

SABBATH OBSERVANCE AND THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

A Statement by the British Union Conference Executive Committee
based on guidelines issued by the General Conference
and prepared in response to an action
at the 1986 BUC Session

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1. PURPOSE AND PERSPECTIVE

The main objective of this document of Sabbath Observance is to provide counsel or guidelines to church members desiring a richer, more meaningful experience in Sabbath-keeping. It is the hope that the work done at this time will provide an impetus towards a real reform in Sabbath-keeping.

Conscious of the fact that the world-wide worshipping community encounters numerous problems in Sabbath observance arising from within a given cultural and ideological context, attempts have been made to take these difficulties into consideration in drafting its statement.

It should be pointed out that the basic principles stated in this document are those of Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy.

It is hoped that the counsel given will be helpful. Ultimately, however, decisions made under critical circumstances must be motivated by one's personal faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. PRINCIPLES AND THEOLOGY OF SABBATH OBSERVANCE

(a) Nature and Purpose of the Sabbath

The origin of the Sabbath lies in Creation when God rested from His work on the seventh day (Gen. 1-3). The Sabbath has significance as a perpetual sign of the everlasting covenant between God and His people in order that they might know who it is that created them (Ex. 31:17) and sanctifies them (Ex. 31:13, Ezek. 2:12), and that they might recognise Him as the Lord their God (Ezek. 20:20).

(b) Uniqueness of the Sabbath

The Sabbath is a special occasion for worshipping God as Creator and Redeemer, and as the Lord of life with whom the human family will be reunited at the second advent. The Sabbath commandment forms the centre of the moral law as the seal of God's authority. Since it is a symbol of God's love relationship with His earthly children, human beings are obliged to respect this gift in the sense that they will do everything in their power to promote and engage in activities that will help establish and enhance a lasting relationship with God. Thus His people will engage only in those activities that are directed toward God and their fellowmen, and not in those that lean toward self-gratification or self-interest.

(c) Universality of the Sabbath

The Universality of the Sabbath is rooted in creation. Thus its privileges and obligations are binding in all nations, sectors or classes. (See Ex. 20:11; 23:12; Deut. 5:13; Isa. 56:1-8). Sabbath observance pertains to all members of the household including children and extends even to "the stranger that is within thy gates" (Ex. 20:10).

(d) Time Frame of the Sabbath

Biblical Data: The Sabbath starts at the end of the sixth day of the week and lasts one day, from evening to evening (Gen.1; Mark 1:32). This time coincides with the time of sunset. Wherever a clear delineation of the time of sunset is difficult to ascertain, the Sabbath-keeper will begin the Sabbath at the end of the day as marked by the diminishing light.

(e) Purpose of Sabbath Observance

Although the Bible does not deal directly with many of the specific questions we may have regarding Sabbath observance in our time, it does provide us general principles that are applicable today. For example, on the Sabbath "the toil that gains a livelihood must cease" (DA 207; see also Ex. 16:29; 20:8-11; 34:21; Isa. 58:13; Neh. 13:15-22). This concept, however, is not supportive of total inactivity. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament invite us to care for the needs and alleviate the suffering of others, for the Sabbath is a good day for all, particularly the lowly and the oppressed (Ex. 23:12; Matt. 12:10-13; Mark 2:27; Luke 13:11-17; John 9:2-21).

Yet even good works on the Sabbath must not obscure the chief biblical characteristics of Sabbath observance, namely, rest (Gen. 2:1-3). This includes both physical (Ex. 23:12) and spiritual rest in God (Matt. 11:28). The latter leads the Sabbath observer to seek the presence of, and communion with God in worship (Isa. 48:13), both in quiet meditation (Matt. 12:1-8) and in public worship (Jer. 23:32; 2 Kings 4:23; 11:4-12; 1 Chron. 23:30; Isa. 56:1-8). Its object is to recognise God as Creator and Redeemer (Gen. 2:1-3; Deut. 5:12-15), and it is to be shared by the individual family and the larger community (Isa. 56:1-8).

(f) Sabbath and the Authority of God's Word

Ellen White points out that the Sabbath commandment is unique, for it contains the seal of God's law. It alone "brings to view both the name and title of the Lawgiver. It declares Him to be the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and thus shows His claim to reverence and worship above all others. Aside from this precept, there is nothing in the Decalogue to show by whose authority the law is given." *GC 452*.

The Sabbath as a sign of the Creator points to His ownership and authority. Meaningful Sabbath observance, therefore, indicates the acceptance of God as Creator and owner and acknowledges His authority over all creation, including oneself. Sabbath observance is based on the authority of God's Word. There is no other logical reason for it.

Human beings have the freedom to enter into a relationship with the Creator of the universe as with a personal friend.

Sabbath-keepers may have to face resistance at times because of their commitment to God to keep the Sabbath holy. To those who do not recognise God as their Creator, it remains arbitrary or inexplicable why someone should cease from all work on the Sabbath day for merely religious reasons. Meaningful Sabbath observance testifies to the fact that we have chosen to obey God's commandment. We thus recognise that our life is now lived in obedience to God's Word. The Sabbath will be a special test in the end time. The believer will have to make a choice either to give allegiance to God's Word or to human authority (Rev. 14:7, 12).

(g) Sabbath – A Safeguard of our Relationship with God

The Sabbath encompasses our entire relation with God. It is an indication of God's action on our behalf in the past, present, and future. The Sabbath protects man's friendship with God and provides the time essential for the development of that relationship. The Sabbath clarifies the relationship between God and the human family, for it points to God as Creator at a time when human beings would like to usurp that position in the universe.

In this age of materialism, the Sabbath points men and women to the spiritual and to the personal. The consequences for forgetting the Sabbath day to keep it holy are serious. It will lead to the distortion and eventual destruction of a person's relationship with God.

When the Sabbath is kept it is a witness to the rest that comes from trusting God alone as our sustainer, as the basis of our salvation, and as the ground of our hope in the future. As such, the Sabbath is a delight because we have entered God's rest and have accepted the invitation to fellowship with Him.

When God asks us to remember the Sabbath day, even in the twentieth century, He does so because He wants us to remember Him.

3. SABBATH OBSERVANCE IN DENOMINATIONAL HEALTH-CARE INSTITUTIONS

Adventist health-care institutions provide the only contact many people have with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The General Conference has declared these institutions to be the Church, in the following words: "In summary, the Adventist health-care institution is a corporate extension of Christ's life and mission and is the Seventh-day Adventist Church fulfilling its health and healing ministry. It is, therefore, indivisible from the Church's total ministry in carrying the gospel to all the world." – *GC Autumn Council, October 13-21, 1976 p. 87.*

Adventist hospitals are more than merely health-care delivery systems. They have a unique opportunity to bear a Christian witness twenty-four hours a day to the communities they serve. In addition, they have the privilege of presenting the Sabbath message by example every week.

In healing the sick and loosing the bonds of the physically infirm, even on the Sabbath, Christ set an example that we look to as the basis for establishing and operating Adventist health-care institutions. Therefore, an institution offering medical care to the public must be prepared to minister to the needs of the sick and suffering without regard to hours or days.

This places a great responsibility on each institution to develop and implement policies that reflect the example of Christ and apply the principles of Sabbath observance as found in the Scriptures and taught by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Administrators have a special responsibility to see that all departments maintain the true spirit of Sabbath-keeping by instituting appropriate Sabbath procedures and by guarding against laxity in its observance.

The following applications of Sabbath observance principles are recommended:

(a) Emergency Medical Care

Provide emergency care willingly and cheerfully whenever needed with high levels of excellence. However, Adventist institutions, physicians, dentists and other caring-personnel should refrain from carrying out work on the Sabbath which can safely be left until another day.

(b) Discontinuation of routine activities

Discontinue all routine activities that could be postponed. Usually this means a complete closing of those facilities and departments not immediately related to patient care, and the maintenance of a minimum number of qualified people in other departments to handle emergencies.

(c) Postponement of non-essential services

Postpone non-urgent diagnostic and therapeutic services. Decisions as to what is necessary or of an emergency nature should be made by the attending physician. If this privilege is abused, it should be dealt with by the hospital administration. Non-administrative institutional employees should not become involved in making these decisions nor should they be obliged to confront the attending physician(s). Misunderstandings may be avoided by making it clear in medical staff bylaws that only surgical, diagnostic, or therapeutic procedures which are not postponable because of the condition of the patient, will be done. A clear understanding with all who are appointed to staff membership, at the time of appointment, will do much to avoid misunderstanding and abuses.

(d) Closure of offices for routine business

Close administrative and business offices to routine business. Although it may be necessary to admit or discharge patients on the Sabbath, it is recommended that the rendering of bills and the collection of money be avoided. Never should the keeping of the Sabbath be a source of irritation to those we seek to serve and to save but rather a hallmark of "the children of light." (Eph. 5:8, AA 260).

(e) A Day of Joy

Make the Sabbath a delightful day for patients, a day when the hustle and bustle of routine work is laid aside and the staff are free to spend more time with the patients, to instruct them, to counsel with them, and to acquaint them with the wonderful love of God. Such missionary activity will provide a memory of Christian witnessing never to be forgotten. Meaningful Sabbath-keeping is much easier to achieve in an institution that employs a predominantly Adventist staff. Presenting the Sabbath in a proper light can be accomplished by the believing workers employed in patient care, and may well be a convicting influence in the lives of those not of our faith.

(f) Scheduling of Duties

Exercise care in the scheduling of all personnel, making reasonable accommodation for employees' religious observance and practices. Adventist workers should not be scheduled routinely to work on the Sabbath so as to provide freedom on weekdays for secular activities. Neither should they expect to be off duty always on that day and thus work a hardship on others. However, special consideration should be given to those with young families needing parental guidance on the Sabbath. Supervisors should attempt, whenever possible, to allow those on duty to attend Sabbath services if their absence does not work undue hardship on those remaining or limit necessary patient care. Sabbath scheduling should never be arbitrary. Human needs should always be considered.

(g) Endeavour to uphold the Church's standards

Resist pressures for relaxing Seventh-day Adventist standards. Some institutions have been pressured by the communities, the medical staffs, and/or employees (where a majority is comprised of non-Adventists), to abandon or weaken Sabbath-keeping principles and practices so that the Sabbath should be treated as any other day. In some cases, pressure has been applied to maintain full services on the Sabbath and reduce them on Sunday instead. Such action should be vigorously resisted. Compliance would cause serious re-examination of the relationship of such an institution of the Church.

(h) Instruction to Non-SDA Staff

Educate employees who are not Seventh-day Adventist concerning Sabbath-keeping principles practised by the institution. Every non-Adventist, at the time of employment at an Adventist health-care institution, should be made aware of Seventh-day Adventist principles, especially institutional policies regarding the observance of the Sabbath. Though non-Adventists may not believe as we do, they should know from the very beginning how they are expected to fit into the institutional programme to help it reach its objectives.

(i) Christian Witness

Foster an attitude for continuing Christian witnessing by Adventist employees. The only contact that many non-Adventist workers ever may have with Seventh-day Adventists may be in the institution employing them. Every relationship should be friendly, kind, and expressive of the love that exemplified the life and work of the Great Physician. Compassion for the sick, unselfish regard for our fellowmen, an eagerness to serve, and unstinted loyalty to God and the church may well prove to be a savour of life unto life. The keeping of the Sabbath is a privilege and an honour as well as a duty. It should never become burdensome or obnoxious to those who keep it or to those about us.

4. SABBATH WORK IN NON-SDA HOSPITALS AND OTHER HEALTH-CARE FACILITIES

The Church has received counsel of special significance to the believer who is considering employment in, or is currently employed by, a non-Adventist health-care institution.

"The law forbids secular labour on the rest day of the Lord; the toil that gains a livelihood must cease; no labour for worldly pleasure or profit is lawful upon that day; but as God ceased His labour of creating, and rested upon the Sabbath and blessed it, so man is to leave the occupations of his daily life, and devote those sacred hours to healthful rest, to worship, and to holy deeds." *The Desire of Ages*, p. 207.

While it is essential in medical institutions that some labour be performed at all times in order to maintain the welfare and comfort of the patients, Seventh-day Adventists should remember the principles that regulate all Sabbath activities. In order to avoid situations where our church member may be faced with problems of Sabbath keeping in non-Adventist institutions, it is recommended that:

(a) Sabbath-keeping Principles

When Seventh-day Adventists seek employment in non-Seventh-day Adventist hospitals, etc., they make known their Sabbath-keeping principles and request a work schedule that will enable them to conform with their principles.

(b) Agreeable duties during Sabbath hours

Where work schedules or other factors make this impossible, they make very clear the types of duty they are willing to perform on the Sabbath in providing necessary medical and hygienic care of the patient and his environment in emergency procedures, and in similar service.

(c) Loyalty to God

Where the above conditions cannot be met, our members should make loyalty to God's requirements paramount. In these circumstances they should seek advice from their church pastor or the local conference/mission.

5. MORAL DECISIONS REGARDING SABBATH OBSERVANCE

Sabbath privileges are sometimes curtailed or denied by employing organisations. To prevent and/or alleviate these regrettable situations, the following suggestions should be considered.

A competent church official should be appointed (Religious Liberty director and/or Youth director) by the Conference or Union to keep abreast of developments that could undermine freedom of worship on the Sabbath. Our members should be advised that this person is available for consultation and advice when necessary. At appropriate times, this individual can approach responsible authorities to clarify to them the adverse impact upon Seventh-day Adventists of any contemplated measure or legislation. This course of action may prevent enactment of measures that could unintentionally curtail or deny Sabbath privileges.

A church official should make efforts to contact the organisation in which an Adventist member is experiencing Sabbath problems, to clarify the reasons why such a member is refusing to carry out certain duties on their Sabbath day. Great willingness, however, should be shown to sacrifice privileges such as vacation time in exchange for Sabbath privileges.

Adventist members should be encouraged to stand by faith for the principle of Sabbath-keeping regardless of circumstances, resting in the assurance that God will honour their commitment to Him.

The local church should offer spiritual, moral, and if needed, temporal help to members experiencing Sabbath problems. Such a support will serve to strengthen the commitment of the Lord not only to the individual member facing Sabbath problems but of the church as a whole.

6. CONCLUSION

The above statement is not meant to be a comprehensive coverage of the rationale for Sabbath observance: it merely provides some guidelines for Seventh-day Adventists in the medical profession.