

# A "Work Sabbath"

BY NANCY MULVIHILL

**G**od is at work—at work. That's the idea behind the innovative "Work Sabbath" program initiated and led by Marguerite Stapleton, vice president, mission effectiveness, Sisters of Charity Health System, Lewiston, ME. The system, which is part of Covenant Health Systems, Lexington, MA, comprises St. Mary's Regional Medical Center, the St. Marguerite D'Youville Pavillion, the Maison Marcotte Independent Living Center, Community Clinical Services, and WorkMed, all in Lewiston.

The one-day, off-site program is intended to enable staff members to explore the spirituality and meaning of work. For virtually all participants, the outcome is affirmation of their role in furthering the organization's mission and a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to their jobs.

"It started as a way to celebrate the Jubilee in the year 2000," says Stapleton in explaining the genesis of the Work Sabbath program. But Work Sabbath did not end with the Jubilee. "It's become so popular that we have initiated a Work Sabbath II for those who have already attended the original workshop," Stapleton says. To date, more than 470 system employees have attended a Work Sabbath session, finding the experience to be relaxing and revitalizing at the same time.

## THE DAY BEGINS

The Work Sabbath program is held each month on a Friday (except for July, the height of vacation season), at a lakeside retreat center some 13 miles from the system campus. Employees receive their regular day's pay to attend the program, which runs from 8 am to 3 pm. Attendance averages about 20 employees per program. "Holding it off-site is essential to foster a sense of just 'hanging out' together," Stapleton notes.

After the participants arrive, have a quick look around the property, and drink a cup of coffee, the day begins with a simple "icebreaker exer-



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cise," Stapleton explains. "Participants break into groups of three, with people they don't know, and make a list of all the things they have in common," she says. "We have a real cross-section of the organization at these workshops. Participants represent different lengths of service, entities, or levels of management. The diversity is part of what they love—that, and discovering that they have so much in common."

After the icebreaker exercise, participants are given "Keeper Cards" on which they are encouraged to record any insight, idea, or commitment they want to keep with them once this day is over. Stapleton offers the participants a selection of cards bearing various adages and slogans, such as Wayne Gretzky's remark: "You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take." Each person chooses a card, agreeing to share its message whenever it seems appropriate—even if doing so interrupts whatever else is happening.

## THE SABBATH WALK

Stapleton then tells a story about a South American tribe that goes on a long march. Day after day they walk, very quickly, until, all of a sudden, they come to a halt and camp for a couple of days before going further. A stranger, watching this, asks a tribesman why his people have stopped walking. "We need the time of rest so that our souls can catch up with us," the latter replies.

Pondering this story, participants gather formally to talk about the Sabbath as it is observed in various faiths, focusing on the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular. "We light a Sabbath candle to honor the fact that we're moving into a new time," Stapleton says. "I distribute reading material from *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, by Wayne Muller (Bantam, New York City, 2000), and invite participants to find a comfortable reading spot, indoors or out.

"Chimes signal when it's time to return to the meeting room," Stapleton continues. "Before the participants disperse, I explain the difference

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between *chronos*—time measured by clocks: hours, minutes, and seconds—and *kairos*, which is time in which one is wholly absorbed in the moment, unhurried and unaware of the hour's passing. And, since this is meant to be a *kairos* time, I suggest that they remove their watches and beepers and leave them on the table for the remainder of the day."

When participants reconvene, they first form small groups to discuss what they took from the reading and then share their insights with the group as a whole. Stapleton notes that when the group is made up of women only, the discussion often turns to the cultural barriers they face in taking care of themselves and finding time just to "be."

Next, participants are sent on a "Sabbath walk"; each is encouraged, while on it, to find a "gift from the earth" (the inspiration for which comes from Anne Morrow Lindbergh's book, *Gift from the Sea* [Pantheon, New York City, 1991]). The walkers are urged to do this in silence. Then, when they return to the meeting room, they place their "gift" on the Sabbath table and explain to each other why they happened to choose it and what it means to them. (A stone, for example, might symbolize the foundation of mission.)

#### EIGHT SIMPLE "RULES"

The morning session wraps up with a discussion of silence. Participants talk about the absence of silence from most people's lives, and about how it might be reclaimed and incorporated in the work day.

After lunch, Stapleton poses this question: "Why do you keep coming back to work here at Sisters of Charity Health System day after day, week after week, year after year?"

("Their reasons for staying here are very poignant and never about money," she remarks later. "They talk about the organization's values, how working for a Catholic organization makes a difference, how they're able to deal with death in a caring and responsible way, how their co-workers provide a sense of family, how they feel as if they're making a difference in someone's life.")

After reading aloud to the group a story about a health care worker who learned how to perform

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her role with great effectiveness, Stapleton invites participants to think of a time when *they* functioned at their best on the job. Then she introduces the idea of being "called" to work at Sisters of Charity Health System, connecting to the phrase in the organization's mission statement in which the system promises "to continue the healing ministry of the Catholic Church."

Next, Stapleton leads a discussion on the topic of "Restoring Balance to Our Work Lives," in the process listing eight "rules" for doing so. The "rules," which come from Jeffrey K. Sallin's *Being God's Partner: How to Find the Hidden Link between Spirituality and Your Work* (Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 1997), are:

- Get a life.
- Discover (or rediscover) Sabbath.
- Pray daily.
- Don't define yourself by your job or career.
- Accept failures on the path to success.
- Stop trying to be perfect.
- Accept limitations and boundaries.
- Let God be your partner.

After a free period, during which participants are encouraged to make notes about and identify their "keepers," Stapleton reads aloud a children's book, *The Quiltmaker's Gift*, by Jeff Brumbeau and Gail deMarcken (Scholastic Books, New York City, 2001), following which she leads a discussion concerning how the story might relate to the day's workshop and to the Sisters of Charity organization. (The book celebrates the joy of giving and gently emphasizes the age-old truth that material wealth does not necessarily buy happiness.)

Then it's time for evaluation and feedback. "I feel strongly that we should hold the so-called 'meeting after the meeting' during the meeting," says Stapleton. "It gives people an opportunity to speak openly to one another, relax, refocus, and become centered. They learn that others in the organization feel the same way they do.

"The Work Sabbath—like our traditional Sabbath—is a day of rest so our souls can catch up with us," she continues. Her goal, she says, is to get a critical mass of Sisters of Charity Health



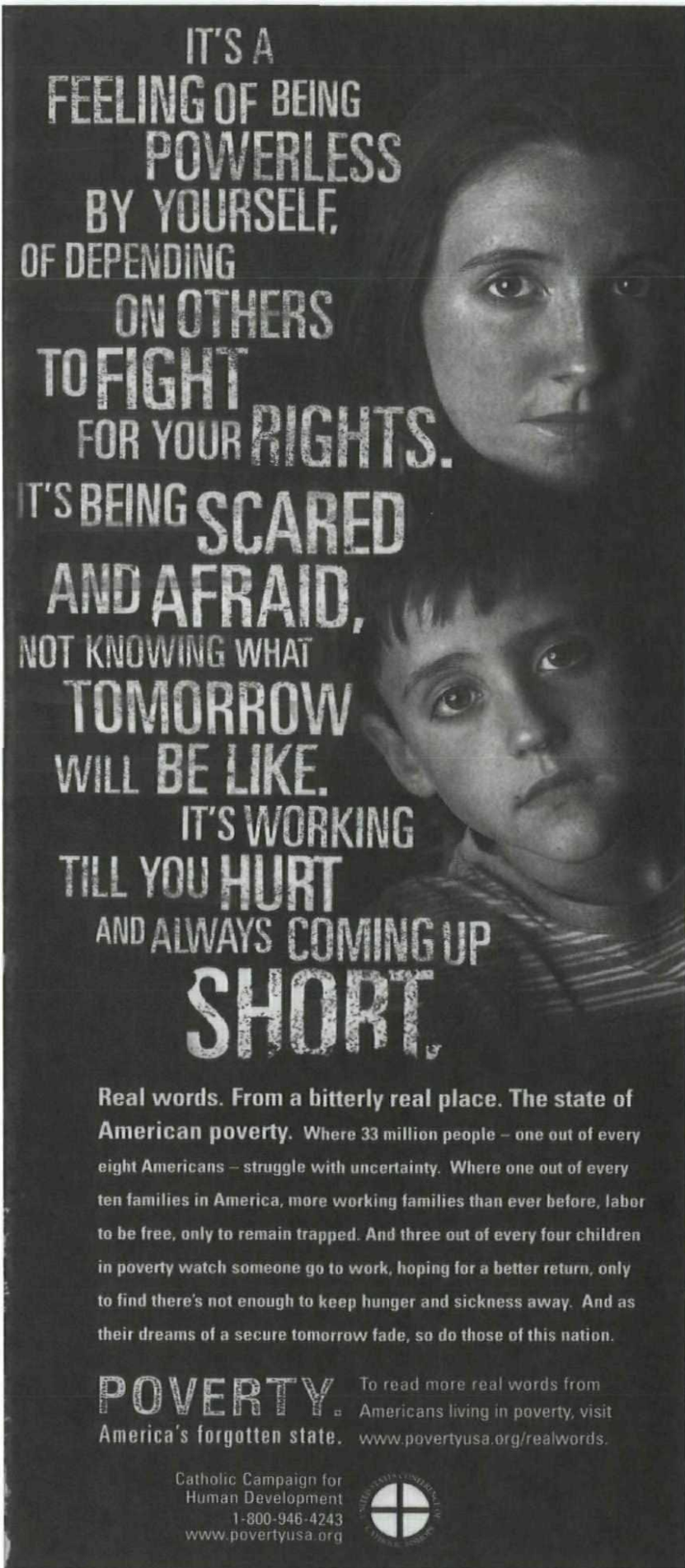
System employees to take part. "Usually one person in a department will attend and become an evangelist for the program," she notes.

What difference has the Work Sabbath made in the lives of the people who have participated? One attendee simply said that she turned off the car radio and began to enjoy the silence. Another said, "Work Sabbath really made me accept that I can't possibly do it all, that I don't have to be Superwoman, and that I can be honest with myself and others about my limits. It has freed me to think in more creative ways and to project a calmer and more centered self and, therefore, an open mind to all the possibilities that life has to offer."

Another participant wrote:

Since attending the Work Sabbath retreat, I have realized that there will *always* be tasks to be completed; however, this moment will never happen again. Now, as I walk down the hall and see a patient alone, afraid, or in distress, I stop without guilt to actually sit and hold a hand, listen, or reassure. No longer do I think about the thousand other tasks that require my attention; I am totally present in that moment with that patient. Although I always stopped before, I wasn't 100 percent 'there.' The energy and humanity in these precious moments motivates and nurtures me in ways I don't quite understand. Thank you.

*For more information about the Work Sabbath program at Sisters of Charity Health System, contact Marguerite Stapleton at mstapleton@sochs.com.*



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FEELING OF BEING  
POWERLESS  
BY YOURSELF,  
OF DEPENDING  
ON OTHERS  
TO FIGHT  
FOR YOUR RIGHTS.  
IT'S BEING SCARED  
AND AFRAID,  
NOT KNOWING WHAT  
TOMORROW  
WILL BE LIKE.  
IT'S WORKING  
TILL YOU HURT  
AND ALWAYS COMING UP  
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