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**Introduction to the Sabbath Interviews:**

Throughout the summer, I will be meeting with various members of our community, interviewing them about their experience of the Sabbath day. I will write about what I hear in order to share with our church body. The intention behind telling our Sabbath stories is not to present one perfect lesson or idea of how Sabbath ought to be understood or practiced. However, through the receiving of story, we are naturally shaped. We are given opportunities to wonder, to imagine, to rethink and learn from one another and our life experiences. My hope is that we as a community will be enriched by hearing how those around us practice and experience the Sabbath day. My hope for this summer is that our own understanding of the Sabbath might be expanded and our longing for the Sabbath might be reawakened through the insights of our community.

## Sabbath Interview // Vern & Carla Sterk

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Many grow up with a certain idea of how Sabbath ought to look and be practiced. Vern Sterk, regarding his understanding of Sabbath at first as a young boy, put it humbly and frankly, “That all got a little revised once we went to Mexico.”

For 40 years, Vern and Carla Sterk found their home in Chiapas, Mexico. In their twenties, immediately following Vern’s seminary studies at Western Theological Seminary, the Sterks moved in among the Chiapas people after sensing a call to this area of the world. Vern and Carla’s new neighbors in the tribal village were not Christians, so most Sundays, the Sterks would walk or catch a ride to some quiet place to observe Sabbath with only their family. After three years, the first two Christians joined them outside the village to avoid persecution. When the church began to grow, the Sterk family was invited to visit surrounding villages, showing and translating Christian films in order to share the gospel. From the time they began serving in Chiapas, Vern and Carla held a foundational belief that Sabbath was a time to be “set apart” in order “to glorify God.” Sunday became a day of service and outreach.

Years into the Sterk’s ministry, they began to see gospel transformation for the Chiapas people. Churches formed in the villages, and the people began to enter into a routine of Sabbath observance. Sabbath, however, took on a form quite different from how we, in the American Reformed Church, might define or experience it. The Sterks explained how Sabbath, when they were growing up, had oftentimes become a day of “limits” or “don’ts.” In Chiapas, Sabbath was a day set apart for joyful worship celebrations and witness.

For the pre-Christian indigenous people, Sunday was a sad day. A cultural norm for the Chiapas people, as Vern and Carla described it, was to spend too much money on hard liquor, escape through drunkenness and become violent with their families in that state. Perhaps it was a day for coping, the best they knew how, with a way of life that left them dissatisfied and disappointed. For the indigenous Christians, however, Sabbath was a day of *joy*. The day was never understood in terms of what they couldn't do. For the indigenous people, Sabbath was for worshipping, going to the market, enjoying local parks, and spending time with family. For the Sterks, because Sundays often involved ministry work, they would set apart every Friday evening for a time of fellowship with their children. "Friday night fun night," as they called it, became a significant "Sabbath" rhythm for the Sterk's. Vern and Carla continue to observe these Fridays as date nights, and their kids have continued to do the same with their own families.

Sabbath is a day of rest from the usual routine. For the indigenous Christians in Chiapas, Sabbath is *missionally-oriented*. On Sundays, it is rare to find a pastor within their home church because their primary mission is to reach out to the community. The pastors go out into the village to visit new people while the elders and deacons run the worship service in the main church building. Meanwhile, other church members and leaders were leading house churches, gathering and welcoming those in the community who were seeking, questioning, wandering or sick. Sabbath is a day of hospitality, of looking towards the "other."

Quite different from our own experience in West Michigan, for the indigenous Chiapas people, Sabbath had to exist in the context of persecution. During significant years of

persecution, the Sterks would lead worship in the woods, away from the village. These Sabbath meetings would include worship, sharing food and insights, prayers and questions. As persecution intensified, the indigenous people would have to leave their village, pretending to go into the city on Sunday for the market. The Christians would gather together in a secret place, then go to market and return to their village with their weekly groceries, this being done in order to prove they were not going into the city for worship. Participating in Sabbath was worthy of risk for the indigenous Christians, but their practices had to exist within their cultural situation.

Jesus Christ, throughout the gospels, challenges the Jewish leaders' strict guidelines for practicing the Sabbath. Jesus heals on the Sabbath and picks grain on the Sabbath, much to the avail of the law keepers. Vern and Carla believe that the Sabbath is meant for “meeting together,” and that we as Christians must prioritize this pursuit (Hebrews 10:25). For those who are curious about and wanting to experience Sabbath rest, the Sterks would encourage you to find a Sabbath rhythm that allows you to learn more about what God has done for you and wants to do for you still. Find a faith group where you can learn and grow and find support. Ultimately, we learn from the Sterks and the Chiapas people that the Sabbath day is a day to be *set apart*, a day for unconventional gatherings greatly worth the risk, for hospitality and for glorifying God.