

# Sabbath Renewal

## Lilly Endowment Inc. and PTS Help Pastors and Churches Learn How to Keep the Fourth Commandment

by Lisa Maguire Hess



Photo: Beth Godfrey

Staff for the Sabbath Renewal Project enjoy a “renewing” cup of tea in their office in Adams House. They are, from left to right, B.J. Katen-Narvell, coordinator for congregational nurture, Lisa Maguire Hess, program director for pastoral and congregational renewal, and Ginny Neuman, project assistant.

“I was most cut off from God when I was at my most excellent,” observed William “Tex” Culton, pastor of Frenchtown Presbyterian Church in Frenchtown, New Jersey, at a recent focus group at PTS to discuss a possible proposal to Lilly Endowment Inc. for its Sustaining Pastoral Excellence competitive grants program. At an invitational lunch at the Seminary, several pastors from the surrounding area brainstormed about “ideal continuing education” for the new millennium. Or at least for the next four years. They discussed the “marks, rhythms, and practices” of “sustained pastoral excellence” and postulated workable strategies for pastoral renewal.

Culton had named the conundrum for every minister. Pastoral leaders, in order to be visibly faithful to their calling, are often encouraged to sacrifice their own relationship with the God who fostered that calling in the first place. In a world of rampant consumerism, increasing clergy burnout, and spiritual hunger felt by lay and clergy alike, pastoral leaders are unintentionally asked to sever their own prayerful and restorative practices, and instead to rely on their personal strength in order to feed needs ultimately satisfied by God alone.

The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program is a recent Lilly Endowment Inc. initiative intended to address this very concern with specific programmatic responses. The endowment has begun to foster strong and effective religious institutions through the vitality of the local congregation and its pastoral leadership. Says Craig Dykstra, one-time Princeton Seminary professor and the endowment’s vice president for religion, “The endowment’s current religion grantmaking revolves around two major and interlocking considerations: first, identifying, nurturing, and educating a talented, new generation of pastors, and second, recognizing and supporting the excellent ones we have. Not surprisingly, we know that healthy, engaged, thoughtful, dedicated ministers go hand in hand with healthy, vibrant, and effective congregations.”

Originally intending to grant 25 million dollars for proposals of up to two million dollars each, the endowment responded generously to the wellspring of interest by grant-ing almost 58 million dollars to 47 institutions nationwide. The grants program has had the additional benefit of creating new programs all over the nation—those actually funded by Lilly as well as others—led by passionate people dreaming new dreams for God’s people.

The Center of Continuing Education at Princeton Seminary culled observations from focus groups and then proposed a four-year Sabbath Renewal Project for Pastoral Theological Excellence. The project was conceived to pursue theological, pastoral excellence that would strike the necessary balance between a pastor’s vital dependency on God and a vital, covenantal relationship between God, pastor, and congregation. Reliant on a pastoral peer group/lay leader team model for systemic renewal, the project addresses both pastoral renewal and congregational nurture in potentially ecumenical or traditional denominational communities. The endowment approved the proposal and the work of implementing it has now begun at Princeton Seminary.

What is the Sabbath Renewal Project? It is a long-term initiative for pastoral renewal and congregational education that explores corporate sabbath-keeping as a vehicle for fostering a balanced pastoral ministry.

It is made up of two parts. Part one involves two overlapping three-year cycles of self-selecting pastoral peer groups who will covenant to meet regularly over a period of three years. During the first two years, these peer groups will gather at the Center of Continuing Education for three contemplative, educational retreats. The retreats form a developing curriculum in (1) sabbath-keeping, the discipline and its consequences; (2) understanding consumerist culture and theological excellence within it; and (3) living within God’s covenant and care. The third year of each cycle is an intentionally focused, independent period for the peer groups to move toward self-sufficiency apart from the project.

Part two of the project engages the congregations of these pastors in two one-day workshops (whose thematic content is similar to the pastoral retreats) and asks them to begin shared practices in congregational spirituality. This part of the project, while not unique among programs in pastoral renewal, is distinct in its explicit recognition that any effective pastoral renewal is intimately connected with congregational education and nurture. Denying this reality results in frustrated pastors and needy congregations—which, one could argue, is a common reality today.

Therefore, leadership teams from each congregation will gather for regional workshops in recognition of this intimate, systemic relationship. Additional funding for pulpit supply or a church consultant—the congregation’s choice—is supplied by the project in order to communicate tangibly the benefits of the congregation’s participation in their pastor’s renewal.

Healthy change comes slowly to any institution—perhaps most of all to the church. But the Sabbath Renewal Project is about healthy change at personal, congregational, judicatory, and seminary levels. Because pastors are implicitly urged to sacrifice their own prayerful relationship with God, reclaiming the sabbath as a practice supported by one’s peers offers a powerful foundation for intentional restoration of that relationship. Dykstra notes, “As busy and as ‘people-oriented’ as pastors’ lives are, many pastors feel a sense of isolation.” Peer groups convened for the purposes of shared experience, prayerful laughter, and mutual support address this isolation.

Many pastors share a feeling of guilt about their own self-care and spiritual practices, in light of the many needs of their congregations. The congregational education and nurture provided by the project begins to address lay understanding of the need for sabbath and the necessary reliance on God as satisfier of need and desire.

Ecclesiastical judicatories are beginning to founder in legal and political responses to human conflicts that create fear and mistrust and destroy relationships. The Sabbath Renewal Project offers them a new, cost-effective model—though only the size of a mustard seed right now!—to give pastors a sense of shared collegiality based on mutuality and relationship, not competition or “due process.” As an educational institution of the PCUSA, Princeton Seminary faces the continual challenge of living in both corporate and ecclesiastical worlds and being accountable to both. The project offers a new way to look at shared practices of ministry, integrally connected to the content of ministry, yet alert to the systemic, corporate challenges to that content.

The project’s most important contribution to institutional change is its recognition of and built-in response to the basic reality of institutional life: any human system will resist healthy change. Therefore, a main focus of the Sabbath Renewal Project is the mutual discernment of the consequences that any shared practice, such as keeping the sabbath in a consumer world, will result in for the individual pastor in his or her system. The root of the project is to discern, and then to articulate, those consequences in order to give participants conscious opportunity to decide whether they want to accept them for the benefit of the shared practice—or not.

Consider an example of the consequences of sabbath-keeping for a family. A family decides to keep the sabbath by setting time apart from its normal activities of buying and selling, working, doing chores around the house, etc. Their sabbath begins Saturday night and ends Sunday night. The time is to be spent in playing, in reading or prayer, in worship, in exploring the natural world together.

The mother is a corporate attorney and receives a call on Saturday night from a client in financial distress who requests immediate attention. To respond immediately would violate the sabbath. And although the matter is not about life and death, to postpone a response in order to keep the sabbath might sacrifice her professional reputation. Which consequence is she willing to pay? What is more important in her world: her identity as a child of God in a loving, committed family or her professional reliability? The corporate world might answer the question one way, the Christian (or Jewish) community might answer it another. The individual must decide. The Sabbath Renewal Project proposes that a community of support can clarify and empower such decisions.

Anyone who engages in pastoral ministry will recognize the desire to keep sabbath as well as the institutional challenges to taking that “time apart.” A pastor’s “day off” is challenged by a community’s times of sudden need: for hospital visits, funerals, or grief counseling. Sabbath time is also challenged by tasks that may not be life or death matters. The lonely parishioner, the continual administrative upkeep of a community, the perceived need to be all things to all people constantly vie for a pastor’s time. The Sabbath Renewal Project aims to provide peer communities of shared support and discernment to help pastors practice sabbath-keeping that is corporate and therefore more likely to actually be practiced.

There is much to do. Lilly Endowment Inc. has given Princeton Seminary opportunity and staff with which to begin. We do so with the honest evaluations and thoughtful contributions of pastors who desire a balanced life and seek support for sabbath-keeping in their ministries. We anticipate new understandings and shared experiences of sabbath renewal for the many pastors and congregations who are thirsty for it. We’ll keep you informed about what we’re learning. ■

*Lisa Maguire Hess, an ordained Presbyterian minister, is the program director for pastoral and congregational renewal at the Seminary’s Center of Continuing Education. She relishes the fact that consistent sabbath practice is now a sign of professional integrity and hopes to encourage conversation about sabbath-keeping throughout the church.*