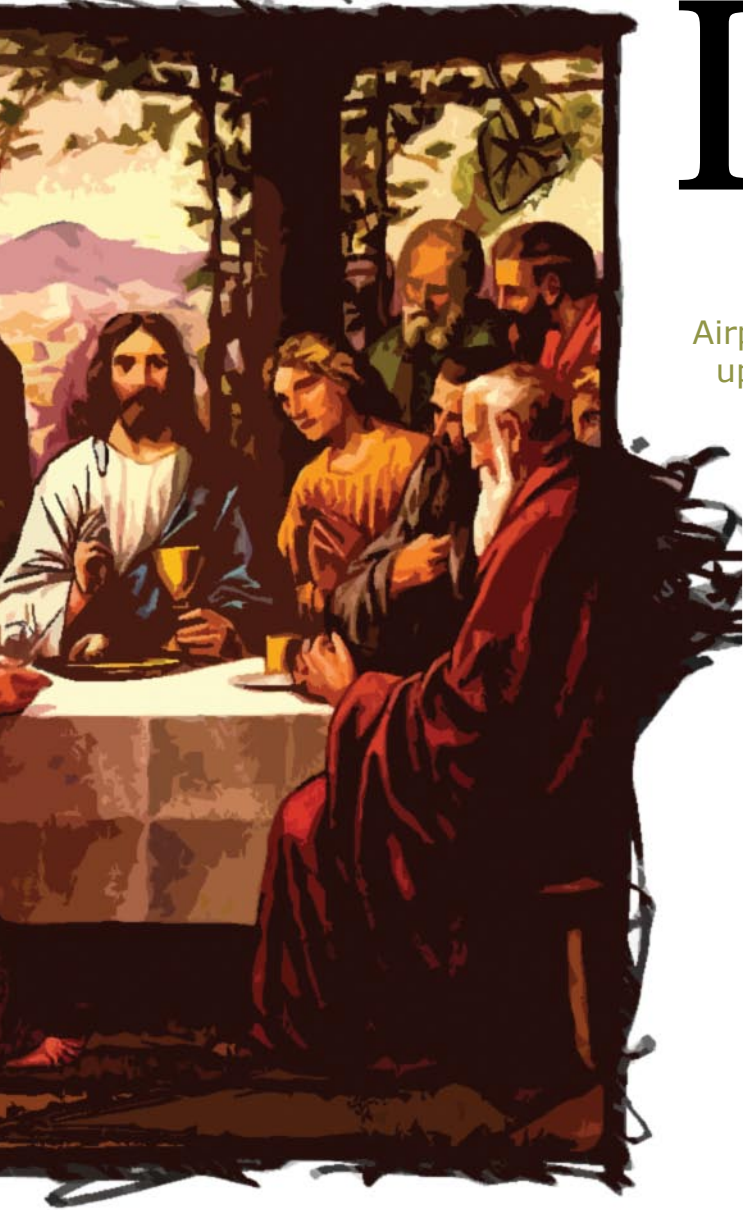




# Slowing Down

by | Mark Yaconelli

Just outside the George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, youth pastor Brent Parker pulls up in his cherry red pickup, steps out, and greets me, “Welcome to our A.D.D. community!”



I throw my bags in the truck bed, and we head west toward The Woodlands, the upscale Houston suburb where Brent lives and ministers. The plan is to meet his wife and 10-month-old son for dinner at a barbecue joint. As we drive I’m a bit surprised by Brent’s relaxed and quiet demeanor. He asks about my family and work life, gently nodding and making eye contact to let me know he’s listening. He laughs easily and allows space within our conversation.

I can’t help but recall the first time I met Brent three years earlier. He had invited himself to accompany a regional staff member of the Disciples of Christ who was picking me up from the airport and driving me to a speaking event. I sat in the back seat; Brent sat shotgun, with his head permanently craned backward, drilling me with question after question. He spoke like a caffeine addict as he grilled me about one youth ministry topic after another. Yet now, riding in his truck, he seemed a different person. Present. Calm.

A few miles from the exit to The Woodlands we get a call from Brent’s wife, Kori. She can’t find the restaurant. Brent does his best to guide her, but his instructions are vague (“You know when you pass that one overpass...well it’s not right there but a little further...it’s like the second turn...”). Within five minutes of leaving the interstate, we too are lost. Brent chuckles, “I’ve lived here five years, and I still continue to get lost. Every street and shopping center looks the same.”

With trees bordering most properties and street signs outlawed, it’s easy to see how people get disoriented. The terrain is level with pine, oak, and sweet gum trees four-feet deep along the main roads and properties. Homes, businesses, and other landmarks are concealed, so the town feels like a hedged maze of meandering blacktop. County ordinance requires that all roads and streets bend—so trees are always visible, creating a sense of backwoods living rather than a carefully engineered Houston suburb.

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The trees, walkways, and twisting roads are comforting, tranquil, and appealing. Yet there is something disconcerting about the careful orchestration of homes, parks, businesses, and trees. Brent, who grew up in the racially mixed (“I was the only white kid on my high school basketball team”) working-class town of Beaumont, tells me, “The story of this town is the story of the *haves*.” Maybe that’s what’s troubling me—my sense that the *have-nots* are missing.

Considering the churchgoing habits of this Bible belt city, The Woodlands Christian Church is considered a small church. One elder told me it’s the smallest church within The Woodlands. After a little investigating I discovered that, within just 10 minutes of the church, there were at least four other congregations that all boasted memberships greater than 3,000.

When Pastor David Emery, Brent, and the church leadership expressed an interest in participating in the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, it seemed to be a unique challenge. Even though the church felt small in comparison to others in the area, the church had grown from 30 to 600 members over the past five years and was full of activity. The question was whether our project’s emphasis on Sabbath-living could take root in such a busy place.

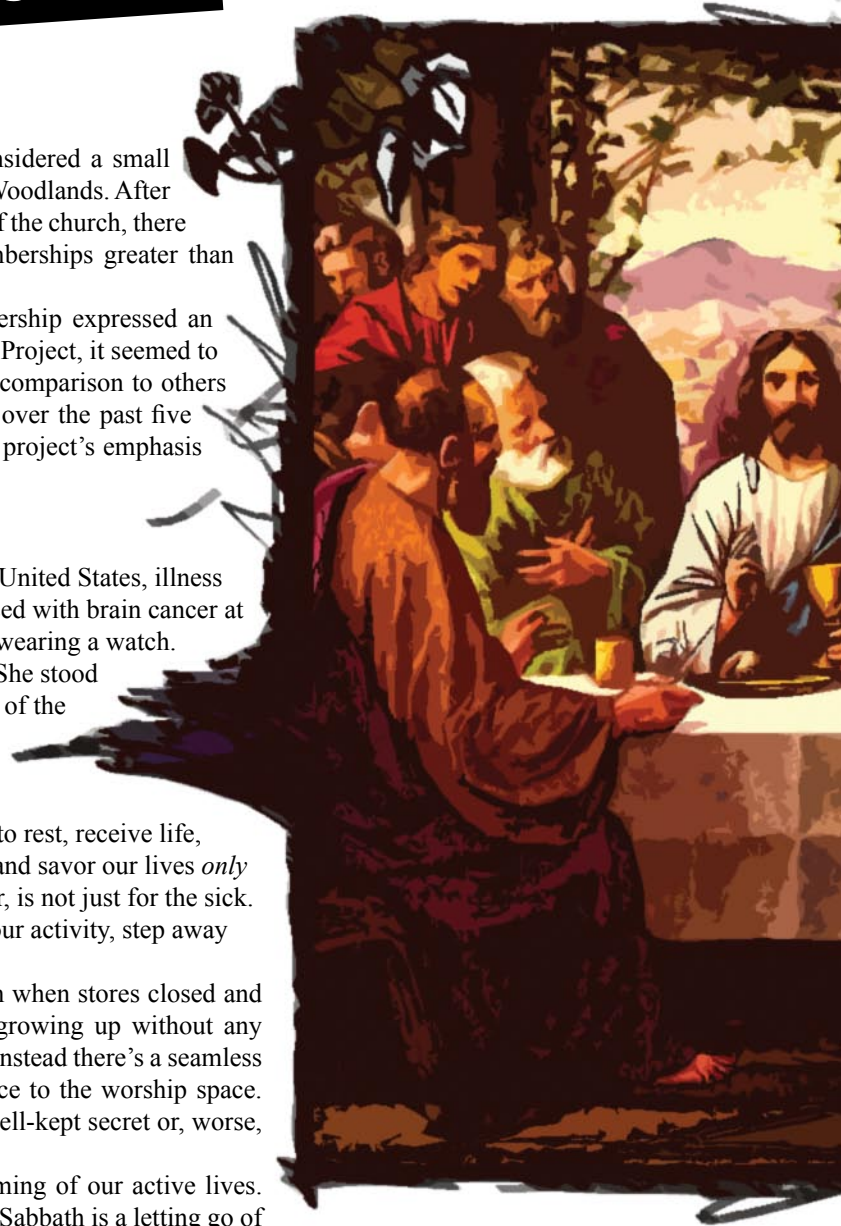
### *Reclaiming the Sabbath*

Author and former pastor Wayne Muller once said that in the United States, illness has become our Sabbath.<sup>1</sup> When a friend of mine was diagnosed with brain cancer at 46, time suddenly became a precious gift to her. She stopped wearing a watch. She spent mornings lying in the sun and afternoons napping. She stood in the backyard, remarking at the changing sky and the colors of the trees. She invited friends over for champagne and chocolate. She took slow walks to church, stopping to talk with people and admire flowers. She took pleasure in life.

Muller was right. It seems we give ourselves permission to rest, receive life, enjoy creation, share good food with friends, and be grateful and savor our lives *only* when we’re stricken with a terminal illness. Sabbath, however, is not just for the sick. It’s a commandment that all people of God take time to stop our activity, step away from our roles, and enjoy our lives.

I have memories of Sunday afternoons in my small town when stores closed and life slowed, but most young people I encounter today are growing up without any sense of Sabbath time. They’re growing up without Sundays. Instead there’s a seamless transition in the pace and quality of life from the marketplace to the worship space. Within most Christian communities, Sabbath has become a well-kept secret or, worse, a blatantly ignored commandment.

Sabbath is a retreat from the striving, toiling, and scheming of our active lives. Rabbi Abraham Heschel once called it “a sanctuary in time.”<sup>2</sup> Sabbath is a letting go of our need to produce and perform—an opportunity for our spirits, as well as our bodies, to be refreshed and renewed. In Sabbath we’re given permission to simply “be.” We’re invited to trust that we (and those we serve) are loved for who we are, not for what we do. To keep the Sabbath is to be reminded that life, even our spiritual life, is a gift. In a time when people are stressed out, overworked, over stimulated, and pressured to do more, the practice of Sabbath may best communicate the good news of Jesus.



The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project sought to instill a deeper awareness of Sabbath-living in youth ministers, pastors, and youth ministry volunteers. Brent Parker, along with a number of other project participants, attended weeklong formation events that focused on Sabbath-living. Long periods of rest were scheduled throughout each week. Lectures were given on the history and practice of Sabbath-keeping. Participants discussed the busyness of adults in North American culture and the toll this has taken on children and young people.

After three years of formation, the question still remained: *Is it possible to reclaim a sense of Sabbath in our congregations and communities of faith? Is it possible to reclaim a sense of time as an abundant gift from God rather than a scarce commodity? Can Christians who live within such a hyperactive culture make Sabbath a central experience in the spiritual formation of young people?*

### *Thinking about Grace*

When we finally enter the restaurant, I'm hit with the smell of mesquite and hickory smoke. Brent's wife and son are already seated. Both Brent and Kori encourage me to order a platter with grilled beef, turkey, and pork ribs. The dish includes a choice of two vegetables—"beans" or "coleslaw." Feeling my prostate expand, I politely refuse.

A former bartender and basketball coach, Brent is the first full-time youth minister for TWCC. In the past, church members often compared him to the congregation's founding pastor who worked upwards of 90 hours a week. Lately, however, people say they've noticed a difference in Brent. I ask him to explain...

"I used to minister out of a fear-and-anxiety model. Everything was win or lose. I was focused on performance: 'How many kids turned out? Did the lesson go over?' There really was no difference between the mode in which I did ministry and the mode in which I did bartending and coaching.

"Everything was about efficiency and performance. The result was that in my first two years as a youth minister, I was never home by 7 p.m.

"I remember one night having this great youth meeting. We had a good turnout of

kids. My lesson went over well. Singing was good. I came home after that meeting upbeat and excited to share the good news with my wife. It was after 8 p.m. when I got home, and as soon as I walked in the door, I started telling her about everything that had happened. Her immediate response was, 'I hate church.' That's when I began to realize I was working too many hours—around 80 a week—and it was hurting my marriage."

Kori nods her head and smiles at me. Brent looks over at his son Caedmon and smiles. Caedmon shoves an impossible handful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. I shift the conversation to Brent's sense of God during this time of overwork. He tells me that before he entered the project, he felt God was a very demanding presence with high expectations—a taskmaster who was never satisfied, always wanting more. Consequently Brent says his focus wasn't "to be close to God, it was to *please* God."

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### *Shifting Priorities*

Three years ago Brent began a daily practice of contemplative prayer, found a spiritual director to meet with regularly, and started listening more to people and the Spirit of God. But he tells me how difficult it was to shift his priorities. He often feels like he's moving against the stream—the busyness that seems ingrained in the community and church culture.

"This church is filled with high-powered people who approach church the same way they approach their businesses—they focus on efficiency and productivity. It's easy for me to get caught up in the same thing. I'm ADD, and so I'm tempted to get busy. I need time to slow down and rest. These times of prayer and just stopping my mind and activity have become a great gift to me."

Out of these Sabbath moments, Brent's sense of time has shifted as well. "I've really slowed down. I do less. I delegate more. And really, it's not just that I've slowed down; time itself has begun to slow." As time slows, he tells me, he's begun to develop more gratitude for the little things within his ministry: "I no longer get stressed out about a low turnout at a youth event. Instead, I feel grateful for each kid who does show up—even if it's just a handful."

I ask him how his sense of God has changed. "Well, for the first time I'm thinking about grace. My transformation can be embodied by that one word—*grace*. Through a commitment to prayer and Sabbath I've found this new ability and awareness to give and receive God's grace. I've discovered that spirituality isn't something you work to obtain but a part of our being that must be found and then appreciated." He pauses to reflect. "It still feels like God has high expectations, and yet at the same time it feels like at any one moment God is satisfied with me, like God is constantly saying, 'If you stopped right now, you've done enough.'"

When I ask him how this change came about he tells me, "This approach to ministry begins and ends with the realization that each of us is a beloved child of God. When I start from this knowledge or understanding, the anxieties and fears of my call are somewhat eased."

Brent tries to share this new sense of time with others in his ministry. “Now when people come in to talk with me, I move out from behind my desk and sit on the couch so they know I’m not in a hurry...that I have time for them. I’m slower to answer questions and more ready to listen. I feel like I have this space in me for other people. There’s this naked emptiness that I bring when I’m with someone, and I’ve found people really appreciate this kind of space and presence.”

I prod, “But isn’t there a drawback to ‘slowing down’? Aren’t there tasks that get neglected, programs that have to be cut, and dwindling numbers of kids?”

“Yes,” Brent replies, looking troubled. “I have to say that sometimes I feel guilty about my priorities around time. I sometimes feel like I need to be doing more, connecting with kids more. Working within the hours the church pays me to work means I see kids less; I harass them to come to church a lot less and so fewer kids come. I worry about that sometimes.

“There’s also this new sense of pain because trying to practice Sabbath is in such direct contrast to the culture—and even the culture of our church. I know life is richer when we slow down. But this creates a lot of conflict. Most of the church community can’t be slowed, and it’s the same for the kids. Most young people experience time as being scarce. There just isn’t enough time—too many activities...I feel compassion for them.”

He turns and looks over at his wife and baby. “But now I’m home most nights by dinner time, and with a new baby, I’m really glad I’ve made this change.”

### *The Upper Room*

The youth room at The Woodlands Christian Church is an anomaly in the recently remodeled church building. The “Upper Room,” as it’s referred to by youth and youth leaders, is painted a shimmering Mediterranean blue, quite unlike the clean white and barren drywall that covers most of the church’s hallways and classrooms. When I ask Brent about the dramatic color, he tells me to look closely at the sole wall hanging: An 8-foot by 4-foot embroidery of the Last Supper. Jesus and the disciples sit at a low rectangular table that opens to the viewer. Behind the seated figures appear four tan and cream tapestries that seem suspended in air, hinting at a sort of makeshift enclosure. Between these tapestries lies an open iridescent blue. It takes me a moment or two to make the connection between the blue in the artwork and the painted walls of the youth room.

“We want this space to feel like a continuation of the Last Supper. We matched the walls of the room with the image from the Last Supper to give us the feeling that we’re in the upper room with Jesus.”

I’m struck by Brent’s sense of youth group as a continuation of the upper room. I turn again to the image on the wall. The upper room is a place of retreat, a place of Sabbath. The disciples sit leisurely with Jesus, eating and conversing. Their bodies are reclined, their gaze turned receptively toward their teacher.

As I gaze at the picture, I remember that Jesus will soon kneel and wash the feet of each of his friends. He will offer them comfort and pray for their safety. It’s a place of humility, where Peter and Judas are challenged to look truthfully at who they are becoming. It’s also a place of spiritual intimacy in which Jesus invites his friends to share not only bread and wine but also his deepest identity and mission in the world. It’s a place of hospitality even to those who will reject or betray him. It’s a place for preparation, a place for rest and renewal before engaging the powers that seek to destroy life.

The upper room is a place for Sabbath.

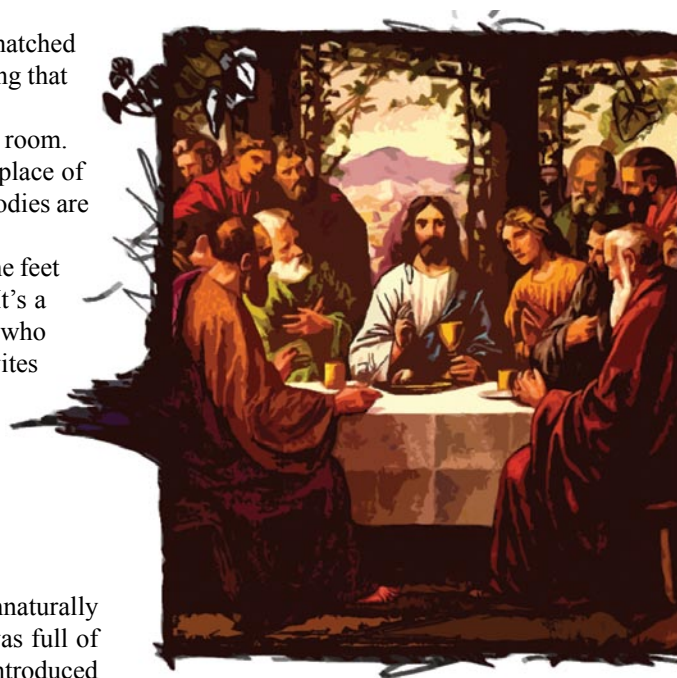
### *A Getaway*

The next morning I find myself sitting in the “Upper Room” surrounded by 28 unnaturally quiet teenagers. Five minutes earlier this high school Sunday school class was full of horseplay and lighthearted conversation. Then Brent called them to attention, introduced

“Spirituality isn’t something you work to obtain but a part of our being that must be found and then appreciated.”

me, and asked all the adult volunteers to leave the room. Now the young people sit still, and I feel like an overeager substitute teacher. I’m interested in whether they are being affected by the youth ministry’s concentration on Sabbath-living, yet I realize that my zeal to hear from them might make them hesitant to respond. I take an indirect approach and ask them to tell me about teenage life in The Woodlands.

“People have too much money here,” a bushy-headed freshman responds. “It’s not good for us. Most of my friends are C.O.D.—Cash on Demand.” Most nod heads, although one young woman disagrees and says that her family is struggling to make ends meet. “There’s a lot of ‘at risk behavior,’” says another young man in a schoolmarm voice. Some students giggle. “But it’s true,” responds a senior dressed in slacks, a button-down shirt, and a worn baseball cap. “Our school is full of drugs. There are lots of parties and lots of drinking.”



When I ask them why, they're silent. Then a baby-faced, 16-year-old girl with midriff exposed says, "It's because a lot of kids are bitter." The group quiets down. I ask her to say more. "It's because we're, like, totally left on our own." I sense the group energizing around her comment. "Do others feel the same way?"

"Totally," 15-year-old Marcus chimes in. "The more money, the more your parents are gone, which means they're more lenient, which means you're more at risk." He pauses. "I've never even met the dads of my five best friends. The more money they make, the less they see them."

## The soul of a young person needs open, un-programmed time to grow.

Evan, a wiry freshman, joins in. "Parents are busy and kids are busy. The result is that parents don't get into your life. They don't ask you what you're doing. It kind of makes you mad... like nobody cares, and you start doing crazy things."

"We don't all make bad decisions," Michael counters. "My dad's gone for a week at a time, every other week. I could've started doing bad stuff, but instead I started coming to this youth group—and I mostly just come on my own."

I'm touched by the loneliness that seems to underlie their responses. I'm interested to hear their impressions of the church and whether they are similar to their experiences of the community at large. The group becomes reflective. R.C., a junior lineman on the high school football team, speaks up. "Church isn't like any other thing I do. It's like a siesta every time I come to church."

Many in the group nod heads. "Yeah, it's like our Hawaii," asserts another girl who is resting her head on the shoulder of the boy next to her.

Sarah, a tall, composed senior adds, "When I come to church, it's like time stops. You can be yourself and forget the outside pressures. It's relaxing to be at church."

I ask if this is everyone's experience of the church. The response is a boisterous "No!"

Amanda explains, "It's not like that for the adults. The rest of the church is still pretty busy. But at youth group it's different. I think for us, church is a getaway."

### *Siesta Time*

The one picture the Scriptures give us of Jesus as an adolescent demonstrates leisure and reflection in the presence of a community of faith. Slipping away from the procession of pilgrims traveling home from the Passover festival, Jesus stays in Jerusalem. For three days he sits in the temple, his "Father's house," listening and asking questions of the elders. In contrast to the great anxiety of his parents' searching, Jesus seems relaxed and restful. He is among the elders of his faith, who seem to have plenty of time to talk with him, listen to him, and delight in who he is becoming.

The soul of a young person needs open, un-programmed

time to grow. It takes time to fall in love with God; it takes time to notice the gift of each moment; it takes time to feel the beauty and suffering of each person and to meditate on the mystery of faith. In contrast with the concrete, technological, and materialistic spirituality that afflicts American culture, the Christian faith is a faith that lives in time, not space.

The New Testament verifies that neither things nor places, neither techniques nor doctrines, form Christians; rather it's long, unstructured time in the presence of Jesus that forms Christians. Yet for most young people the Christian life is just as stressful as the rest of life—harried Sunday mornings, clock-run worship services, program-packed youth meetings, and somber confirmation exams.

As Brent and the other adults at The Woodlands Christian Church began to incarnate a sense and practice of Sabbath time, not only did the youth ministry programs shift but also the ways in which they related to young people. In a church without Sabbath, young people easily become projects that need managing. Brent talks about feeling the pressure to be the "answer" person—the professional in control of students' spiritual development. This is fundamentally different from the listening attitude he and the other leaders now seek to embody with young people.

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Can congregations incarnate a different culture of time? Can church leaders seek to create a sense of Sabbath in the formation of their children? How will young people feel about the church and the Christian faith after engaging in a youth program that isn't run by the clock? What will their expectations of the Christian life be when they're raised in a community in which adults and youth take long stretches of time to share their lives, pray, and meditate on Scripture? What understandings of God will youth develop when church feels like a siesta from the stress of daily life? ☞

### **Mark Yaconelli**

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