



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now? – Part Four *Designing a Christian Practices Learning Program*

John Roberto

(This is the fourth in a series of articles on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)

The **first** article in the “How Shall We Live Now?” series proposed a faith forming dynamic of *Behaving* (practices for Christian living) leading to *Belonging* (being part of a Christian community living those practices) and integrating *Believing* (reflecting on how the Christian tradition informs our practices). The **second** article explored what we mean by Christian practice and which practices are central to forming a Christian way of life. The **third** article focused on building a curriculum to form people of all ages in Christian practices and presented six ways to develop a plan for your church:

1. Engage in the Christian Practices of Your Community
2. Embed Christian Practices into Existing Formation Programs.
3. Develop an Annual or Seasonal Christian Practices Plan.
4. Align Christian Practices with the Lectionary.
5. Connect Christian Practices to Milestones and Life Transitions.
6. Create Christian Practice Apprenticeships.

This **fourth** article will focus on designing learning programs and the processes (methodology) of teaching and learning Christian practices. Now online in **Practices** at LifelongFaith.com are downloadable learning programs, reproducible activities, and curated resources for teaching Christian practices. Currently available are Praying, Reading the Bible, Keeping Sabbath, and Eating Well. Coming soon will be Forgiveness, Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Honoring the Body, Dying Well, Household Economics, and Caring for Creation.

The **fifth** and final article in the series will focus on the process of forming habits of faith, i.e., making practices part of one’s daily life.

A Learning Process for Christian Practices

The dynamic of forming people of all ages in a Christian practice incorporates four movements, which become the template for designing Christian practices learning programs.

Movement 1. Reflecting on Our Lives

The first movement, *Reflecting*, taps into a basic area of human need that can find meaning and purpose in a Christian practice. Reflecting gives people an opportunity to become aware of how they experience a basic human need and hunger for the Christian practice in their own life. Reflecting also provides space for people to become aware of how they already engage in this practice, and the things that distort or hinder the practice.

Oftentimes this first movement begins with real-life stories (presentations, print, audio, and/or video) of people who seek meaning and purpose for their lives through a particular practice. This helps spark people's reflection and storytelling.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

The second movement, *Exploring*, grounds the Christian practice in the Bible by describing how the biblical story deepens our understanding of the Christian practice and connects to people's human needs and hungers. We present the wisdom of the Christian tradition on a particular Christian practice, describing what people today, and throughout history, actually do when they are engaged well in a particular practice—how people or communities live the practice with exceptional grace and skill. By connecting the Christian practice to human needs and hungers, people can identify how and why a practice is important to living a meaningful life.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

The third movement, *Experiencing*, immerses people in the actual practice—opportunities to experience activities that lead them into the Christian practice. This immersion can take place in programs, within the life of the Christian community (such as worship and ministry activities), and/or out in the community (serving people, providing hospitality, etc.). The key is that people actually experience the practice.

Movement 4. Living the Practice

The fourth movement, *Living*, includes reflecting on the experience of the practice activities (Movement 3); showing people how to make the Christian practice a part of everyday life; and providing people with a variety of tools and activities to integrate the Christian practice into their daily life—at home, at work, at school, and in the world.

An Example of the Learning Process in Action: The Practice of Prayer

To illustrate how these four elements are incorporated into the learning process here is an example for the Practice of Prayer. (The Prayer Learning Program and reproducible Prayer Activities are available for free on the Lifelong Faith website: <https://www.lifelongfaith.com/practice-of-prayer.html>.)

1. Prayer in My Life Today
2. Prayer is. . . .
3. Prayer is Relationship with God.
4. Prayer is Opening Our Lives to God.
5. Prayer is Being Changed by God.
6. Prayer is Being Attentive to God and Others.
7. Prayer is Living.
8. Prayer Takes Practice
9. Preparing to Pray
10. Contemplative Prayer
11. Centering Prayer
12. Scripture Prayer #1: Reflective Reading
13. Scripture Prayer #2: Imaginative Prayer
14. Scripture Prayer #3: Lectio Divina
15. Scripture Prayer #4: Visio Divina
16. Scripture Prayer #5: The Psalms
17. Intercessory Prayer
18. Praise Prayer #1: Psalm 103
19. Praise Prayer #2: Psalm 95
20. Thanksgiving Prayer
21. Praying with Music
22. Online Resources for Daily Prayer
23. Praying in Color Experience
24. Praying through the Day
25. Closing the Day: The Prayer of Examen
26. Praying in Families with Children

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

These two activities help people to identify the role of prayer in their life and how they pray today.

Activities

- Prayer in My Life Today (#1)
- Prayer is.... (#2)

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

These activities explore six descriptions of prayer from the Bible and Christian tradition.

Activities (#3-8)

- Prayer is Relationship with God.
- Prayer is Opening Our Lives to God.
- Prayer is Being Changed by God.
- Prayer is Being Attentive to God and Others.
- Prayer is Living.
- Prayer Takes Practice.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

There are at least two ways to structure the learning design to give people direct experiences of praying through the activities: a *guided experience* and *experience centers*.

Approach 1. Guided Experience with the Whole Group. Guide all of the participants in small groups or family groupings through the selected prayer activities with a mix of presentation and direct experience.

Approach 2. Experience Centers. Offer an experience center for each activity you select. Have the participants move from station to station to experience the prayer activities, similar to attending workshops at a conference. Each learning activity should have its own room or section of a large room. If you want everyone to experience all of the learning activities, then organize the participants into the same number of groups as you have learning stations. Make the groups of equal size and have them rotate from learning station to learning station.

Activities (#10-26)

(Select activities to fit your program design. Each takes about 20 minutes to experience.)

- Contemplative Prayer
- Centering Prayer
- Scripture Prayer #1: Reflective Reading
- Scripture Prayer #2: Imaginative Prayer
- Scripture Prayer #3: Lectio Divina
- Scripture Prayer #4: Visio Divina
- Scripture Prayer #5: The Psalms
- Intercessory Prayer
- Praise Prayer #1: Psalm 103
- Praise Prayer #2: Psalm 95
- Thanksgiving Prayer
- Praying with Music
- Online Resources for Daily Prayer
- Praying in Color Experience
- Praying through the Day
- Closing the Day: The Prayer of Examen
- Praying in Families with Children

Movement 4. Living the Practice

These activities help people to reflect on their experience of the prayer activities and explore how to make prayer a part of everyday life. Provide people with a “Prayer Guide” (print and digital) with all of the activities for their personal and family use.

Application Activity

- Preparing to Pray (#9)

Reflection Activity

Reflecting on the prayer experiences. Use questions like the following to help people reflect on their experience of the prayer.

- Which prayer styles did you like best? Why?
- Which ones did you like least? Why?
- How did you feel God's presence through these prayer experiences?
- Which prayer styles do you (or your household) want to start using in your prayer life?

Integrating prayer into daily life. Use questions like the following to help people imagine how to integrate prayer in their daily lives.

- Which prayer experiences do you (or your household) want to include in your prayer plan?
- When will you (or your household) make time for prayer in your day or week (upon rising, before bedtime, meal time—breakfast or dinner, etc.)?
- Where will you (or your household) pray (at the table, in the car, outdoors, quiet room in the house, etc.)?

Program Designs

The Christian practices learning process and activities can be used in a variety of program designs:

- Intergenerational programs
- Family-centered programs
- Families at home activities (print or digital)
- Children's programming: classes, vacation Bible school, parent-child, grandparent-child
- Adolescent programming: classes, youth gatherings, and retreats
- Adult programming: independent, small groups, retreats, and large gathering settings
- Online playlists of prayer experiences for different age groups published on a website

Here are four examples of program designs for the Practice of Prayer.

One-Session Program (Guided Experience)

The four movements and activities can be used to design a one-session program of 60-90 minutes for children, youth, adults, and/or parents. Each prayer activity plan is approximately 15-20 minutes in length.

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Select experiences (based on program schedule) from Prayer Activities #10-#25.

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Conclude with Activity #9 “Preparing to Pray.”

Intergenerational or Family Learning Program (Experience Centers)

The four movements and prayer activities can be used to design an intergenerational or family program using prayer experience centers in a schedule that allows for three rounds of activities. Offer as many experience centers to accommodate the size of the group, and the physical space and leaders that you have. All of the Prayer Activities can be published on a website and designed onto a playlist for continuing learning.

Large Group Gathering and Opening Prayer Experience (10 minutes)

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience (10-15 minutes)

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice (10 minutes)

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice: Select from Prayer Activities #10-#25.

- Round 1: Prayer Centers – a mix of all ages and age-appropriate centers (20 minutes)
Break—move to next Center (5 minutes)
- Round 2: Prayer Centers – a mix of all ages and age-appropriate centers (20 minutes)
Break—move to next Center (5 minutes)
- Round 3: Prayer Centers – a mix of all ages and age-appropriate centers (20 minutes)
Break—move to next Center (5 minutes)

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Reflect on the Prayer Experiences
- Conclude with Activity #9 “Preparing to Pray.”

Closing Prayer

Small Group Program (Guided Experience)

The four movements and prayer activities can be designed into a multi-session small group program of 90 minutes per sessions. Create a Prayer Guide (print, digital) to accompany the program. All of the Prayer Activities can be published on a website and designed onto a playlist for each session. Here’s an example of a 4-week program. (See the list of prayer activities earlier for the numbering.)

Week #1. Movements 1 and 2: Fundamentals of Prayer

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Week 2. Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Scripture Prayer Experiences: Choose from Prayer Activities #11-14

Week 3. Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Contemplative Prayer (#10), Intercessory Prayer (#15), Praise Prayer (#16 or 17), Thanksgiving Prayer (#18)

Week 4.

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practice

- Praying Online (#21), Praying through the Day (#22) Or Closing the Day: The Prayer of Examen (#23)

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Preparing to Pray (#9)

Retreat or Extended Time Program (Guided and Experience Centers)

The four movements and prayer activities can be designed into a retreat experience with a blend of whole group prayer experiences and small group experience centers.

Opening Prayer

Large Group: Guided Experience – 1 hour

Movement 1. Reflecting on Life Experience

- Select Prayer Activity #1 or #2.

Movement 2. Exploring the Christian Practice

- Use content from Prayer Activities #3 through #8.

Break

Small Groups: Experience Centers – 2 hours

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practices

- Select from Prayer Activities #10-#25.
- Divide the participants into four groups and have them rotate through four, 20-minute prayer experiences in four spaces throughout the facility with 5 minute breaks to change spaces

Break

Large Group: Guided Experience – 1 hour

Movement 3. Experiencing the Christian Practices

- Select from Praying through the Day (#22) or Closing the Day (#9), followed by Prayer Takes Practice (#8)

Movement 4. Living the Practice

- Preparing to Prayer (#9)

Closing Prayer

Next in the Series

The **fifth** and final article in the series will focus on the process of forming habits of faith, i.e., making practices part of one's daily life.

Be sure to check out the downloadable learning programs, reproducible activities, and curated resources for teaching Christian practices in **Practices** at LifelongFaith.com.