjoyable activities they don't need rules about what not to do.

5. Self Selection. Perhaps part of the reason for the lack of controversy may be the self selection that takes place in an area where there are many Adventist churches from which to choose. Within ten miles of our church there are 38 other Adventist churches. A survey showed that most people choose to come to Azure Hills because they like the warm, informal family feeling. So people who might otherwise complain simply choose another church.

6. Size. The situation could play out differently in a small church where a few critical people might have more influence on the overall direction of corporate Sabbath observance.

### **Some Final Suggestions**

I believe that ASRS members who have been teaching about the meaning of Sabbath in their classes over the last decades have contributed to a different and more positive approach to Sabbath observance in Adventism than what I grew up with. Members of this society have made it possible for a spiritually positive, non-legalistic and non-controversial Sabbath observance to exist.

In addition to sharing the positive meaning of the Sabbath, however, it would be helpful for those who teach both future pastors and future parishioners to focus on some practical issues as well. These might include the following:

1. Positive Sabbath experiences don't just happen. They take lots of thought, work and advance planning. Help students move from what the Sabbath ought to mean in our experience to how one might vision and plan such experiences for themselves, their family, and those to whom they minister.

2. People will differ with each other and they will interact with each other. Therefore part of a positive Sabbath experience is negotiating community within diversity. Community also doesn't happen without work. How can we be faithful to our principles, not offend others, and

live in community? Maybe role play situations and case studies might help students think about the messy business of negotiating within community.

3. Corporate Sabbath observance is affected by age and stages of emotional and spiritual development. I'm sure the profile of a congregation less focused on children than Azure Hills would look quite different from this one. Having students think about the intersection of Sabbath and people at different stages of life and development might be useful, especially for future pastors.

4. Sabbath observance is not only theoretical and individual; it is practical and communal as well. A holistic approach to Sabbath observance needs to include such considerations.

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