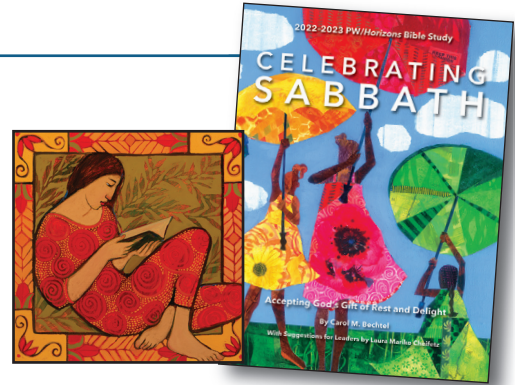


Powerful Testimonies

BY DANELLE CRAWFORD MCKINNEY

For use with Lesson Five of the 2022–2023 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight*, by Carol M. Bechtel



Scripture: Genesis 2:15 and 3:17–19; Exodus 31:12–18, 35:1–29 and 36:1–7

Since 2016, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been taking steps to raise awareness about the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and to dismantle its impact. Written in the late 1400s by Popes Nicholas V and Alexander VI, the Doctrine of Discovery authorized Christian explorers to stake claim on lands throughout the world in the name of Christianity. The document labeled any non-Christian people or communities “heathens” in need of conversion to Christianity, but also proclaimed that non-Christian people could not stake claim to land.

In those times, Indigenous peoples in what is now known as the United States had no understanding of land ownership. The people belonged to the land, not the other way around. But because of that papal decree, many Indigenous peoples were killed for or forcibly moved off the lands they inhabited. This was genocide—all based on a paper that authorized Christians to take action against anyone who was not labeled a Christian.

The connection between Sabbath and the experience of generations of Indigenous people who encountered colonial Christianity will become clearer in this resource. But for now, let’s start with Carol Bechtel’s statement that “. . . all forms of slavery/servitude are serious and real. They violate the beautiful freedom for which we were all created” (p. 48). Reading the words “beautiful freedom,” I cannot help but think of the Indigenous people who were killed or forced from their traditional homes, forced to convert to Christianity and generally dehumanized—all in the name of Christianity.

Nearly all tribal people had an organized religion, deeply embedded into their everyday life. These communities had a belief system with similarities to Christianity—care for the community, gratitude and love for Creator and creation—without claiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Some tribes sent out members of their communities to look for a deeper connection with the Creator. Similarities to Christianity aside, the

Church’s policies denied Indigenous people the freedom to live and worship in traditional ways.

In the United States, the Presbyterian Mission Board was one of the first denominations to send missionaries to Indigenous people. Many of the congregations established by missionaries continue to worship God today. Sometimes the Presbyterian presence was brutal, but other times Presbyterians supported Indigenous people in their efforts for sovereignty and recognition of their basic human rights.¹ Christianity has functioned both as a “sore spot” and a “saving grace” for Indigenous people. While varying viewpoints describe this relationship today, many Indigenous people still cling to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The largest mass execution in United States history targeted Dakota men. More than 300 Dakota men were declared guilty and were set to be sentenced for participating the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862—fighting that erupted after the U.S. government changed terms of land treaties and would not send payments to starving tribes. Missionaries appealed to President Lincoln to pardon most of the Dakota men, but President Lincoln still ordered 38 Dakota men to be hanged.

Oral history tells us that the 38 men were walked to a large platform in Mankato, Minnesota, on December 26, 1862, (the day after Christmas was celebrated by the Christians of that town). As the Dakota men made their way, there was great wailing from the women. The men stopped them, saying, “Today is not a day of defeat. It is a day of victory, for we have made our peace with Creator, and we will now go to be with Him forever.”²

Even in that terrifying moment, the men thought of the Creator. As they were executed, the Dakota sang a song known today as “Many and Great, O God are Thy Things.” This song is an original Dakota Air that we still sing at our Dakota Presbytery meetings. It is a sacred song, and when we sing it, we remember those who made sacrifices for us.

This information shared is not a story to make people feel bad about the plight of our people. It is a testimony. It is a statement that tells the world that there is Sabbath

in hard work, and there is Sabbath in death. While we can celebrate that we are still here, we remember those who made sacrifices on our behalf. We ourselves make sacrifices too. These sacrifices are meant for us to clearly understand the important relationship we have with God.

What is a testimony that you have heard from someone who has a story to share about their relationship with God?

How were you most affected by the testimony?

Have you ever had an experience with God that transformed your life?

What is something you would share that could help someone else going through difficulty?

Some people find it hard to believe stories that involve invisible forces, like angels, deceased ancestors or even the Holy Spirit. For Indigenous people, things that are unseen are not unbelievable or unusual to us. We know that other realms of spirituality are all around us. When we have experiences that cannot be explained by modern day science or factual evidence, we open our senses. Even dreams hold messages for us to pay close attention to, as they may be signaling something that we need to know. Having the discipline to listen to the clues that God sends us is a way of strengthening our relationship with Creator.

Have you had an experience that people find hard to believe?

In light of that experience, did you change course or do something different than you normally would?

What did you draw from that experience?

Prayer: Master of all things visible and invisible, we thank you for giving us sacred times in which we can converse with you. We thank you for the testimonies of those who have gone before us. We thank you for sharing your love and guidance in so many places, in so many ways. It is your gentle spirit that moves us and transforms us in ways we never thought possible. Help us to recognize you in the chaos of the world.

When the busy-ness of our lives overwhelms us, thank you for giving us rest and wholeness. Help us celebrate that rest. Help us then respond to your calls for justice, learning difficult histories and moving toward healing. Help us when our spirits are troubled by injustices. Give us the ears of compassion, not guilt or defensiveness.

Help us when we struggle to sing your praises, when we are overwhelmed by those things that consume us, that hold us captive. Help us to remember that you are with us in everything we say and do. In the harmony of your world we pray. AMEN.

Danelle Crawford McKinney is the first Dakota woman (Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota Oyate) ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a teaching elder from Dakota Presbytery. She also works with Indigenous young adults at Haskell Indian Nations University.

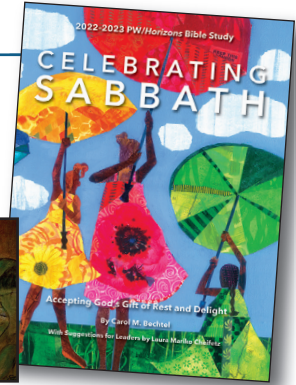
Notes

1. "Doctrine of Discovery: A Review of Its Origins and Implications for Congregations in the PC(USA) and Support for Native American Sovereignty." Report to the 223rd General Assembly (2018). [presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Doctrine-of-Discovery-Report-to-the-223rd-GA-2018-FINALIZED-COPY_As-Approved.pdf](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Doctrine-of-Discovery-Report-to-the-223rd-GA-2018-FINALIZED-COPY_As-Approved.pdf). The report speaks to PC(USA) relationships with Indigenous people and the impact and legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery.
2. *Dakota 38+2*, Smooth Feather Productions (2012); [youtube.com/watch?v=ZLjzUNXMBhM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLjzUNXMBhM).

Cared for and Caring for Our Community

BY DANELLE CRAWFORD MCKINNEY

For use with Lesson Six of the 2022–2023 PW/Horizons Bible study, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight*, by Carol M. Bechtel



Scripture: Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15

In attending many meetings in various presbyteries over the years, I've noticed one major difference between a meeting in Dakota Presbytery and other presbyteries. In Dakota Presbytery, a family who lives close to the meeting site prepares and serves all of the meals offered to the attendees. Many families prepare these meals either in memory of someone who has passed or to honor someone who has completed an accomplishment.

When a family member prepares a meal in memory of a loved one it feels sacred, both to the preparer(s) and to those who partake in the meal. Preparing a particular dish or tending to details reminds family members of teachings from or connections with their deceased loved one. Sometimes a new revelation will come while conducting this important task.

In many ways, this does not feel like work. It feels a lot like taking care of ourselves by being mindfully in a space where pain, sorrow and grief, but equally love and care, can heal our aching souls. This kind of balance—creating from a sense of loss—can help in times of difficulty. Sharing stories of loved ones and having a pastor pray for the family and the meal can bring healing to the community.

Feeding extended family creates an energy that not only heals our souls, but inspires us to be better in all of the things we do, to be in community, growing with those around us. This inspiration may find some of us becoming Commissioned Ruling Elders or Teaching Elders. Sometimes inspiration nudges us toward serving on a committee. Regardless of the particulars, this energy brings us closer to God in ways we never imagined.

In traditional culture, when a person passes away, the family will mourn for a year or a designated time. During this time the family focuses on providing a *wopida/wopila*, or what is known as a giveaway to thank the community for helping during the difficult time of grief. After that time is over, the family provides a meal to the community and gives away items that they spent making over the year. They may give away items the individual enjoyed, such as favorite kitchen towels. Community members might receive beautifully sewn star quilts, pillow sets or even beaded items that the family created in remembrance of their loved one. No money is expected to be paid by those who attend the *wopida/wopila*. It is only love shown by the family.

All of this cooking, baking, creating and gift giving may seem like work. But the *wopida/wopila* isn't about toiling or reaching a quantifiable number or value or gifts. It's not payment. It is an act of love and care, originating from the same impulse to care for our bodies by eating and addressing our needs. Taking care of each other is an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and how we can become better stewards of our love for others and for God.

Who is someone you would honor or remember during a *wopida/wopila*?

What kind of activity would you do and why?

What sort of events or activities have brought you healing?

How might you incorporate these insights to times of loss or grief?

This lesson emphasizes finding a balance between honoring yourself and God without doing too much to take away from your own energy levels. In discerning this balance, some people question whether they've done enough. Others might feel too exhausted or might be so used to running on fumes that they don't wonder if they've made the right decision! On whichever side we might find ourselves, it is important to listen to our body, mind and spirit. While this is something we certainly are not always used to doing, it is very good advice.

Reflect on an experience that taught you a lesson in discernment.

What sort of lesson did you learn?

In your struggle to find balance, what has been a help to you in that time, and what has not been helpful?

Prayer: Almighty God, you are our ultimate relative. We love learning about your word and your will for us. Every day, you provide us with the most amazing *wopida/wopila* of your gifts of sustenance, shelter, acceptance and love. We especially thank you for your relationship with us, for showing us your creation every day so that we can see your hands at work. Thank you for providing us with those sacred moments to pause our ministries, our work, our busy-ness. Thank you for the invitation to recognize and appreciate the wonder of those you have created, and for showing us their talents, teachings and love. Help us to honor those we remember in all that we say and do.

We pray that you will ease our hearts when guilt and distractions try to tempt us away from building relationships with those we encounter and with you. Help us to learn from each other and to share with one another what you have done and what you continually do for us—even at times when we are too busy to notice. We adore you that you are the one who teaches us and heals us. In your holy name we pray, AMEN.

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