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Sabbath-keeping is a costly practice. Those who keep a 24-hour Sabbath refuse to take part in economic gain during that time period and are unable to work certain kinds of jobs. Beyond the economic costs, there are the psychological costs of inhibiting thoughts about the stress of the week or other secular activities. However, psychologists have demonstrated that when people have to exert more effort for their religion, the benefits they experience are higher than otherwise. Karl Bailey, professor of psychology, has found this to be true of Sabbath-keeping.

Trained as a cognitive psychologist, Karl Bailey began studying motivation and religiosity, and Sabbath-keeping specifically, shortly after he came to teach at Andrews. The topic was “something that a lot of students were interested in,” he explains. He began working on a research project with an undergraduate honors student, Chinyere Sampson, who wanted to understand why people didn’t go to Sabbath School. As they began looking for literature related to Sabbath observance, they noticed a shocking dearth of research.

The one exception was a 2004 paper they found in the Journal of Psychology and Theology by Margaret Diddams, Lisa Klein Surdyk and Denise Daniels of Seattle Pacific University (“Rediscovering models of Sabbath keeping: Implications for psychological wellbeing.” Journal of Psychology and Theology, 32, 3–11). The paper posited a theory of Sabbath-keeping, using a theory of motivation called Self-Determination Theory, that intrigued Bailey and Sampson.

“Self-Determination Theory says that there are three basic psychological needs that people have in order to thrive,” says Bailey. “First, people need to feel like they can act in accordance with themselves without being coerced into doing things. We call that autonomy. Second, people need to receive feedback that what they are doing is effective and makes a difference. We call that competence. And third, people need to be in a community. We call that relatedness. If you have those three things, people thrive.” Self-Determination Theory also predicts that people will be more motivated to act if they have internalized whatever behaviors they are supposed to perform.

Diddams, Surdyk and Daniels believed that this theory could be applied to how people keep the Sabbath. They hypothesized that there would be three different groups of Sabbath-keepers: those who divide their life into Sabbath and non-Sabbath time (life segmentation); those who keep Sabbath because they think it makes them a healthier person or because it provides an excuse for hanging out with family and friends (prescribed meaning); and those who, as Bailey states, “live their lives as Sabbath-keepers” and derive their understanding of reality from the Sabbath (integrated Sabbath).

“The problem was that all the models presumed the existence of a community of Sabbath keepers and these researchers [Diddams, Surdyk and Daniels] didn’t have one,” Bailey explains. But Bailey did. He worked with Sampson, and later graduate student (and now adjunct instructor) Arian Timoti, to design a questionnaire that would measure the “internalization of Sabbath-keeping among Seventh-day Adventists” and, specifically, the three models of Sabbath-keeping that Diddams, Surdyk and Daniels proposed (Bailey and Timoti, Journal of Psychology and Theology, in press).
The questionnaire was comprised of 21 questions on a scale that they developed, which broke up into three subscales. “The first subscale measures the degree to which the cares of this world intrude on your Sabbath. The second subscale measures the degree to which the Sabbath is useful for you—that is, prescribed meaning, which is essentially the degree to which you can protect yourself against stressors or hang out with friends or family. The third subscale measures the degree to which you take the principles of the Sabbath and apply them throughout your life instead of on just one day of the week,” says Bailey.

Bailey and his students anonymously surveyed 362 subjects (all college students), keeping the responses of 325 who were between the ages of 18-25. They then used the data they collected to see if they could find correlations with wellbeing that were different than simply the internalization of Christianity in general. They found that “Internalization of Christianity for Adventists correlates with wellbeing,” but they also found that “Sabbath-keeping predicts wellbeing above and beyond that.”

By using factor analysis, and then clustering the subjects based on the responses, they were able to identify three distinct groups of Sabbath-keepers, just as Diddams, Surdyk and Daniels predicted. Those who have internalized Sabbath-keeping to the greatest degree were at the top of the cluster and those who have internalized it the least were at the bottom.

While all three groups may identify as Sabbath-keepers in name, Bailey says, some individuals reported feeling that the Sabbath is imposed on them, thus limiting their autonomy. These individuals do not internalize Sabbath-keeping.

Another finding was that the degree to which individuals have internalized Sabbath-keeping predicts when people will wake up on Saturday. Those in the most internalized cluster wake up a full hour before those in the least internalized cluster. The data predicts nothing for the rest of the week, only Saturday, which means people “are driven by different schedules on Sabbath.”

The data implies that there are reasons why people wake up at different times. Those who wake up earlier have Sabbath School and church to get to, while those who wake up later noted that they occasionally do chores on Sabbath (certainly not a good reason to wake up early!).

Bailey continued working on the project with then-undergraduate Cheryl Simpson (now Collatz) and replicated the study in a church setting. The surveys were conducted in a Spanish-speaking church and a multicultural church, which offered a wide range of adults thus reducing the “college-student effect.” The surveys showed a smaller effect on wellbeing and less variability than in the college-student surveys. However, the effect was still there: Sabbath-keeping predicts wellbeing.

Bailey, with Simpson and later undergraduate Paola Caceres, began looking at some of the mediators, or variables, that “explain why we get the relationship between Sabbath-keeping internalization and wellbeing.” Using a pool of college students, they looked “at people’s parental environment and memories for Sabbath-keeping, their general internalization of religion, and how people were treated on a daily basis.”

According to their study, “It turns out that there is a moderate to large mediation effect for the way people are being treated every day.” In other words, people’s experiences throughout the week inform how much or how little Sabbath-keeping impacts their wellbeing. If people experience a lack of community, or relatedness, during the week they are less likely to benefit from Sabbath-keeping.

Bailey is interested in seeing if this mediation effect would show up in community members, not just individuals on an Adventist campus—where the people students interact with during the week are the same they attend church with—and, more specifically, what can be done to improve people’s Sabbath-keeping experience. He is also working with undergraduate Cooper Hodges on designing a project that will look at the kinds of religious programs that are already taking place on campus to see what is successfully meeting people’s needs both for wellbeing and for the internalization of religion.

For Bailey, the overall study is an important contribution to the church because it puts a theoretical background to what people know experientially as being true: keeping the Sabbath is good for you. Bailey was careful with the theory he chose to work with in this study. “I was trying to choose a theory that would enhance my understanding not only of the religious context, but also my faith,” he says. “To the degree that we do this, as social science researchers, we can provide lenses for helping us look at our church better and see how theology turns into praxis.”