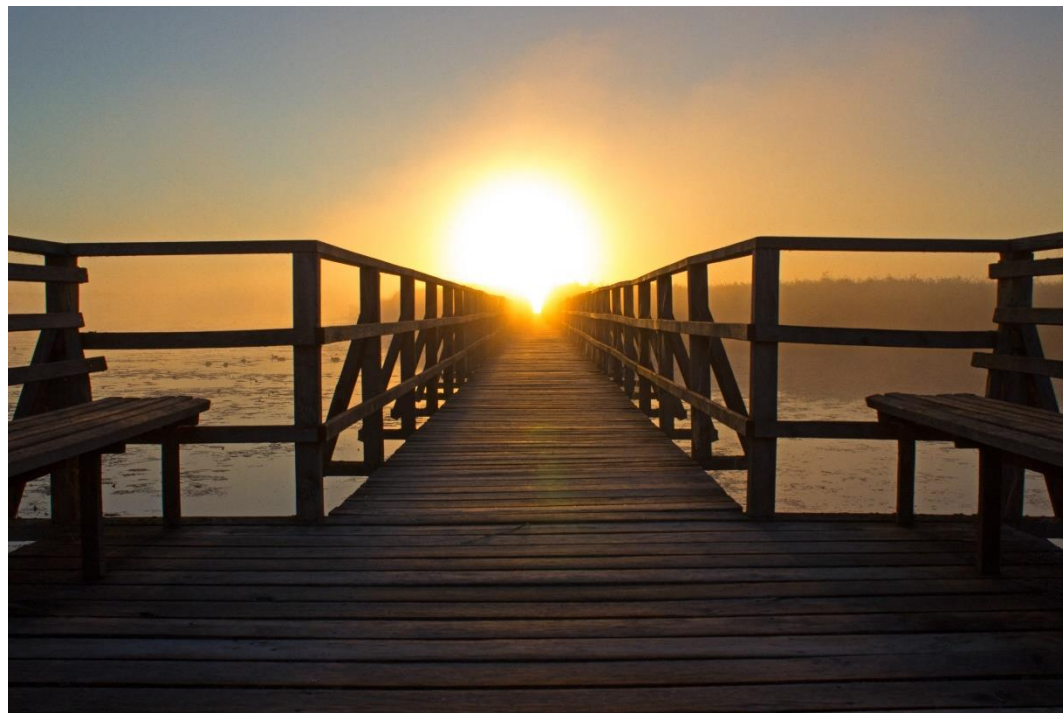


the GIFT of SABBATH

Aaron Neff, moderator

I'm writing my first newsletter article as your Moderator while a live performance by the Houston Ballet II is happening 50 yards from me. I'm spending a week of study leave at the Chautauqua Institution. It's my first time here, and I have my whole family with me. I feel very grateful for this study leave. I'm getting lots of sleep, stimulating my mind, getting quality time with my family, and generally feeling rested. That word "rest" reminds me of the word "Sabbath." Is my week at Chautauqua Sabbath? It's summer time, and many of you may be taking various forms of vacation: trips to the beach, to the lake, to the mountains, to the city, to see friends, and more. Is that what Sabbath is—vacation? I would say, "Yes and no." Yes, because I believe sabbath is meant to help us pause and take account of our lives and consider whether or not they are in alignment with our espoused values. I assume that happens for many of you when you take vacation or go on a trip. It certainly happens for me. But I also say no, because sabbath is meant to be so much more than that. It is also meant to be a mechanism that helps us to say no to the "culture of more." Vacations alone can hardly help us to resist a life of consumerism, especially if everything else about our lives pushes us in that direction. Let me explain what I mean.



In many workplaces throughout the United States, including and especially in the church, people are working more and harder than ever before and, as a result, are experiencing record levels of burnout. The World Health Organization defines burnout as a health condition "resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." According to research published in *the Journal of Occupational Health*, workers experiencing burnout who took a vacation reported modest decreases in exhaustion and health complaints but also said those benefits disappeared after two to four weeks. Why? We were never meant to (because we are not biologically equipped to) experience *chronic* stress in our lives. The best vacation in the world could never reduce the devastating health effects in the workplace of endless crises, endless demands, endless deadlines, and endless pressure to perform. Let me put it this way: If you're driving 200 MPH in a racecar,

screaming your head off because you're terrified and stressed, stopping to take a break for 15 minutes isn't going to make you feel any less terrified and stressed when you're strapped back into that racecar seat again. Your stress is due to the speed at which you're driving, not that you're driving at all. It's similar in the workplace. Work isn't a problem. Excessive work that strives to take, take, take at all costs is the problem. Vacation can't solve that problem on its own. But it can help us to create space for us to make better decisions about our lives (and churches). As I wrote earlier, sabbath is meant to help us pause and take account of our lives and consider whether or not they are in alignment with our espoused values. To continue my metaphor, a vacation can help us to realize, "It's going to kill us if we keep driving at 200 MPH! Perhaps, we should stop driving so fast and figure out where we're going!"

As churches, we constantly feel the pressure to do more to attract more people. However, what if the greatest thing we can offer ourselves and our communities right now is the gift of rest—a place where we can simply belong and where we don't pressure each other to sit on a committee or serve as an elder but, instead, simply do *only* the things that matter most. I encourage us all this month—as we're getting our last vacations in before summer ends—to pause and take account of our lives and consider whether or not they are in alignment with our espoused values. Do this for your personal lives and for your churches and see what God reveals!