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## A Sabbath way to lead

*True Sabbath rest isn't an escape. It means pausing to delight in other people and to understand the gifts of those around you, says Norman Wirzba.*

by [Norman Wirzba](#)



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Christian leaders are often advised to step back and take a rest. Instead of being in the thick of the group, managing this program or coordinating that committee, the leader should take a break -- perhaps take a nap in a hammock or go to a movie.

Leaders do need to practice Sabbath rest if they are to be effective. But a true Sabbath should not amount to checking out, or finding an escape from the exhaustion or drudgery of work. (If the responsibilities of leadership result in utter fatigue or frustration, there's probably something wrong in the style of leadership from the start.)

The God we worship and follow is a Sabbath-loving God. God is forever leading the whole of creation to its most beautiful, good and true end. The means of God's leadership and care circulates

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continuously through Sabbath rest. Sabbath informs the whole of creation and the full extent of God's creativity in the world. It is the end and the beginning of everything that God does.

But Sabbath rest does not mean that God tries to flee from creation. A better way to think about this is to recognize that God's Sabbath amounts to the most complete presence to the world imaginable. We need to recall that God has spent six days creating the world. At the conclusion of this work, God is not tired or frustrated. Rather, God can't refrain from delighting completely in the goodness of all he has made. God looks upon creation and sees reflected back the concrete manifestation of his own love.

True rest does not mean inactivity. It means putting an end to the restlessness that often characterizes the way we live. We are restless because we think the places we are in and the people we are with -- perhaps the very people we are trying to lead -- are not good enough. We think life would be better and we would be stronger and more successful leaders if we only had a better group of people to work with.

Part of our problem is that we do not see our communities or staffs the way God sees them. We don't appreciate them as gifts from God. If we did, the first thing we would do is get to know them. We would then be attentive to their struggles and successes, patient with their shortcomings, and nurturing of their hidden beauty and strength. God can love the world so profoundly -- and delight in it so thoroughly -- because he sees through the posturing and jockeying and pain and insecurity and fear and anxiety to the core seed of divinely given gift and promise. He loves each creature "to the end," as John's gospel says, and so practices the care and celebration that will eventually lead each creature to resurrection life.

When leaders practice Sabbath rest what they are really doing is learning how to delight in the people and the communities they lead. Rather than imposing an agenda on others, effective leaders -- inspired by God's own care-full and celebratory ways -- learn to attend to the goodness and beauty that is always already there. As leaders learn to recognize in others the love of God made concrete, it will be much more difficult for them to go home exhausted, frustrated or resentful.

A Sabbath way to lead takes time. It requires that the pacing of our agendas be slowed down so that we can first enter into the presence of each other and learn how to find our collective delight. Sabbath leadership presupposes that the leader has discerned where the God-given gifts in the staff are and what barriers are preventing people from attaining their full potential.

More than 20 years ago, I worked in a homeless shelter in Chicago's Near East Side. After a couple of months, the program was going poorly. One day, Charlie, our staff supervisor, called a halt to our work. We shut the shelter down for an entire day so that the staff could face each other and hear the stories of who we were, why we were there and what we hoped to accomplish.

This Sabbath time in the midst of chaotic days was utterly transformative. Homeless folks the next day asked, "What happened?" because staff now got along and worked toward a common purpose. Staff members figured out on their own to help each other because in our "Sabbath meeting" we learned about each other's strengths and growing areas. We began to see each other as gifts to be received and cherished. Charlie now admitted it was a pleasure to come to work.

Charlie, a former priest, understood the Sabbath. He modeled the sort of Sabbath leadership that finds ways to delight in the world and our life together. Leadership can be the occasion to discover and unleash buried gifts. It can direct each of us into the delight of each other, and ultimately our collective rest in God.

