CONCLUSION

After a period of adjustment, of “living into” the Sabbath, I found the Adventist observance of the seventh day to be fulfilling and rejuvenating, even though I didn’t observe it for the same reason as the Adventists (as an identification of the remnant to be resurrected at the Second Coming or Advent). The ways in which Adventists observed the Sabbath varied geographically, yet these were the common elements: setting the day aside for focusing on spiritual matters and one’s relationship to God—especially through nature, reading and studying religious materials, resting, praying and contemplating, not being employed for pay on Saturdays (in a field other than health care or the pastorate), and not asking others to work for one except in case of emergency, from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. There were things I regretted missing—attending concerts usually—but I liked not having to devote Saturday to running errands and doing chores, all of which seemed to proliferate from week to week. I rested easier during the stress of the week knowing that for one twenty-four-hour period I would not be busy, but would devote the day to being apart from the world’s business.

When I spent Saturday doing errands and recreation, it dispersed the energy from the week, and there wasn't much left over for Sunday. Sunday then felt “blah” and became a day for worrying about Monday. When I spent Saturday as Sabbath, I used the energy from the week for spiritual matters and rest, and felt renewed on Sunday to do more secular projects and move back into the workweek.

Yet I found that the SDA worship services did not meet my need for the unstructured corporate communion which Friends practice. Thus, my primary day for corporate worship has remained first day (Sunday), with the Friends; my day of study, rest, and refraining from
commerce or salaried work was seventh day (Saturday). In this way I combined practices of both churches and followed my biorhythms. It was an embodied way of living, not a theological issue—it was a relief, not an arguable discussion point. It was a kind of willingness, an assent rather than a creed or doctrine or tenet. My conscience and spirit said to set a day aside, to rest body and mind from work, to study and pray and remind myself how to live out “love your neighbor as yourself.” I didn’t condemn or judge anyone else for not doing the same, and I didn’t rely on doing that in order to be saved (i.e., following the letter instead of the spirit of the law). I saw no reason not to observe a seventh-day Sabbath—I didn’t see it as forbidden, nor as something that would redeem me in and of itself. It was something which brought me peace and helped me feel closer to God. In conjunction with first day rest and study and corporate worship, and with finding balance, prayer, and rest each and every day, this worked for me.

Also, as with early Quakers (and many other denominations), one day for corporate worship sometimes wasn’t enough and I also needed time to study with a group. There were times when I felt like I needed Sabbath School more than Friends Meeting. Friends Meeting has always been hard work because it requires a wide opening of the self to the Spirit, yet Sabbath School let me come at things in small, manageable chunks. This study with a worship group so different from my own certainly led me to a different understanding of what it means to be a Quaker, and I’m grateful I had the opportunity to do so as part of a recorded ministry. Now I feel I have been released from this particular calling and what remains is to share the results of my experience with others.

This journey was intensely personal and remaining true to my intention to learn from the Adventists but not to cause the SDA church or congregation to change was difficult as I
struggled to find where and when I could speak as a Quaker who believed passionately in the
tenets of my faith without offending the person who is truly “other.” For example, the one
d Doctrine I would want the SDA church to re-examine is the question of gays and lesbians—
homosexuality—because their stance seems so antithetical for a church which preaches and
practices love and equality, and I think they could be better than they are in this area. The essay
I wrote (Appendix II) came not only from the wish to engage the scriptures for myself, but also
to educate and persuade, yet I only shared it with a few Adventists. On a related note about
equality, the SDAs are a far more racially-integrated denomination than Friends, despite Friends’
dedication to equality, and Friends could learn much from the SDAs in this area. Meeting people
in the SDA church as a Quaker and as a recorded minister deepened the conversations we had.
Playing music resulted in recognition and conversation and opened up opportunities for further
interaction.

I was often surprised by the welcome I felt from the SDAs as a hosting faith community.
The congregations welcomed me again and again, thanking me for making the effort to
understand their beliefs and doing their best to educate me without expecting that this would
result in a new membership. It is probable that they hoped for conversion, but they never said
so overtly.

To fulfill the obligation to share my learning with the Friends Meeting which recorded
my ministry, I reported to the Ministry and Counsel regularly, and those at Meeting for Worship
heard my vocal ministry change as a result of my study with the SDAs. I also shared my new
knowledge more formally at a program following worship. I used a comparison of theology and
practice between the liberal, Hicksite Friends and the SDAs (appendix) to help Friends see
connections where they might never have considered there to be any. In two branches of
Christianity which differ significantly theologically, there are still commonalities which lead both
to want to prevent the occasion for war and to work for peace and reconciliation. Yet one
denomination is devoted to evangelizing in the belief that God will only save those who live out
the light they are given and which corresponds most closely to the light provided by God via the
Scriptures as understood by the SDAs. The other denomination is devoted to accepting people
exactly where they are, realizing that there is some light in each person and in most religious
beliefs; thus conversion is not a prerequisite to achieving union with God or to an afterlife.

Concerning ecumenism, there may be lines beyond which either party, individually or
corporately, are not willing to go. One “line in the sand” I had not been willing to cross
previously in my life was to engage with organized religion at all, especially Christianity—I
believed that the Church was mostly evil and caused harm to great numbers of peoples
throughout the world and throughout history. I crossed that line in my mid-to-late thirties when
I began to attend Friends Meeting and to interact with the Episcopal Church. This more recent
journey with the Adventists helped me to cross many other lines, in positive and healthy ways,
resulting in much personal growth. Yet, I would not be willing to be baptized with water nor to
participate in Communion, finding these antithetical to basic Quaker practice. And while Friends
are often willing to visit other churches, both Christian and other, I don’t believe that SDAs
would approve this practice for their members. It is important to discover where boundaries lie,
and to respect them.

The characteristics which outwardly define a group as different from the society in which
they live, e.g., clothing, language or vocabulary, day of worship, simplicity of lifestyle, lack of
adornment, refusal to swear oaths, all contribute to the sense of belonging to that group. Generally, the greater the differences are from the majority of society, the stronger the commitment is to the in-group. This means that we cannot minimize the variations between denominations; we must honor the practices that distinguish us from each other.

My journey, then, is one depiction of how we might meet each other within Christianity and also across religions, crossing boundaries in order to learn about the other, but not violating the integrity of either practice. Ecumenism, in my mind, involves just this type of learning within Christianity, and also includes working together on projects of concern to both (or all) groups involved. It does not mean blending of theology and/or practice. Individuals may find themselves changing throughout such a process, but the aim might be personal spiritual growth, not merging. The goal is for people to get to know each other by intermingling, and to appreciate each other’s practices, not to unify distinct and unique theologies.

I would not have missed or given up this experience for the world. It opened my heart, helped me learn to be more flexible, and brought me into community when I needed it. I learned to keep a time and space sacred. The experience also brought me a different view of marriage, and I think in general prepared me to enter into marriage (my partner Amy and I were married July 15, 2007, under the care of the Grand Rapids Friends Meeting; we married legally in California on June 30, 2008). I learned to trust more fully and to talk about difficult matters more gently.

My struggles with Seventh-day Adventism were with form: the forms of observing a day of rest, simplicity exemplified by not wearing jewelry, sacraments such as baptism and foot-washing, the hierarchy of a paid clergy who could only be male. My joys were also with some of
these: the peace which came from a day devoted to seeking God within, hymns and other beautiful music during the worship service, and studying the Bible with a small group of intellectual thinkers. Ultimately, it is the early Quaker testimonies which sustain me: the Light of Christ within, an emphasis on the equality of gender and sexual orientation in addition to race, simplicity lived out according to an individual perception of God’s truth, the radical devotion to principles of the Spirit rather than Old Testament law, and the insistence on a critical examination of the underlying causes of social problems and action to solve those at their core.

Now I wear jewelry only occasionally and choose it consciously; I do drink alcohol occasionally but never in much quantity; sometimes I will eat out or otherwise spend money on the Sabbath but mostly I try to keep it clear, though less and less so. As time passes, I feel less need for a 24-hour period of “grace” yet try to remain aware of the sacred on a daily basis. I have returned to attending professional conferences on Saturdays. With Friends, I can relax in how I dress for worship and I can express my political and social convictions without worrying about contradicting doctrine or offending fellow congregants and losing their companionship. I rejoice in being part of a community which recognizes and sanctifies loving same-sex relationships. Being able to publicly express my love for my wife brings a fierce joy into my life that wasn’t possible in the SDA community. Now I do not experience the heart-wrenching loneliness I felt when trying to live by Adventist rules that didn’t come from my experience of God and Christ.

George Lakey sums up my thoughts:
The experience of community, it turns out, is not primarily about doing, but rather about *being*. ... Quakers join other mystical traditions in knowing that spiritual union happens more through listening than talking, more through experiencing than formulating, more through surrender than control. ... That's what makes conflict such a powerful doorway to spiritual growth, a place where social science and spirituality come together. Conflict calls us to the moment and makes possible joyful membership in a powerful group that is deeply connected. For many of us it brings up our fears and desperate yearning for control, our wish for a *procedural* way around a confrontation that needs to happen. But if you want to grow, stop avoiding conflict and start embracing it.

Primarily I see my time with the Adventists as one chapter in a continuing installment of making myself available to God, committing to connection. Curiosity led me into conflict, discussions led into community, community into relationship. While trying to look for the sacred in each day of the week, sometimes I observe seventh day as “set apart from the world,” sometimes first day, sometimes part of each day. It all comes back to listening for the Spirit and following the whisperings I hear in my heart.