

YOUTH MINISTER
STUDY GUIDE



NATHAN T. STUCKY

WRESTLING WITH REST

INVITING YOUTH TO DISCOVER THE GIFT OF SABBATH

FOREWORD BY KENDA CREASY DEAN

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- NATHAN T. STUCKY -

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WRITTEN BY MEGAN DEWALD

INTRODUCTION & CHAPTER 1:

- WEEK ONE -

1. Stucky introduces readers to the topic of Sabbath with a personal story that had profound implications on how he understood himself and his community as a young person.

DISCUSSION

What are the stories that have shaped the identities of the young people in your youth ministry? Do these stories align (or misalign) with how you hope these young people understand themselves?

2. Stucky writes, “Youth work hard; they do something special; and then they receive encouragement and affirmation. They feel the love” (p. 2).

DISCUSSION

The “work-reward-repeat” cycle to which Stucky refers in his introduction is reinforced in churches as much as anywhere else in broader American culture. How does this cycle appear in your church and/or youth ministry? How does Stucky’s observation that the cycle is “devoid of grace” and “devoid of rest” resonate with your experience in youth ministry?

ACTIVITY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Provide each student with paper and pens/markers. Instruct them to think about a story they’ve heard others tell about young people in your church, and give them 3-5 minutes to draw something from that story on one side of the paper. When the time is up, ask for volunteers to show their drawing and re-tell the story. After people have shared their stories, instruct students to turn the paper over. On the other side of the paper, ask students to write down 1-3 adjectives that describe the people and/or events in the story. Then facilitate a conversation about whether the students feel like the adjectives they wrote down accurately describe them too—as a group or as individuals. Do the stories convey the truth about young people? Do they convey the truth about the Gospel? What stories do young people want the church to tell about them?

3. In recounting Danny's story in chapter 1, Stucky states that "[Danny's] church appears to equate greater involvement and increased activity with superior faithfulness" (p. 5).

DISCUSSION

What are the metrics by which your church defines a young person as an "active" youth? What are the metrics by which a young person is considered "inactive"? Are these metrics grounded in a concern for young people's Christian faithfulness? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

4. Stucky claims that the church has misinterpreted Sabbath because of fear—fear of practicing Sabbath wrong and fear of practicing Sabbath at all when there is still so much to do (p. 12-13).

DISCUSSION

Which of these fears do you think guides your church and/or youth ministry the most? If these fears don't resonate with your experience, what might be an underlying fear of practicing Sabbath in your context? What might be faithful antidotes or responses to address these fears in your context?

5. **ENGAGING SCRIPTURE:** After reading chapter 1, read Exodus 16. Stucky suggests that "it seems plausible that God provides the manna-Sabbath combination as a way of slowly reforming the identity of the Israelite people" (p. 17). How does practicing the Sabbath reform their identity? What would it look like to alter your weekly or annual youth ministry programming to include a "manna-Sabbath" rhythm? How could practicing the Sabbath reform the identity of the young people in your church? How could it reform your identity?

CHAPTERS 2-3

- WEEK TWO -

1. Stucky introduces his readers to the work of Dr. Daniel J. Siegel and the emerging field of interpersonal neurobiology. In this work, Dr. Siegel busts three popular myths surrounding adolescence: (1) the idea that young people are overtaken by raging hormones; (2) the idea that adolescence is merely an obstacle to overcome; and (3) the idea that the goal of adolescence is total independence (p. 27-28).

DISCUSSION

How have these myths informed your youth ministry, whether implicitly or intentionally?

MYTH ONE: Young people are overtaken by raging hormones during adolescence.

What are the policies or norms in your ministry that are based on assumptions around the bodies and sexuality of young people?

MYTH TWO: Adolescence is merely an obstacle to overcome.

How does the architecture of your church and/or the design of your youth ministry programs reinforce an idea that young people are not yet capable of making decisions or participating in the full life of the church?

MYTH THREE: The goal of adolescence is total independence.

How does your church or youth ministry celebrate the achievements of individual young people? Can you identify activities or conversations that foster a spirit of competition among individual young people?

2. One of Siegel's key concepts for understanding adolescent neurobiology is the concept of "mindsight," which Stucky defines as "the ability to perceive or 'see' the mind...both her own mind and the minds of others" (p. 33). This mindsight includes three skills—insight, empathy, and integration.

ACTIVITY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE: MIND & EMPATHY MAPS

Select a familiar biblical story to explore with your young people (great examples include 1 Samuel 3, Job 1, Luke 10:29-37, or Acts 2:1-42).

Provide each student with two sheets of paper and various writing instruments. On one sheet of paper, ask the students to write their name in the center. Instruct them to listen as you read the selected story aloud once. After they listen, explain that they are going to explore what this story brings into their minds by drawing something called a "mind map." As you read the story a second time, have them write down any thought, feeling, memory, or question that comes to mind. Encourage them to let their minds wander as they write and draw and think.

Next, have students write the name of one of the characters from the biblical story on the second sheet of paper. Explain that they are now going to use their imaginations to draw something called an "empathy map" to explore how this story would make that particular character think, feel, see, hear, speak, or act. Read the story again, encouraging them to let their minds wander again as they write and draw and think about what it would be like to be this character in the story.

When you are finished, facilitate a conversation (as a whole group, small groups, or in pairs) about their learning from this exercise. Prompt reflection on paying attention to one's own experiences and paying attention to the experiences of others. Compare their maps. How did the experience of encountering the story change when they practiced empathy?

3. Youth ministry has sometimes reinforced a culture of sleeplessness through various activities and programs with young people, such as overnight lock-ins and trips with jam-packed schedules. While these activities and programs can be deeply transformative in the lives of young people, Stucky also draws our attention to the research that “the more emotionally intense an experience a person has while awake, the more important sleep becomes for consolidating or making sense of the experience” (p. 42).

DISCUSSION

What role does sleep—or sleeplessness—play in your youth ministry? Given your care of the spiritual journey of young people (one that can be very emotionally intense), how might you consider reimagining the role of sleep in your youth ministry? How might this reimagination impact the whole church?

4. In chapter 2, Stucky suggests that “the real opponent to rest in contemporary culture isn’t merely busyness, but our love of busyness” (p. 52). In chapter 3, Stucky’s conversations with young people demonstrate the devastating impact of this broader cultural glorification of busyness, noting how these young people link busyness with their identity. “To some extent,” Stucky writes, “busyness has simply become a part of who they are” (p. 80).

DISCUSSION

Describe the typical Sunday morning (or other community gathering and worship time) at your church. How has the broader cultural norm of busyness influenced that gathering and worship time? How busy are the ministry leaders and clergy? How busy are the children and youth? How busy is the congregation? If rest is present at all, where and how so? Echoing Stucky’s question—“Is this the rest that adequately reflects the grace of God?” (p. 84).

5. Unlike much writing on the relationship between young people and technology, Stucky’s analysis of technology neither condemns nor extols it. While he explores the real pressures of constant connectivity through mobile technology (p. 58), he also notes that young people describe much of their “screen time” as rest—a time to “check out” (p. 67).

DISCUSSION

How is technology engaged or used in your youth ministry? What are the relationships you observe between the young people in your care and their mobile devices?

CHAPTER 4

- WEEK THREE -

1. “Being unproductive undercuts our primary ways of evaluating ourselves and others,” Stucky writes. “Who are we if we’re not producing something, if we’re not achieving, if we’re not doing?” (p. 99).

REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Throughout chapter 4, Stucky challenges the notion that the Sabbath is something that we earn or deserve as a reward for our work and productivity, while noting that this is precisely the kind of “Sabbath” that many people in ministry accept and model.

Obtain a written copy of your current youth ministry job description. Read through it carefully and note if, where, and how the idea of “productivity” appears. Then note if, where, and how Sabbath appears. Is the practice of Sabbath an expectation or requirement? If so, is it contingent upon you meeting particular deliverables in your youth ministry work (e.g. you are permitted rest following a weeklong camp or mission trip)? If not, how might you introduce the practice of Sabbath into your job?

2. Stucky introduces his readers to the theological work of Karl Barth, describing how Barth’s interpretation of the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3 grounds the relationship between God and creation in the Sabbath. “Thus, the relationship between God and humankind utterly depends on God’s Sabbath rest, given to creation—including humanity—with the invitation to ongoing participation” (p. 105).

DISCUSSION

What are the connections for you between relationship and rest? How have you witnessed the forming or deepening of relationships in your youth ministry during periods of rest? How might these insights inform the way you make space for rest amid the programs, events, and other opportunities in your ministry?

3. Stucky points to Barth’s insight that “[h]umankind’s first full day of existence is the seventh day—the day of God’s rest—which means that the first act of God that humanity has the privilege of witnessing is God’s rest” (p. 106). Flowing from this insight, Stucky notes how “human participation in the Sabbath rest on the seventh day of creation couldn’t be based in human accomplishment. It could only be grounded in God’s work and invitation” (p. 107).

DISCUSSION

How does this interpretive lens for understanding this creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-2:3 challenge the work-reward-repeat cycle Stucky describes in the Introduction to this book? How does this lens provide a new framework for responding to the anxieties of the young people in chapter 3?

4. Throughout the book so far, Stucky has been building upon his initial observation that “[b]efore we existed, before we could do anything to earn it, we were loved. Sabbath tells this story” (p. 3). In chapter 4, we encounter a fuller exploration of the idea that God’s gift of the Sabbath is “Sheer Grace” (p. 107), drawing from Barth’s theological framework and a nuanced interpretation of Scripture.

DISCUSSION

How do you understand, teach, and model grace in your youth ministry and in the entirety of your life? Why do you think Stucky repeatedly describes grace as “disorienting”? How has reading this chapter changed—or disoriented—your understanding of grace?

5. Chapter 4 opens with a reference to Barbara Brown Taylor’s comment that Sabbath is “a practice in death” (p. 99). Stucky continues to explore the intersections of Sabbath, death, and identity throughout this chapter, especially in his discussion of Barth’s “renouncing faith”—“faith that renounces every identity other than the grace-rooted one we find in God” (p. 116).

ACTIVITY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Provide every person with something to write with and something to write on. Instruct students that they have five minutes to write either a Twitter bio (160 characters max) or Instagram bio (150 characters max). Allow the use of words, hashtags, and even emojis, but ensure they do not exceed the character limits. When the five minutes are up, give them one minute to edit before insisting on “pencils down.”

Have students share their bios with each other, whether as a whole group, small groups, pairs, or other configuration that makes sense for your context. Once everyone has gone, prompt reflection with the following questions:

- (1) Did it seem like these bios accurately described the people who wrote them? If so, how so? If not, what did you not know about each other or think was missing from some bios?
- (2) How many times did you hear people describe themselves based on things they do (e.g. “soccer player,” “Starbucks barista,” “newspaper editor”)? How would these bios change if we didn’t describe what we do but instead focused them on who we are? Is there a difference? If so, what is the difference? If not, why not?
- (3) How would these bios change if they were written about us by God? How would they be different from each other? How would they be the same?

6. **ENGAGING SCRIPTURE:** Return to Exodus 16 and to your answers to question 5 in the first week of his study guide. After reading chapter 4 (particularly p. 121-124), what more could you say in response to the questions about how the practice of Sabbath could reform the identity of the young people in your church and your own identity? How do you resonate with Stucky’s observation that “the Israelites intend no disobedience; they perceive their own efforts not as a failure of God’s test, but as extra credit” (p. 124)?

CHAPTER 5

- WEEK FOUR -

1. In chapter 5, Stucky highlights the 12 passages in the Gospels that feature Jesus healing on the Sabbath. “[T]he Gospel picture of the Sabbath is a picture of miraculous, gracious, and often unexpected healing at the hands of Christ” (p. 132).

ENGAGING SCRIPTURE After reading chapter 5, read the Gospel passages Stucky references on page 132 (Mark 3:1-6; Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; Luke 14:1-6; John 5:1-18; and John 9:1-12). What common themes, words, or ideas do you notice in these passages after reading this chapter? What elements had you missed in previous readings without the lens of this framework Stucky provides? What—if any—new insights have you gained from this exercise?

2. Stucky draws the reader’s attention to the “confrontation” that takes place between Jesus and the Pharisees during his healings on the Sabbath (p. 132-136). “Jesus insists that the error of the Pharisees is not that they take the Sabbath too seriously, but that they have missed the point and reduced it to a matter of mere human power and choice... As [Jesus] miraculously heals on the Sabbath, he simultaneously proclaims both the superiority of his own power and lordship—making himself equal to God—and the insufficiency of merely human power and agency for attaining God’s all-powerful Sabbath grace” (p. 134-135).

DISCUSSION

Giving them the benefit of the doubt, why do you think the issue of Sabbath-keeping was so important to the Pharisees? Why do you think it is so important to Jesus? How would you describe the Pharisee’s interpretation of the Sabbath commandment versus Jesus’s interpretation? How is Jesus’s understanding of the Sabbath consistent with his statement in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17, NRSV).

3. Stucky notes that, with the notable exception of the one Sabbath that Jesus spends alone in the tomb, Jesus spent the other Sabbaths of his ministry in community. “Jesus refuses the reduction of the Sabbath to a matter of mere private devotion and insists instead on a Sabbath inclusive of a broad community” (p. 138).

DISCUSSION

How do the Gospel passages of Jesus’s healing ministry on the Sabbath illustrate Jesus’s insistence on inclusive community? What might this kind of inclusive community look like today? When you consider your youth ministry, would you describe it as an inclusive community? Why or why not?

4. Stucky explores several key features of the Sabbath healing texts that distinguish them from other passages of Jesus's healing ministry in the Gospels.
- (1) The person who is healed in each of the Sabbath stories does not initiate the encounter with Jesus. Instead, “[o]n the Sabbath, it is Jesus who initiates healing of a radically gracious nature” (p. 142).
 - (2) The person who is healed is a character “at rest” in the encounter. “The Gospel writers seem to exhibit consistent intentionality in depicting the recipients of Jesus's Sabbath healing as passive” (p. 143).
 - (3) Unlike many healing narratives in the Gospels, the Sabbath healings do not mention the person's faith. “Jesus's action precedes any action on the part of the one who receives the healing” (p. 143).

DISCUSSION

Think of a time in your life when you experienced Jesus's healing presence. Where do you see overlap with that experience and the features of these Sabbath healing narratives? Where does your story depart from these narratives? How is Stucky's notion of “disorienting grace” present in these Gospel narratives and in your own?

5. Stucky offers a direct challenge to those who minister to youth: “[If] ‘the Sabbath is about doing good and saving life—acts of mercy, healing, and teaching, [then I]et's get busy! That's what the Sabbath is all about!’ This line of thinking operates functionally in the lives of many in ministry—particularly ministry on behalf of youth... [and] in the lives of the young people we met in Chapter 3. They strive so endlessly after all the things their churches, schools, and broader culture tells them they should that they, too, assume rest somehow falls outside the life to which they are called. If there is Sabbath, it's Sabbath work, not Sabbath rest” (p. 147).

ACTIVITY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE: TIME DIARIES

Consider Stucky's research method for understanding young people's relationship to rest (see pages 65-66, including footnote 8 on page 200). If feasible, gather the supplies needed for a time diary project like this in your ministry context. Instruct students (or perhaps a selected small group) to record how they spend their time over seven days—and participate in this exercise alongside them. After those seven days, gather students again, instructing them to “highlight every instance of rest, using their own definition of rest” (p. 66). Following this, instruct them to “indicate any times when they felt they were particularly connected to God or others, and any times when they felt they were particularly themselves” (p. 66).

Notice any themes that emerge regarding busyness, rest, relationship to God, self-awareness, and grace. What does this exercise reveal to your young people about themselves? What does this exercise reveal to you about yourself? How could you share the results of your research with your students' families and/or your wider congregation? What would it look like for the results of this research to inform (or reform) your youth ministry?

Modifications of this exercise include:

- Having students write their 24-hour, 7-day schedules from memory during one youth gathering (noting the limits of accuracy) and discussing rest, relationship, God, and self afterward.
- Hosting a retreat that allows students to explore these broader themes over several days.

CHAPTER 6: - WEEK FIVE -

1. When rest—or even Sabbath rest—is discussed in our contemporary culture, it is often confused with practices of self-care. (See footnote 69 on pages 210-211 for Stucky’s exploration of how the concept of Sabbath as God’s all-powerful grace challenges this notion). Throughout the book and in chapter 6, Stucky observes how these practices may have their place, but that they also assume “substantial privilege” (p. 154) and may even lure us toward “the ideals of consumer capitalism and any other cultural narratives that turn people away from God’s grace” (p. 155).

DISCUSSION

Why do you think Stucky is wary of the ways “consumer capitalism” tries to package and sell “rest and relaxation”? How has reading this book helped shift your perspective on the concept and practice of Sabbath rest? What are some practices you could incorporate into your youth ministry that would help facilitate similar shifts in the perspectives of young people?

2. Recall Siegel’s “four central features of adolescence” that Stucky introduces in chapter 1—emotional spark, social engagement, novelty-seeking, and creative exploration (p. 28).

DISCUSSION

Following Stucky’s argument that “our young people should be at the heart of the community of faith as it discerns the contours of faithful Sabbath practice” (p. 157), how can you leverage the “four central features of adolescence” in your context to discern what Sabbath rest can look like in your youth ministry?

3. Consider Stucky’s illustration of Sesame Street Ernie’s rubber ducky (“You gotta put down the ducky if you want to play the saxophone!”). In a similar light, Stucky frames the stories of the Israelites in the wilderness and the Pharisees in the Gospels, and the stakes come into sharper focus. “If it’s true that God asks the Israelites and the Pharisees to put down something on which it appears their lives depend, and if it’s true that God does this so that they may know that their lives ultimately depend on God’s grace, provision, and care, then perhaps we can gain clarity on our Sabbath practice by asking the same questions: What is it that tempts us to believe our lives depend on it?” (p. 160).

DISCUSSION

What are the “lesser gods” (even those which Stucky acknowledges are “potentially good things”) that you feel like your life is dependent upon? What are the goods and/or gods that you feel like your youth ministry is dependent upon? What can you identify as goods and/or gods in the lives of the young people in your care?

4. In chapter 6, Stucky introduces the reader to four ancient Sabbath practices, including:
- (1) worship and liturgy, which happens at God's initiation (p. 163-164);
 - (2) story-telling, which reshapes and reforms misshapen or deformed identities (p. 164-165);
 - (3) breaking bread, which invites us "to partake of God's provision" (p. 165-166); and
 - (4) loving neighbors, which reminds us to "consider the implications of all our choices and of the political and economic systems that surround us" (p. 166).

ACTIVITY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE: RE-PROGRAMMING

With either the whole group or in strategic smaller groups, have your students brainstorm on a large sheet of paper or other writing surface every event, activity, class, trip, and/or program that is offered as part of the youth ministry at your church. (As a bonus, this exercise will probably teach you a lot about how your students understand youth ministry at your church!)

Using the four Sabbath practices outlined above, have your students note where they see or experience these practices during your current youth ministry programming. Reflect on what you learn from this step of this exercise with your students.

Next, have your students delete, erase, or cross out any element of your current youth ministry that doesn't correspond at all with these four Sabbath practices. Then reflect on what you learn from this step of this exercise with your students. Finally, have your students brainstorm how these four practices could be better incorporated into the youth ministry of your church. What would you have to let go? What would you experience instead? Is any of this possible, feasible, and/or desirable for your youth ministry?

5. "Contemporary culture offers its own responses" to young people, according to Stucky. "It sells plenty of distractions to keep young people awake, distracted, busy, and restless. The church, too, has offered its response. Too often it has attempted to outdo the culture on the culture's terms instead of engaging the world on the terms of God's life and grace" (p. 171).

DISCUSSION

How has your church "attempted to outdo the culture on the culture's terms" when engaging young people? How do popular buzzwords around youth ministry like "attractual" and "relevant" signal this kind of relationship between culture and youth ministry? What would be required of you to reshape or reform the conversation in your ministry "on the terms of God's life and grace?"

6. Stucky closes his book echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call (which itself echoes Jesus's call) to "come and die." Describing what that means, Stucky notes that "if the death that we and our young people experience is in service to achievement, productivity, and ceaselessness, or in avoidance of the disorientation of rest, then it isn't Jesus's call we heed... Our existence doesn't begin with what we can accomplish, and it won't end by what we can achieve" (p. 177).

DISCUSSION

Consider Jesus's words in the Gospel of Matthew: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" (Mt. 16:24-26).

HAVE YOU BEEN HEEDING JESUS'S CALL?