

Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

Volume 2.2

www.lifelongfaith.com

Summer 2008

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LifelongFaith Associates Writing Team

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About the Artist: *Born and bred in Brooklyn, NY, Laura James is a self-taught painter of Antiguan heritage. Ms. James paints religious subjects and visual dramatizations of Bible stories using iconography found in Ethiopian Christian Art. Ms. James is also an award winning artist of secular works. In 2001, Ms. James’ was commissioned by Liturgy Training Publications to create 35 images for a new reading of the Book of the Gospels. The completed book has been praised for its multicultural approach, and for its beauty.*



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This issue of **Lifelong Faith** is part of a larger initiative of LifelongFaith Associates on “Faith Formation in Christian Practices.” The focus of the project is to develop new ways to nourish the faith of families and individuals across the whole life span through Christian practices. With development grants from the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, we have been working over the past year to develop resources for households, and training and tools to help churches integrate education in Christian practices into faith formation efforts.

We have created a new resource for households, *Living Well—Christian Practices for Everyday Life*, with sixteen Christian practices: 1) Appreciating Beauty; 2) Caring for the Body; 3) Celebrating Life; 4) Discernment; 5) Doing Justice; 6) Dying Well; 7) Eating Well; 8) Forgiving; 9) Hospitality; 10) Keeping Sabbath; 11) Listening to God’s Word; 12) Managing Household Life; 13) Participating in Community; 14) Praying; 15) Relating, and 16) Serving. We have developed a three-day seminar program to provide the knowledge, skills, tools, and resources church leaders need to make faith formation in Christian practices an essential element in faith formation. Beginning in Fall 2008, we will be consulting with parishes to assist them in implementing a Christian practices approach to faith formation. In Spring 2009 we will assess the impact of the resources through an evaluation process.

This issue of the journal includes an essay by **Dorothy C. Bass** and **Craig Dykstra** presenting the theological foundation of Christian practices. **Bradley Wigger** writes about the ways that families live the Christian practices in their home life. **Don C. Richter** presents a variety of ways to conduct faith formation in Christian practices with youth and young adults. In my article I outline a variety of practical strategies for implementing a Christian practices approach to faith formation. The last essay in the journal is the “Eating Well” chapter from our new resource —*Christian Practices for Everyday Life*. It is a good illustration of the approach and methodology we are developing.

To learn more about the *Faith Formation in Christian Practices Project* and the *Living Well* resources go to www.lifelongfaith.com.

I hope our resources and training can help you and your church make Christian practices an integral element of your faith formation curriculum for all ages.

John Roberto, Editor

Lifelong Faith

Lifelong Faith is published quarterly by LifelongFaith Associates, LLC.

ISSN #1939-5299

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Individual Subscriptions
One year (4 issues)—\$36
Two years (8 issues)—\$64
(Canadian residents please
add \$12; other countries
please add \$20.)

Group Subscriptions
2-5: \$32 per subscription
6-9: \$28 per subscription
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Teaching



A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices

Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass

Midway through *Tender Mercies*, a 1984 film featuring an Oscar-winning performance by Robert Duvall, something happens that is rarely the stuff of movies. In a modest service in an unremarkable church in a small Texas town, a boy and a man are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Entering into Christian life that Sunday morning are Mac Sledge, a once-successful country singer whose recent marriage to Rosa Lee has reversed a tailspin brought about by alcohol and thwarted ambitions, and Sonny, Rosa Lee's ten-year-old. As the minister lowers first Sonny and then Mac back into the water, Rosa Lee watches from her seat in the choir. Riding home afterwards in their pickup truck, Sonny asks a question, "Do you feel different, Mac?" Mac looks unsure at first. "Not yet," he replies. But laughter wells up in him as he speaks, gentle laughter that soon embraces all three. Something has happened that is beyond mere feeling.

In the water, under the threefold name, Mac and Sonny have been given new life as children of God. And this new life is already finding expression in a family marked by self-giving love. Hardships and temptations will not simply disappear; troubles remaining from Mac's former marriage will soon visit his new home, and it will be a while before Sonny can come to terms with his father's death. Even so, this is a story of gift upon gift. Though burdened by difficult emotions and the strain of eking out a living from the country gas station she owns, Rosa Lee consistently notices God's grace. "Every night, when I thank God for all his blessings and his tender mercies to me, you and Sonny are at the top of the list," she tells Mac when he is disheartened.

Dorothy C. Bass directs the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith that develops resources to help contemporary people live the Christian faith with vitality and integrity in changing times. She is the author of *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* and editor or coeditor of *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*; *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*; and *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*. Her most recent book, coedited with Craig Dykstra, is *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*.

Craig Dykstra is Vice President for Religion at Lilly Endowment, Inc. He is the author of *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practice*; co-author with Dorothy Bass of two articles in *Practicing Our Faith*, and co-editor with Dorothy Bass of *For Life Abundant*.

(This article originally appeared in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* and is reprinted with permission of the publisher Wm. B. Eerdmans.)

In *Rosa Lee and Sonny*, and like *Rosa Lee and Sonny* thanks to his presence in their lives, Mac has received a gift, a tender mercy. The grace that opened him to receive this gift was God's prior gift of a new, true self. Mac—a has-been who lay drunk on the floor in the movie's opening scene—would have found the account of salvation given in the letter to the Ephesians an apt description of his new condition: "It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to devote ourselves to the good deeds for which God has designed us" (Eph. 2:9-10). With new life, Mac is learning, comes a new way of life: caring for Sonny, weeding Rosa Lee's garden, and casting his lot with a struggling young band in Texas rather than racing back to Nashville when given the chance. Mac's good deeds are humble ones, and his faith is humble, too: the last words he speaks in the film show that he is still far from serenity. In the spirit of his agonized questioning, however, it is evident as he plays catch with Sonny in the film's closing scene that he has been "made new in mind and spirit, [having] put on the new nature of God's creating" (Eph. 4:23-24). Mac has been and is still being restored—from bondage to freedom, from isolation to community, from despair to hope. He has even been restored to music, Saturday night country music, though in a different way than before. Coming to faith he enters a new way of life, one that is truly life-giving.

Romero is another, quite different movie about the Christian way of life. This film biography of the martyred bishop of El Salvador tells the story of how a new way of life characterized by freedom, community, and hope emerged among the poor in Latin America. At the film's beginning, the behavior of the church hierarchy is guided by a centuries-old habit of special favor the rich and mighty of the land. In the barrios and countryside, however, priests, nuns, and other grassroots leaders have begun to share a theology of liberation with the oppressed and marginalized. As Bishop Romero's eyes are opened to injustice, he gradually joins their efforts and comes to understand and participate in Christ's solidarity with the poor and the suffering. One implication, he realizes, is that Catholics of all classes and ethnic groups, belonging as they do to "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5), should bring their children, together, to a common font of water for the liturgy that incorporates them into the one Body of Christ, the church. The decision is presented as a key point of rupture between Romeo and the social and economic elite, which is represented in the film by a wealthy young woman who is Romero's own goddaughter. She has planned a lavish private baptism for her baby, and she is

appalled that anyone expects her to stand side by side with peasants and allow water that has touched their children to touch hers.

That elites were permitted to rely for centuries on privileged treatment at the baptismal font suggests that the baptismal rite itself does not automatically bestow either new life such as that experienced by Sonny and Mac or solidarity such as that which emerged in El Salvador as faithful people struggled against injustice during that country's long civil wars. Indeed, the best-known cinematic depiction of baptism shows just how thoroughly the rite can be abused. In the *Godfather*, the scene in which the infant godson of Don Michael Corleone is baptized is intercut with scenes of several murders, which the Don has ordered for that same hour. Viewing this abuse of baptism makes Christians recoil, however, aware that this basic act of initiation in the Christian community means to give life, not death—indeed, abundant life, life that is joined to the life and love of Christ.

Life Abundant

In this essay we set forth a way of thinking about how a way of life that is deeply responsive to God's grace takes actual shape among human beings. To be sure, many of us feel that we already know such a way when we see it: Salvadorans struggling for justice, yes; the Mafia, no. This essay proposes, however, that learning to think more systematically and theologically about the shape and character of such a way of life may be helpful as we seek to discern its contours in new situations, to enjoy and give thanks for it, and to share it with others.

In a sense, what we offer here is a specific way of engaging in a dynamic that exists within the Christian life itself. Because the circumstances in which human beings live are always concrete, conflicted, and in flux, those who seek to live faithfully must necessarily wonder where and how to discern the specific shape that a way of life abundant might take in a given time and place. What moves do people make as they encounter one another in the context of God's grace? What words do they say, what gestures do they perform, what relationships do then enter? These questions may be asked consciously, or they may be implicit in the day-to-day decisions of a community, but they are surely somewhere in play, for the contours of a life-giving way of life are usually not readily apparent. Moreover, these questions are theological. Addressing them is one of the most difficult tasks confronting theologians, whose vocation it is to

reflect not only on God but also, in light of God, on human life and all creation.¹

Reflection of this sort takes on special urgency in a time and place where far more attention is given to *life-styles of abundance than to ways of life abundant*. Thus we offer this essay because we hope to contribute to the building up of ways of life that are abundant not in things but in love, justice, and mercy. Today rapid social change and intense spiritual restlessness evoke fierce yearning in many people, in our own neighborhoods and around the world. Some observers see this yearning as a quest for meaning, others as a longing for spiritual consciousness or experience. Important as these quests are, we think that they arise from a deeper longing, a longing for a life that adds up to something that is in a deep sense good for oneself, for other people, and for all creation. As Christians, the two of us affirm that such a way of life—right down to the specific words, gestures, and situations of which it is woven—finds its fullest integrity, coherence, and fittingness insofar as it embodies a grateful human response to God's presence and promises.

Awareness of the possibility of a way of life shaped by a positive response to God pervades the Bible and Christian history—as do examples of the human tendency to fall short of God's invitation to such a life, from the Garden of Eden to the churches of ancient Asia Minor to the inequities that divide contemporary Christians. Without neglecting the sin that is part of Christian history, it is vital that those who seek to walk in such a way today learn to recognize the lived wisdom of Christian people over time and across cultures as a constructive resource. The earliest accounts of Christian origins depict groups of people doing things together in the light of and in response to God. Jesus gathered disciples, with whom he healed and taught, ate and sang, and prayed and died, while immersed in Jewish communal life and walking Roman roads. In later years, as these disciples and those who came after them gathered into communities to celebrate the presence of the risen Christ, their communities too were immersed in the ordinary stuff of specific times and places. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul give us glimpses of people breaking bread together in memory of Jesus, sharing their possessions with those in need, singing, healing, and testifying together—men and women, slaves and citizens, Jews and Greeks, makers of tents and dyers of cloth. Over the centuries, ways of living that shared this deepest source and purpose would take shape in the quite different daily experiences of the Egyptian desert, European cities, Salvadoran villages, American small towns, suburbs, and cities

and countless other places. In all these places, specific human beings have sought to live in ways that responded to the mercy and freedom of God as it is made known in Jesus Christ. They have done things that other people also do, simply because these things are part of being human—they have cared for the sick, buried the dead, brought up children, made decisions. But they have done them somehow differently because of their knowledge of God in Christ.

By “Christian practices” we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.

When we reflect on this heritage as theologians concerned about building up ways of life abundant in our own time, we must ask not only whether it provides resources that seem helpful, but also whether what we find there is true, as far as we can discern, to the purposes of God. In a sense, each community of Christians in every generation is already engaged, implicitly or explicitly, in just such discernment. Inheriting much but also drawn into relationship with God in Christ in the present moment, they care for the sick, bury the dead, bring up children, tell stories, and make decisions, sometimes pausing in midstream to ask whether the forms these activities take in their own time and place are faithful to God's purposes. Theologians take up these questions in a more deliberate and ordered manner. But to describe this entire way of life is a daunting task, particularly when done in a way that is responsive to the purposeful presence of the Triune God who has created and is bringing redemption to everything that is. The task is rightly and necessarily large, potentially attentive to the entire universe. Yet it would fail if it lost sight of the One who understood the value of a single lost coin to a housewife and of one lost sheep to a shepherd.

The effort to offer a theological description of a way of life abundant, then, is complicated by *the problem of the too big and the too small*. The problem of the too big is that the task is all-encompassing; reflecting at this level would be too grand to be of much direct use by itself, conceptually or strategically. The problem of the too small is the opposite. In theological reflection, and also in the actual work of living as Christians and trying to

guide others in doing so as well, it often seems that we do a little of this and a little of that and a little of something else; too often it becomes difficult to keep in view the larger wholes to which these smaller pieces belong. The connections get lost, and when that happens we lose any sense of the overall significance and import of particular activities, ideas, doctrines, biblical texts and narratives, and beliefs.²

Christian Practices

Rather than speak of a Christian way of life as a whole, therefore, we shall speak of the “Christian practices” that together constitute a way of life abundant. By “Christian practices” we mean *things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world*.³ Thinking of a way of life as made up of a constitutive set of practices breaks a way of life down into parts that are small enough to be amenable to analysis, both in relation to contemporary concerns and as historic, culture-spanning forms of Christian faith and life. At the same time, practices are not too small; each Christian practice is large enough to permit us to draw together the shards and pieces of particular understandings, beliefs, events, behaviors, actions, relationships, inquiries, and skills into sets that are capacious and cohesive enough to show how they might guide one into a way of life.

We advocate a concept of practices that allows us to draw together under a single rubric ideas and activities of many kinds, and the fact that this move gives us a concept of manageable size is only one reason for doing so. Even more important is the fact that such a concept enables us to recognize the practice and theological kinship of certain beliefs, virtues, and skills with certain behaviors, relationships, and symbols, because all of them contribute to building up a recognizable, and finally coherent, Christian practice.

In the book *Practicing Our Faith*, which the two of us wrote with eleven colleagues, we identified a list of twelve practices that meet this definition: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God. We did not claim that these twelve practices are the only things Christians do together over time that could be identified as practices. We did, however, intentionally limit the list, wishing to focus concern for a way of life on a number that was small enough to be comprehensive but sufficient in scope to address fundamental

human needs. We also excluded those shared activities whose primary use is in liturgy, arguing that each of the practices we treated has both liturgical expressions and expressions in others settings.⁴

Take, for example, the practice of hospitality to strangers. As we understand this practice, the action that occurs when the staff members of a homeless shelter provide a homeless man with a bed is only one movement within it; it is not in itself a practice. The practice of hospitality, as we understand it, also encompasses, among other things, the biblical stories that have shaped the way in which the hosts perceive their guests; the specific habits, virtues, knowledge, and other capacities of mind and spirit that the hosts bring to the situation, many of which could have been developed only within the context of the practice itself; the liturgical words and gestures that make manifest in crystallized form the hospitality of God to humankind and our obligations to one another; and the domestic hosting that prepares family members to break bread with strangers in less familiar surroundings as well.

Over the centuries and still today, countless Christians have actually engaged in this practice. Often they have done so without a high degree of theological articulation—a lack that does nothing to exclude them from being numbered among practitioners. But the theological scholar who carefully researches the history of the Christian practice of hospitality, assesses the ethical tensions in which it involves practitioners, and analyzes the strengths and limitations of the current state of the practice, has also done something that is an indispensable aspect of this Christian practice: she has provided hosts and guests with an opportunity to reflect critically and constructively on the practice itself and thus to understand more fully what it is they are actually doing.⁵ Within a social and intellectual context in which connections are often severed or obscured—connections between thinking and doing, domesticity and public life, liturgy and social justice—the capacity of this concept of practices to show how such apparently different things do indeed belong together seems to us to be of great value.

The two of us are aware, however, that others use the term “practices” in different ways. Drawing on the social sciences, many contemporary scholars refer to much small bits of action by this term; in this use, a “practice” can be almost any socially meaningful action, such as keeping records for the homeless shelter, or welcoming visitors to a worship service, or sharing a family meal. An older, more specific use of the term applied it to the ascetical and spiritual disciplines and exercises by which people

deliberately seek to become more attuned to the sacred.⁷ A third understanding of practices arises from moral philosophy, especially the work of Alasdair MacIntyre; this use grounds a concept of virtue in what MacIntyre calls “social practices,” complex social activities that pursue certain goods internal to the practices themselves. Our own understanding of practices reflects the influence of MacIntyre, while also differing in crucial ways from MacIntyre.⁸ All three basic approaches, agree, however, on the key claim that beliefs and practices can and should be understood in relation to one another: they all reject the separation of thought and action, seeing in a practice a form of cooperative and meaningful human endeavor in which the two are inextricably entwined.

The distinctive understanding of *Christian practices* set forth in this essay focuses on practices as the constituent elements in a way of life that becomes incarnate when human beings live in the light of and in response to God’s gift of life abundant. Thus, when we refer to Christian practices, we have something normative and theological in mind. Each element in our approach presumes that Christian practices are set in a world created and sustained by a just and merciful God, who is now in the midst of reconciling this world through Christ. Christian practices address needs that are basic to human existence as such, and they do so in ways that reflect God’s purposes for humankind. When they participate in such practices, Christian people are taking part in God’s work of creation and new creation and thereby growing into a deeper knowledge of God and of creation. This is something that is necessarily done with other people, across generations and cultures. And it is something that is always done imperfectly, and sometimes even in such a distorted manner that practices become evil. We hope that the definition that follows will clarify our distinctive way of using this term. Even more, we hope that it will suggest some of the characteristic features of the way of life abundant whose edification is our central concern.

Christian practices address fundamental human needs and conditions.

Christian practices, theologically understood, are directed to humanity’s most basic needs, needs that arise out of the very character of human existence. They address conditions fundamental to being human—such as embodiment, temporality, relationship, the use of language, mortality—and they do so through concrete human acts joined

inextricably to substantive convictions about how things really are.

A fundamental human condition is that we all have bodies; the Christian practices we call “honoring the body” insists in myriad ways that human bodies be honored—nor violated, not ridiculed, not murdered—because they are made in the image of God. A fundamental human condition is that we are all mortal; the Christian practice we call “dying well” takes shape as Christians help one another to know that they are upheld by the One who is the source of life itself and that their lives have mattered, profoundly and appropriately, to themselves and to others, ultimately because they have mattered to God. A fundamental human condition is our vulnerability to the unknown and thus potentially threatening stranger; the Christian practice of hospitality involves practitioners in presuming the stranger to be guest and neighbor, rather than enemy, by acknowledging the stranger’s own vulnerability and enfolding the stranger in care.

A practice is a practice in our meaning of the term only if it is a sustained, cooperative pattern of human activity that is big enough, rich enough, and complex enough to address some fundamental feature of human existence. Christian practices have a normative dimension that is thoroughly theological in character. That is, our descriptions of Christian practices contain within them normative understandings of what God wills for us and for the whole of creation and of what God expects of us in response to God’s call to be faithful. Christian practices are thus congruent with the necessities of human existence as such, as seen from a Christian perspective on the character of human flourishing.

Normatively and theologically understood, therefore, Christian practices are the human activities in and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another and creation. As parents honor the body of a teen-aged daughter, she begins to understand her God-given strength and beauty. When mourners surround the bereaved with song and prayer, the bereaved become able to thank God for the life of their beloved. When an overstressed worker takes one day every week to worship, feast and play, he is renewed in relation to God, other people, and the work that he does on the other days of the week. Because these people have done certain things together in the light of and in response to God’s active presence, they have in a sense shared in the practices of God, who has also honored the human body, embraced death, and rested, calling creation good. And the other practices are like this, providing concrete help for human flourishing that is informed by basic Christian beliefs

about who human beings really are and what God is doing in the world.

The wisdom about fundamental human needs that is embedded in historic Christian practices can be a profound resource for contemporary people who seek to sustain a measure of freedom within the prevailing economic culture, where “needs” for specific, often branded, material products seem to multiply as global markets expand. Being able to tell the difference between fundamental human needs and manufactured ones can mean the difference between lives that are grasping and lives that are in a deep sense free. For most North Americans, for example, this would mean the difference between being driven by market-induced desires and being free to share possessions and keep Sabbath. In a situation in which the cultural celebration of what Miroslav Volf has called “product-needs” subjectively overwhelms attention to “the fundamental non product-needs [that] are objectively rooted in the nature of human beings as creatures made in the image of God,” Christian practices embody the freedom that is rightly ours.⁹

Theological reflection plays an essential role in sustaining the capacity of Christian practices to embody such freedom. As Martin Luther learned during his years as a monk, ardent engagement in practices can become a form of self-securing, an effort to win one’s own salvation apart from God. His reading of Paul’s epistles led him to a revised account of the Christian life as a response to God’s grace.¹⁰ Alternately, a self-satisfied grasp of God’s grace can seem to make participation in Christian practices unimportant—a view criticized by virtually every theologian.¹¹ Sin can urge us toward either mistake; indeed, it is difficult to think of a time in which we humans are more likely to deceive ourselves and others than when we are distinguishing between our desires and our needs. Thus helping one another to understand what God-shaped fundamental human needs and conditions actually are and what a God-shaped faithful response to them actually consists of a crucial theological task. Any such reflection will encounter the quandary with which Calvin began the *Institutes*: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.”¹² A full understanding of a set of Christian practices includes both a profound knowledge of humankind in its most fundamental and orienting needs and capacities, including its capacity to sin, and a profound knowledge of God’s purposes for all creation. In other words, both theological anthropology and theological assessment

of what God is doing in the world are relevant to a theological account of practices, and to the community’s ability to engage in authentically Christian practices.

Christian practices thus involve a profound awareness, a deep knowing: they are activities imbued with the knowledge of God and creation.

Indeed, we believe that it is precisely by participating in Christian practices that we truly come to know God and the world, including ourselves.

When we participate over a long period of time in addressing fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God’s active presence in the life of the world, we grow into a double-sided knowledge of God and ourselves. This knowledge is not first and always articulate and ordered; many worthy practitioners would be unable to offer a coherent theology. Rather, this knowledge has first to do with knowing that the world and oneself belong to God, who is present and active in certain ways. To grow in this kind of knowledge is also to grow in trust, generosity, and freedom as a practitioner. Christine Pohl’s account of the Christian practice of hospitality depicts generations of hosts who have come to know God in this way.¹³

Christian practices also open possibilities for knowledge that is theological in other ways. First, insofar as a Christian practice is truly attuned to the human condition in a given time and place and to the intentions of God, participating in it increases one’s knowledge of humanity and all creation. Entering the Christian practice of healing, for example, develops in practitioners certain skills, habits, virtues, and capacities of mind and spirit; one learns the properties of certain foods and remedies, the effects of different kinds of touch, and the locations of organs and bones. The content of each practice challenges, lures, and sometimes drags its practitioners into new ways of being and knowing that are commensurate with that practice—and thus, if it is rightly attuned, commensurate with the well-being of creation. Living within such a practice gives men and women certain capacities that enable them to read the world differently—even, we would argue, more truly.

Second, insofar as a Christian practice is truly attuned to the active presence of God for the life of the world, participating in it increases our knowledge of the Triune God. For example, Christians who keep holy a weekly day of rest and worship acquire

through the Christian practice of Sabbath-keeping an embodied knowledge that the world does not depend on our own capacity for ceaseless work and that its life is not under our control. Observing Sabbath on the Lord's Day, Christian practitioners come to know in their bones that creation is God's gift, that God does not intend that anyone should work without respite, and that God has conquered death in the resurrection of Christ. And this knowledge is not only embodied; the words of liturgies, the songs of people gathered for worship, and the difficult decisions that must be made about the actual characteristics of a "holy" day are an intrinsic part of this practice. Across the centuries, certain Christians who are highly conversant with the history, texts, and liturgical forms of the tradition (and often of the Jewish tradition as well, especially in this case) have led reforms in the shape of Sabbath-keeping, urging stricter or more relaxed observance. They have also written hymns, prayers, and books that they hoped would deepen the capacity of the larger community to know this practice and, through it, to know God more fully. Thanks to their creative work, which may serve the community for centuries without attribution, practitioners who are not in any academic sense "theologians" may draw from the rich language and the embodied experience of Sabbath, a knowledge of realities toward which more formal theologies point, and which they seek to explicate: grace, justice, and salvation.¹⁴

Christian practices are social and historical. They are activities people engage in together over time.

Practices, as understood here, are patterned activities carried on by the whole communities of people, not just in one particular location, but across nations and generations. Since each individual human being is mortal, only corporate, social action can be extended over long periods of time and across a wide variety of social and cultural circumstances. An individual person may engage in a certain practice in solitude for a while, of course, but even then the practice has been learned from, and exists in continuity with, other people who have done it in the past and who do it around the world today. When a practice is vital and authentic, however, it is also necessarily concrete and particular, taking appropriate shape in a distinctive time and place in the form of a cluster of apparently small gestures, words, images, and objects. Therefore specific forms are flexible enough to take on the contours of many societies and cultures. Each practice can, and indeed

must, be crafted in varied ways and forms, some of them not yet imagined. Practices allow for—indeed, they thrive on—such improvisation and negotiation.

So far, these claims that practices are social and historical contain nothing that is especially theological or Christian. A *theological* account of our understanding of Christian practices, however, could be founded on God's decision to work in and through human communities living in particular times and places. The biblical stories of Israel and of the church suggest these trans-generational human communities are intrinsic to God's way of being in and for the world. Subsequently, Christians have also linked the specific congregations in which they gather to other Christian congregations across generations and cultures and to the unifying power of the Holy Spirit by affirming their belief in the "the holy catholic church." Indeed, we would argue that the practices of all Christian congregations are intricately linked to one another as well as to the practices of communities long ago. Historians trace these links, but on occasion those involved in a Christian practice also experience them, sensing the unity of their singing or testimony or forgiveness with the practices of their spiritual forbears. At the same time, Christian practices are always oriented toward the future as well; just as communities in the past and present have appropriated and altered for their own contexts the specific moves and signs that embody hospitality or forgiveness or healing, so also will future practitioners devise improvisations that we cannot yet imagine.

Christian practices share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace.

For Christians, any theological discussion of human beings and our activities must also take account of the problem of sin and evil. Both individual human failings and unjust social structures set countless obstacles in the way of practices that are good for all people. Moreover, in history and in the present day, practitioners who bear the name of Christ have participated in shared activities that are distorted, damaging, and manifestly not embodied responses to the active presence of God for the life of the world. Egregious examples leap to mind, but the quieter damage that can be wrought in the course of everyday life also evokes this problem, as people who bear the name of Christ fail to practice forgiveness, or discernment, or hospitality. Indeed, any given practice—including any practice that is historically Christian—can become so distorted that its pursuit and outcome are evil rather than good. Therefore,

much of the thinking we need to do about practices is critical thinking, thinking that discloses how destructively the basic activities of human life are often organized—globally, in American society, in our churches, and in our homes.

The normative and theological concept of Christian practices that we propose situates Christian practices themselves within the mystery of fall *and* redemption, of sin *and* grace, that informs Christian reflection on the problem of evil. Within the history of any given practice, there have been points at which the social forms of the practice became unjust—for example, by becoming allied with national hostilities or rigid class boundaries. Christian Pohl's fine history of the Christian practice of hospitality to strangers describes the gradual removal of hospitality from homes to institutions and the impact of the church's shift from marginal to established status—changes that combined to destroy the personal and egalitarian qualities of early Christian hospitality. In some times and places, hostility to certain strangers has gone and continues to go virtually unchallenged among Christians. Yet Pohl's account also tell how a theologically normed practices of hospitality has been retrieved by Christians called to be hosts to refugees and the poor in more recent times, including our own. Even so, Pohl argues, the possibility that hosts and guests will abuse or demean one another continues to be an intrinsic danger within this practice. That the danger is sometimes not avoided provides evidence of the continuing power of human sin within Christian practices.¹⁵

Even practices that are in modest disrepair can provide the space within which selves made new by God can respond to God's grace by extending it to others. On the other hand, even apparently sound practices can become abodes of bondage rather than freedom for practitioners who forget that it is God's activity rather than their own that is healing the world. The theological shape of Christian practices, as we understand them, substantively addresses the human tendency to grasp more control than is rightly ours—a grasping that can be harmful even when it seems to be for a good purpose. While the point of most human practices is the achievement of some form of mastery over a specific kind of conflict or chaos. Christian practitioners do not *master* death in the practice of dying well, or enmity in the practice of forgiveness, or sound in the practice of singing our lives to God. Instead, in trying to engage in such practices faithfully and well, they seek to enter more fully into the receptivity and responsiveness, to others, and to God, that characterize Christ and all who share in the new creation.

Engagement in Christian practices, indeed, provides situations in which practitioners can live into the promises made at the baptism. Freed of the impossible task of mastering death, they can live in the shadow of death in a way that does not paralyze but rather grants freedom., freedom to offer hospitality or forgiveness or healing to those who need it, and to sing their lives to God, even when death's shadow looms large and immediate. Even when this kind of freedom is not perfectly realized to know it is to see the world and all who dwell therein as belonging to a gracious God.

Christian Practices—A Way of Life Abundant

A critical theological awareness of the Christian practices that constitute a way of life abundant press practitioners to see things whole at several levels. This is crucial to the criticism, retrieval, and strengthening of practices, for when the concern of practitioners does not reach beyond the self or the cares of a self-absorbed community, Christian practices lose touch with the larger realities within which they are normatively embedded. One of these realities is the historic and global church. Even the most parochial examples of Christian practice exist in relation to and indeed are part of a movement that spans centuries and cultures, and this movement has always provided resources for mutual criticism and renewal, resources that are especially accessible and pertinent in the contemporary context of globalization. In addition, as constituent elements of a way of life abundant, the various Christian practices are deeply integrated with one another: when practicing hospitality, one is drawn in forgiving those once considered alien, and into perceiving one's own forgiveness as well; in keeping Sabbath, one honors the body, reorders economics of the household, and grows in capacity to participate in the practice of saying yes and say no. Other connections emerge as well: we begin to understand the family table, the table provided for the destitute, the table of holy communion, and the eschatological table where all people will feast in the fullness of God are not isolated from one another, but are part of a coherent whole constituted by the encompassing, unifying reality of God's active presence for the life of the world.

A way of life abundant keeps connections such as these strong. Its pieces add up to something that is good because it is responsive to the grace that is at the heart of everything. Thinking about this way of life in terms of the practices that constitute it

discloses some of its characteristics, each of which we have already encountered as the characteristics of Christian practices themselves. This way of life addresses fundamental human conditions and needs. It involves its adherents in God's activities in the world. It arises from and imparts a profound knowledge of God and creation. It is lived together with others, and in continuity across many years. It catches up those who live it in the mysterious, dynamic process by which God is bringing a new creation into being.

This is the way of life abundant that Mac Sledge begins to glimpse in *Tender Mercies* when he decides that he wants to be baptized. It is a way he has not so much found as been found by, mainly through Rosa Lee, who as she offers him her trust and her love also offers him her faith in Christ. His needs have been transfigured: this man who once "needed" alcohol and fame now needs only love and music and a modest living. He knows the limits of his knowledge of God—"Why?" he cries in anguish after his daughter dies in a car crash—but he also knows that the only appropriate responses to his new life are gratitude to God and kindness to the people around him. He is caught up in the new creation that is coming into being right there in the small town in Texas.

This is also the way of life that began to shape the vision of the people of El Salvador as they brought their children to Archbishop Romero for baptism. The shadow of death would not paralyze them, they promised and were promised, even when it burst into their villages in the form of government-sponsored death squads. Resisting the powers of death, they would embrace the Christian practices of discernment, testimony, shaping communities, and dying well. They had long known the suffering of poverty and marginalization, and they were preparing to add the suffering of resistance to these more familiar forms. Their suffering would take on a different character, however, when joined to one another's suffering and the suffering of the great company of those united in and through the passion of the One who suffered, died, was buried, and rose again.

Baptism is the rite that marks entry into such a way of life. It involves the pouring of actual water on a unique human body, as a specific individual is honored and received in his or her embodied integrity. At the same time, it incorporates the baptized person into a social and historical Body that spans centuries and cultures. And it incorporates that person into the very mystery of Christ. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" writes Paul to the Romans (6:34).

"Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." When it is detached from a way of life abundant, as in the Corleone baptism, the pouring of water accomplishes nothing. We cannot be sure what becomes of the little godson, but is clear that the godfather himself has only a lifestyle of abundance, not a way of life abundant, however impressive the riches and might he secures for himself.

This way of life addresses fundamental human conditions and needs. It involves its adherents in God's activities in the world. It arises from and imparts a profound knowledge of God and creation. It is lived together with others, and in continuity across many years. It catches up those who live it in the mysterious, dynamic process by which God is bringing a new creation into being.

At its heart, baptism is not so much a distinct practice as it is the liturgical summation of all the Christian practices. In this right, the grace to which the Christian life is a response is fully and finally presented, visibly, tangibly, and in words. Here all the practices are present in crystalline form—forgiveness and healing, singing and testimony, Sabbath-keeping and community shaping, and all the others. Unlike each particular practice, baptism does not address a specific need; instead, it ritually sketches the contours of a whole new life, within which all human needs can be perceived in a different way. Under water, we cannot secure our own lives, but we can know, in a knowing beyond words, that God's creativity overcame the darkness that covered the face of the deep at earth's beginning, and that water flowed from Jesus' side on the cross, and that the new creation to which we now belong anticipates a city where the river of the water of life nourishes the roots of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. When a new Christian rises from the baptismal water, human needs are not just met; they are transformed. Even the need not to die no longer overpowers all other needs, and the

true freedom of a life formed in love, justice, mercy, and hope is no longer too frightening to embrace. “In baptism,” said St. Francis, “we have already died the only death that matters.”

Part of the work of Christian theologians in every age is to reflect on the shape and character of the way of life Christians enter when we rise from the watery death of baptism. How should the new selves we have been given walk in newness of life?

Exploring the question involves us both in contemplating the deepest foundations of Christian faith and in figuring out the shape our living should take amidst the immediate concerns of each day.

The letter to the Ephesians may be read as an articulation of this kind of reflection on a way of life, written for the sake of guiding people more fully into it.¹⁶ The letter begins with a vision of the situation of the faithful that is cosmic in scope, they are “blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” and “chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world” (1:3-4). In a sense, the letter’s author is telling his readers who they really, most fully, most truly are. As the letter nears its end, however, the author describes the specific moves and gestures that would result from bearing this identity in the face-to-face social arrangements of a first-century city in Asia Minor, urging men and women of high estate and low to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21).

The way of life set forth in Ephesians is not without suffering; the letter’s author writes of imprisonment (3:1, 4:1) and of the need of the faithful to withstand “all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (6:16). Nor is it without division; the reconciliation of Gentile and Jew is the letter’s urgent theme. But it is, in the midst of all this, a way of life that is whole, because it is in the keeping of the Triune God who was and is and shall be, and because it is responsive to and reflective of the character of that God:

With this is in mind, then I kneel in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, that out of the treasures of his glory he may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundations, may you be strong to grasp, with all God’s people, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you attain to the fullness of being, the fullness of God himself (Eph 3:14-19, NEB).

End Notes

- ¹ The New Testament epistles characteristically address this concern. Ellen T. Charry has identified the centrality of this concern to key theologians in Christian history and urged it upon the attention of contemporary theologians in *By Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ² Craig Dykstra considered “the problem of the too big and the too small” from the perspective of the Christian educator in *Growing in the Life of the Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), pp. 66-67.
- ³ This is the definition of Christian practices that provides the basis of *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997); it is explained in the book’s first chapter, which we coauthored. In retrospect, we think that the definition of practices quoted here would be strengthened by the addition of the words “in Jesus Christ” at the end, which would clarify the character and content of the active divine presence that is so central to our understanding of practices. The authors of *Practicing Theology* were first convened for the purpose of reflecting on how the concept of practices that informs *Practicing Our Faith* might contribute to and be challenged by the work of systematic theologians. As will be seen later in this essay and in other essays in the present volume, some of them conceptualize “practice” differently than we have done.
- ⁴ *Practicing Our Faith* was written by a team that included Amy Plantinga Pauw and L. Gregory Jones, who are also contributors to the present volume, as well as M. Shawn Copeland, Thomas Hoyt Jr., John Koenig, Sharon Daloz Parks, Stephanie Paulsell, Ann Maria Pineda, Larry Rasmussen, Frank Rogers Jr., and Don E. Saliers.
- ⁵ See Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
- ⁶ See the chapter by Kathryn Tanner; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
- ⁷ An example is Margaret Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1988). Authors in this school of thought tend to use “practice,” “discipline,” and “exercise” almost interchangeably.

- ⁸ Our own reflection on practices began with, and is still deeply indebted to, Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of "social practices" in *After Virtue* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 187-88. Each of us relied on MacIntyre in our earlier work on practices; see Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics* after MacIntyre, ed. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenburg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1997), and Dorothy C. Bass, "Congregations and the Bearing of Traditions" in *American Congregations*, vol 2, ed James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Our present understanding of practices differs from MacIntyre's account in *After Virtue* in that ours is now theological and thus normed not only internally but also through the responsive relationships of Christian practices to God.
- ⁹ See Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 152-154. Volf identifies five "non-product-needs" that are fundamental to people's humanity and argues that "product-needs" should not be indulged to the detriment of these. The five are the needs for communion with God; solidarity with nature; tending to the welling-being of one another; the development of moral capacities and practical and intellectual skills; and the new creation, the kingdom of freedom. Margaret Mile's treatment of Christian asceticism in *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) also makes a relevant argument, i.e., that ascetical practices have historically been the means by which Christians have sought freedom from cultural mandates and from whatever within themselves would restrict their communion with God.
- ¹⁰ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selected Works*, ed. John Dillenberge (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 52-85.
- ¹¹ Virtually all Christian theologians commend engagement in acts of faith, hope, and love that fall without our notion of practices. Specifying this aspect of the Christian life is an important part of the theological task—one, indeed, to which Luther himself turns in the final sections of "The Freedom of a Christian."
- ¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) I.1.1, p. 35.
- ¹³ Pohl, *Making Room*

- ¹⁴ The relation of what is here called "the Christian sabbath" to the Sabbath of Judaism is treated further in Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). At issue in this essay is how a practice such as keeping sabbath bears theological content, which can become articulate in theological terms. Jewish reflection on the Sabbath provides an excellent example within Jewish theology; e.g., Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1952).
- ¹⁵ Pohl, *Making Room*
- ¹⁶ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), offers such an interpretation of Ephesians, which Ford calls "a testimony to the quality of transformed life in a worshipping community. Its horizon for human flourishing is unsurpassably vast. . . . Within that, its special focus is on what it means to have a particular social identity in relation to God and other people (pp. 107-8).

Practicing Our Faith Web Site www.practicingourfaith.org

The Valparaiso Project launched PracticingOurFaith.org as a way to extend the invitation offered in the 1997 book *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. Both book and website explore twelve time-honored practices shaped by the Christian community over the centuries, yet richly relevant to contemporary experience.

The web site includes:

- **Descriptions** of each of the twelve Christian practices with ways to practice, worship materials, and books and films.
- **The Library** with essays, study guides, sermons, and other items that explore the concepts on which *Practicing our Faith* is based and treat different aspects of specific practices.
- **A Bookstore** of project-sponsored and -related books.
- **What Others are Doing:** descriptions of projects funded by the project.

Reflection Guide

What is Christian Practice?

Dorothy C. Bass

(This article is reprinted with the permission of the author from the Practicing Our Faith web site: www.practicingourfaith.org.)

Christian practices are shared patterns of activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Woven together, they form a way of life.

Each practice is a complex set of acts, words, and images that addresses one area of fundamental human need. Hospitality. Sabbath-keeping. Forgiveness. Making music.

First of all, practices are things we *do*. A child or adult can participate in a practice such as hospitality through warm acts of welcome, even without comprehending the biblical stories and theological convictions that encourage and undergird this practice. Most of our practicing takes place at this unreflective level, as we go about our daily living.

At the same time, practices are not *only* behaviors. They are meaning-full. It is important to note that within a practice, thinking and doing are inextricably knit together. Those who offer hospitality come to know themselves, others, and God in a different way, and they develop virtues and dispositions that are consistent with this practice. When people participate in a practice, they are *embodying* a specific kind of wisdom about what it means to be a human being under God, even if they could not readily articulate this wisdom in words.

While affirming the unreflective character of most participation in practices, I believe that it is also helpful to reflect deliberately on the shape and character of the practices that make up our way of life. Indeed, such reflection may be especially important at this point in history, when the shape of our lives are changing so rapidly. These are practices in which Christian communities have engaged over the years and across many cultures, practices which it is now our responsibility to receive and reshape in lively ways in our own time and place.

When we do reflect on practices such as those explored in *Practicing Our Faith*, we can see that central themes of Christian theology are integrally related to each Christian practice: our practices are shaped by our beliefs, and our beliefs arise from and

take on meaning within our practices. For example, Stephanie Paulsell bases her chapter and book “Honoring the Body” on the theological convictions that God created human bodies and declared that they are good; that God shared our physical condition in the incarnation of Jesus; and that God overcame death through Christ’s resurrection. Through everyday activities—for example, resting, bathing, and caring for those who suffer—we live out our deepest convictions about who we are as embodied children of God in specific, often stumbling, ways. We learn to do so from those with whom we share our lives, and likewise, it is with them that we need to reflect on practices as they take shape in the light of and in response to God’s grace.

A practice is small enough that it can be identified and discussed as one element within an entire way of life. But a practice is also big enough to appear in many different spheres of life. For example, the Christian practice of hospitality has dimensions that emerge as (1) a matter of public policy; (2) something you do at home with friends, family, and guests; (3) a radical path of discipleship; (4) part of the liturgy; (5) a movement of the innermost self toward or away from others; (6) a theme in Christian theology; and probably much else. Thinking about this one practice can help us make connections across spheres of life—connections that often get disrupted in our fragmented society. For example, reflection on the Christian practice of hospitality would provide a way of exploring the relations between spirituality and social justice.

Note that our concept of practices describes a larger chunk of life than most uses of this term imply. For example, we would not call tithing a practice; rather, it would be one discipline within the larger practice of household economics.

Notice that each of the practices (keeping sabbath, honoring the body, hospitality, discernment) necessarily leads to the others; in fact, you can tell when you are doing one well when it necessarily involves you in the others. For example, if you are practicing hospitality so intensely that

you neglect sabbath and don't honor your body, your practice of hospitality is misshapen.

Is worship a practice? Yes. However, it is important to note that worship is an overarching master practice rather than one practice among many. The term "worship" has a double meaning: it is what we do together in church (as we speak, sing, listen, and gesture, *embodying* the wisdom of Christian faith in a specific form), and it is the purpose of the entire Christian life. Bringing these two meanings into right relation requires us to ask questions like these: How does the way we worship together form us to engage in Christian practices in other contexts? And how can our participation in practices beyond our worship services also be offered up as worship to God?

Some would call the sacraments "practices." However, in Valparaiso Project literature we have seen the sacraments as more normative and all-encompassing than any given practice can be. Craig Dykstra and I put it this way in our essay in *Practicing Theology*:

At its heart, baptism is not so much a distinct practice as it is the liturgical summation of all the Christian practices. In this rite, the grace to which the Christian life is a response is fully and finally presented, visibly, tangibly, and in words. Here all the practices are present in crystalline form—forgiveness and healing, singing and testimony, sabbath keeping and community shaping, and all the others. Unlike each particular practice, baptism does not address a specific need; instead, it ritually sketches the contours of a whole new life, within which all human needs and ways of living can be perceived in a different way. Under water, we cannot secure our own lives, but we can know, in a knowing beyond words, that God's creativity overcame the darkness that covered the face of the deep at earth's beginning, and that water flowed from Jesus' side on the cross, and that the new creation to which we now belong anticipates a city where the river of the water of life nourishes the roots of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. When a new Christian rises from the baptismal water, human needs are not just met; they are transformed. Even the need not to die no longer overpowers all other needs, and the true freedom of a life formed in love, justice, mercy, and hope is no longer too frightening to embrace. "In baptism," said St. Francis, "we have already died the only death that matters." [pp. 30-31; see also Miroslav Volf on this point, p. 248]

Why does all this matter? How does this idea of "practices" help us think about—and live—the Christian life?

- **It points beyond the individualism of the dominant culture** to disclose the social (i.e., *shared*) quality of our lives, and especially the social quality of Christian life, theology, and spirituality. Our thinking and living take place in relation to God and also to one another, to others around the world and across the centuries, and to a great communion of saints. I remember a line that got cut from *Practicing Our Faith*: "This is not a self-help book but a mutual-help book."
- **It helps us to understand our continuity with the Christian tradition—an important matter during this time of change and in the midst of a culture infatuated with what is new.** The way of life we are describing is historically rooted. Practices endure over time (though their specific moves have changed in the past and will surely change again). This perspective can help contemporary people to treasure their continuity with the past. Continuity is not the same as captivity, however. Caring for a *living* tradition includes adaptivity and inventiveness within ever-changing circumstances. Moreover, the history from which Christian practices emerge is expansive, encompassing many cultures and denominational traditions.
- **It makes us think about who we truly are as the created and newly created children of God.** An important claim is that Christian practices address "fundamental human needs." We live in a culture that is very confused about what people need—a culture where "needs" are constructed and marketed. In contrast, awareness of Christian practices helps us to reflect theologically on who people really are and what we really need. (Our vulnerability and our strength are disclosed in the practice of honoring the body, our finitude and gratitude in the practice of keeping sabbath, etc.)
- **All of this means that people need to craft the specific forms each practice can take within their own social and historical circumstances.** This approach thus requires attention to the concrete and down-to-earth quality of the Christian life. It invites attention to details such as gestures and the role of material things. This crafting is

an important responsibility of ministers and educators.

All people engage in most or all of the practices in *Practicing Our Faith* in one way or another. After all, all human beings necessarily rest, encounter strangers, help one another to find healing, and so on. However, those who embrace Christian practices engage in these fundamentally human activities in the light of God's presence and in response to God's grace as it is known in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Christian practices can be understood not as tasks but as gifts. Within these practices, we do not aim to achieve mastery (e.g., over time, strangers, death, nature) but rather to cultivate openness and responsiveness to others, to the created world, and to God.

Christian Practices: A Summary

A Christian practice is a cluster of activities, ideas, and images, lived by Christian people over time, which addresses a fundamental human need in the light of and in response to God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.

A practice. . .

- addresses fundamental human needs and conditions through practical human acts.
 - involves us in God's activities in the world and reflects, in the way we participate in the practice, God's grace and love.
 - is social in character
 - we learn practices with and from other people
 - though we sometimes do some of the activities that comprise a given practice alone.
 - endures over time
 - each practice arises out of living traditions, having taken numerous forms in the past and in various cultures around the world, and
 - will carry those traditions into the future, in specific forms not yet imagined.
- involves a deep awareness, a profound knowing; a practice
 - is imbued with thought; it is embodied wisdom
 - carries particular convictions about what is good and true;
 - embodies these convictions in physical, down-to-earth ways;
 - becomes articulate in concepts, ideas, and images, expressed through rich vocabularies and carefully developed bodies of thought;
 - incorporates both words and gestures, some of them grand but others apparently small and mundane.
 - is done within the church, in the public realm, in daily work, and at home.
 - shapes the people who participate in it
 - as individuals and as communities,
 - in ways that conform to the particular content and patterns of the specific practice, thus
 - nurturing specific habits, virtues, and capacities of mind and spirit.
 - possesses standards of excellence
 - having that which is good as its purpose and goal
 - relying on certain competencies and embodying certain norms
 - though practices often become distorted and corrupt
 - and so are open to criticism and reform, particularly with reference to the shape of God's practice.
 - comes to a focus in worship
 - which makes manifest in words, gestures, images, and material things the normative meaning of the practice and its place in the mysterious life of God, and
 - discloses the practice as gift, not task.
 - adds up to a way of life when interwoven with other practices
 - through their mutual interdependence, as each practice strengthens the others, and
 - in their reliance on the God of Life.

Reflection Guide

Twelve Christian Practices

Practicing Our Faith

(The twelve Christian practices are summarized from *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and reprinted with permission from the Practicing Our Faith web site: www.practicingourfaith.org.)

Honoring the Body

To hold a newborn in one's arms is to know both the sacredness and the vulnerability of the body; indeed, it is to know that there is an intimate connection between sacredness and vulnerability.

(Stephanie Paulsell)

The practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness. As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our daily bodily acts that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others. Stephanie Paulsell writes, "The practice of honoring the body challenges us to remember the sacredness of the body in every moment of our lives... Because our bodies are so vulnerable, we need each other to protect and care for them."

Hospitality

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves - indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own.

(Ana Maria Pineda)

The need for shelter is a fundamental human need. None of us ever knows for sure when we might be uprooted and cast on the mercy of others. But how do we overcome our fear in order to welcome and shelter a stranger? The Christian practice of hospitality is the practice of providing a space to take in a stranger. It also encompasses the skills of welcoming friends and family to our tables, to claim the joy of homecoming.

Household Economics

To choose simplicity is to live into complicated questions without easy answers, taking one step that may make another step possible.

(Sharon Daloz Parks)

Good economic practice—positive ways of exchanging goods and services—is about the well-being, the livelihood, of the whole household. In the face of great economic and environmental challenges, the Christian practice of household economics calls on us to manage our private homes for the well-being and livelihood of the small planet home we all share.

Saying Yes and Saying No

Christian asceticism is not spiritual boot camp, but neither is it effortless. Learning when and how, to what, and to whom to give our yes or our no is a life long project. (M. Shawn Copeland)

Tough decisions and persistent effort are required of those who seek lives that are whole and holy. If we are to grow in faithful living, we need to renounce the things that choke off the fullness of life that God intended for us, and we must follow through on our commitments to pray, to be conscientious, and to be in mutually supportive relations with other faithful persons. These acts take self-discipline. We must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.

Keeping Sabbath

Sabbath keeping is not about taking a day off but about being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for God's activity in creating the world, giving liberty to captives, and overcoming the powers of death. (Dorothy C. Bass)

"I'm so busy... I just don't have enough time to complete all my work." Do you need a break, but doubt you have time for it? What about those who don't have sufficient work to sustain themselves? The practice of keeping Sabbath helps us to resist the tyranny of too much or too little work.

Testimony

Testimony occurs in particular settings — a courtroom or a church — where a community expects to hear the truth spoken.

(Thomas Hoyt, Jr.)

In testimony, people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all. The practice of testimony requires that there be witnesses to testify and others to receive and evaluate their testimony. It is a deeply shared practice—one that is possible only in a community that recognizes that falsehood is strong, but that yearns nonetheless to know what is true and good.

Discernment

Our decisions and our search for guidance take place in the active presence of a God who intimately cares about our life situations and who invites us to participate in the divine activities of healing and transformation. (Frank Rogers, Jr.)

Christians believe we are not alone in the midst of uncertain insights and conflicting impulses. Discernment is the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations.

Shaping Communities

Coordinating a community's practices through good governance helps to make its way of life, clear, visible and viable. (Larry L. Rasmussen)

The shaping of communities is the practice by which we agree to be reliable personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements—indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life. In one sense, then, shaping communities is not just a single practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.

Forgiveness

Practicing forgiveness can produce dramatic transformations in our imaginations and the psychological, social and political horizons of our lives. (L. Gregory Jones)

The practice of forgiveness is not simply a one-time action or an isolated feeling or thought. Forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life that is shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with God and with other people. The central goal of this practice is to reconcile, to restore communion - with God, with one another, and with the whole creation. L. Gregory Jones writes, "Forgiveness works through our

ongoing willingness to give up certain claims against one another, to give the truth when we access our relationships with one another, and to give gifts of ourselves by making innovative gestures that offer a future not bound by the past."

Healing

Healing is an indispensable part of the coming wholeness that God intends for all creation.
(John Koenig)

The practice of healing is a central part of the reconciling activity of God in the world. Healing events are daily signs of the divine mercy that is surging through the world and guiding it toward its final perfection. This is true whether they take place by the sharing of chicken soup, the performance of delicate surgery, or the laying on of hands in a service of worship.

Dying Well

Those who face death experience the living presence of God through the living presence of the community that cherishes and mourns them.
(Amy Plantinga Pauw)

Death is a frightening prospect, for the specter of death destroys any illusion that we are in full control of our lives. How is it, then, that some people are able to die with the assurance that death is not the final word? In the Christian practice of dying well, Christian people do things with and for one another in response to God's strong love, translating into concrete acts our belief in the resurrection of Christ, and of ourselves. Dying well embraces both lament and hope, and both a sense of divine judgment and an awareness of divine mercy.

Singing our Lives

If music is the language of the soul made audible, then human voices, raised in concert in human gatherings, are primary instruments of the soul.
(Don Saliers)

What we sing and how we sing reveals much of who we are, and entering into another's song and music making provides a gateway into their world, which might be much different from our own. Something is shared in singing that goes beyond the words alone. This something has taken shape over many centuries in a practice that expresses our deepest yearning and dearest joy: the practice of singing our lives to God.



The Joy of Practice in Families

J. Bradley Wigger

My (now teenage) son and I embarked on an adventure a few years ago that reminds me again what can happen through learning. Together we have been learning to play the conga drums. As we began, we were both starting from scratch in relation to percussion, and I had not had a music lesson since I was eight years old. Linda, our talented and patient teacher, has been amazingly helpful and encouraging. Typically, she introduces a rhythm to us by playing it. The music itself inspires us, stirring the hope in us that we will be able to play likewise. Then she breaks the rhythm down into its parts—right hand, left hand, high drum, low, slap, bass tone, touch—and so it goes. Our homework is to practice putting these parts together so we can play the full rhythm for her the next week. Not only does Linda know how to teach by showing us the relationship between part and whole, she does something else that is crucial to good learning. She makes it fun. The experience reminds me again of the sheer joy of learning.

Good learning reinforces itself. Fun, joy, meaning—all create a constructive loop that motivates us to devote the time and energy it takes to practice or work on learning. In the case of our drumming, having some fun with it, together, was a key reason we wanted to play in the first place. But the joy of learning runs deeper than fun. There is something about learning itself—learning something where there was nothing, learning to perform, attaining a skill, developing a gift—that is inherently meaningful. It could be learning to drum or learning to whistle; it could be learning to cook or learning the history of rose gardening; it could be learning to read or learning to ride a bicycle. All such learning is gratifying. The more complex and demanding, the greater the gratification, as long as there are successes along the way. My hunch is that the joy of learning has to do with tapping our deepest natures, with tapping our freedom, creativity, and love for life. As we learn, our wonderful strangeness, our openness to possibilities finds a home where it can thrive.

The World of Practice

Without joy or meaning, sustaining the discipline and practice that learning requires is all but impossible. The tasks of learning become overwhelming burdens. However, when the joy of learning happens, even the “burdens” can be meaningful. Even practice. A friend of mine is seasoned opera singer, and he still spends

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(This article originally appeared in the *Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* and is reprinted with permission of the publisher, Jossey-Bass.)

many hours a week training his voice and practicing his art, even when he is not performing publicly. I asked him how he stays motivated, and he responded, “When I practice I get to sing, and I love to sing.” I can imagine no greater sense of meaning, joy, or gratification in learning than when the practice itself is joy. When practice and learning are always for the sake of something else—for performing, for mastery, for getting a good grade, for getting a job—the sheer enjoyment of the activity can get lost in such functional goals.

Something else happens in practice that is part of this gratifying loop that motivates and sustains learning: subtleties emerge. As subtleties emerge, as complexities and nuances are appreciated, the world gets richer and practice takes on depth. In fact, practice itself opens new realms. In terms of drumming, practice is not only a matter of putting parts together but discovering new possibilities. Maybe I get a slight popping sound when my hand is cupped a bit more. Maybe a time delay in timing or omission of a beat turns the whole rhythm in a new direction. Perhaps starting with my left hand makes the third beat stand out a little more. The world of the drum turns out to be a much more complex and fascinating than either David or I ever realized. But these discoveries, these complexities and possibilities keep the learning fresh and sustain the time and effort it takes to sit down and play. The discoveries and subtleties of learning are ingredients for the joy of learning.

While the world becomes more subtle through learning, learning also makes the world bigger. As David and I got better at learning particular rhythms, Linda began playing recordings for us. She taught us how to listen for particular rhythms in relation to specific songs and then connect them to more general styles of music. Eventually, we were able to work on the beat and play along with the recordings. To help with this process, she has passed along tapes and CDs from her own collection and has even taken us to hear local bands play. Linda is Puerto Rican by heritage and emphasizes all kinds of Latin beats and music. (It is not surprising to find David falling asleep at night listening to this music.) The point is that, even as our appreciation for the subtleties of rhythms deepens, our cultural-musical world grows beyond a four-four rock backbeat.

In addition, learning the drums affects how we see; better, it affects how we hear and feel the world around us. In the natural world, as well as in the cultural world, there is rhythm all over the place. In breathing air or gulping a glass of water, there is rhythm; in a bird’s song or a train’s rumble there is rhythm. Rhythm is everywhere. It was always there, but now we are much more likely to notice. Driving

down the road, I sometimes catch my son, working out the rhythm of a song on the radio. As he slaps his knees, he might say, “Sounds almost like a samba beat, but just a little different here.” Or he might say, “That’s the same beat we learned last week.” I have been affected, too. Often now, out on a long walk or run, I hear rhythms in my mind playing off the cadence of my stride. Sometimes I catch myself practicing on my chest, working out a new challenge or experimenting in relation to my steps.

This may be more than you want to know about the world of drumming, but there are clues about any kind of learning in the example of learning to play the congas. There are also clues about the relationship between practice, learning, and meaning. In general practice sustains learning. This is obvious to most people. But less obvious is the way in which practice actually generates learning and, along with it, meaning.

Spiritual Practice

Without addressing the deeper questions of meaning and faith, spiritual practices easily degenerate into burdens and busyness in a world already overloaded with things to do. Practice requires time, discipline, and energy. Practice is demanding, and this is as true for the spiritual life as it is for learning to play music. So if practice is disconnected from questions of meaning, practice will drain our time and energy. Or if practice is so oriented to functional goals that we no longer say, “I get to sing,” then it will eventually go flat.

In the spiritual life, generally, practice is understood in a couple of ways. On the one hand, if you are a “practicing” Christian or Jew, you are the opposite of a “lapsed” Christian or “unobservant” Jew. Practicing means doing things out of faith; maybe you pray, worship, or serve others. On the other hand, the term *practice* also refers to specific practices. In this sense, we focus time and energy to engage in some particular activity. In the larger sense of practice, we focus time and energy to engage our lives in an overall way. In both senses of the word, practice gives texture to the life of faith.

Both senses of practice are helpful to remember as we raise our children. Practice involves specific activities; practice is a general orientation to life. When practices are only specific activities like prayer or worship, it is easier to locate them in one place, such as in a congregation. But when linked to a whole lifestyle, it is easier to imagine and engage in practices anywhere and everywhere. Prayer can happen at home; caring can happen for those in another country.

The reason for noticing these ways of understanding practice is that one of the most powerful ways in which parents can be spiritual teachers is through practice. In this case, teaching is not so much oriented to drawing out three points of a Bible lesson or helping a child memorize a catechism, though it can include these. Again, parents have to shake off images of teaching shaped by classroom education. A powerful form of teaching is simply leading the way for engaging in rituals, disciplines, and practices that are explicitly religious. When these happen at home, children learn that home is spiritual territory. Not only do they communicate that a family can be a community of faith, practices connect the family community to the congregational community. Children learn that prayer, for example, is not just something that happens at worship, but it happens at the dinner table. Children can learn that talk of God is not just something that happens in religion classes or Sunday schools but on a front porch or in a car. Religious practices are bigger than either a congregation or a home, so they can unite both realms.

There is no doubt that the greatest challenge to practicing faith at home has to do with the multiple demands and complexity of modern (or postmodern) family life. We are a scattered lot, and nearly everything in contemporary society wants to drive us apart more. Even religion can add to this fragmenting mania, especially as it divides families and communities up by developmental stages or categories of special concern. But religion does not have to be divisive. In fact, the scattering of community life in the contemporary world only highlights the importance of families and communities finding ways to do things together. Religious practice at home, in congregations, in the community can have binding power, and we desperately need it. We need the kinds of practice that focus life together and resist the hurried manipulations spawned by a consumption-obsessed economy and technological culture. We can bless our children by showing them rhythms of life not driven by shopping, electronics, hurrying, fleeting images, working longer hours, fast meals, quick fixes, and speed in general. Although this hyper-world is not likely to change any time soon, the rhythms of the life of faith may slow us down long enough for creative possibilities to emerge.

Parents have to decide for themselves how and what they want to do in the way of faith practices in the home. I will suggest some possibilities because, historically, some activities continually emerge in the world of faith—perennial activities that can happen in congregations and homes alike. Over and over again, practices involving prayer, the reading of

sacred texts, service, talk of God, meals, and celebrations emerge in faith communities in one way or another. Very often these activities occur in conjunction with one another; each can be carried out in a thousand different ways, according to various traditions. And there are many, many more kinds of rituals and expressions of the spiritual life that are also very important (for example, rituals of confession and atonement or anointing and healing). I want to highlight some more general activities that can be carried out in the midst of family life.

Prayer

When a child sees a father bow his head in prayer or a mother raise her hands in praise, the child is learning to see that there is an authority even greater than the parent. As one child put it, God is “her parents’ parent.” The child is learning a lot about humility; the child is learning a lot about a source of security even greater than the parent.

Prayer itself covers a wide range of concerns and, as it does, integrates a wide range of human life, from joys to concerns, in relation to the Holy. Prayers of praise and prayers of thanksgiving teach gratitude. Prayers of concern teach about care and sources of strength in hard times. Prayers in hushed tones or silence teach reverence and respect; exuberant prayer teaches passion and joy. As children themselves pray, not only are they practicing these things but they can reveal what may be going on in their souls. A child may be afraid to start school, need protection from a bully, be so thankful for Grandma, or hope people who are hungry can find some bread today. Hearing the prayers of our children teaches us about them, helps us pay attention, helps us know how they are doing.

A few years ago, when Jane’s father was battling leukemia, we heard a great many prayers from our children: “. . . and God be with Grandpa, help him get better.” Sometimes the payer would extend, “. . . and be with everyone who is sick or dying.” Prayer created a place where they could share their worries with God and with us. Sometimes we would talk about Grandpa; sometimes we could not and had to let tears speak for us. But this is what prayer so often does. It creates a place for our fears and joys, a place to share vulnerabilities and sources of comfort. I know some parents worry, “What if our children pray for something, like healing, and it doesn’t happen. What will that say about God?” My only response to parents regarding this concern is that prayer also gives us a place to live with the ambiguities of life such as addressing a God we miss or hoping that those who are dying will heal. Jane’s

father, Andy, after some valiant fighting, lost the battle after a year or so. The prayers of David and Cora shift a bit: “. . . and God, be with Grandma and with Mom.” It seems to me that a good practice—in this case, the practice of prayer—is big enough to handle the ambiguities, the fears, and the concerns of life, and even death itself. And by engaging in such practices, we can handle them better, too. In fact, a few months later, after Andy’s death, Cora offered a prayer at dinner. “Dear God,” she prayed, “tell Grandpa we miss him, but tell him we’re doing okay.”

Prayer, like other religious activities, can be done alone. And this is helpful for children to know and to learn. But I am suggesting that families pray together, too. Many parents do have a prayer or devotional life, but it is completely hidden from their children. I am suggesting opening that life up a bit and sharing it. Sharing experiences together is a large part of their binding power. There are no guarantees that “families that pray together stay together,” because some families that pray together still fall apart. But I do think prayer is an integrating force holding communities together. It connects the parts to a larger whole. And so it is with the other practices as well. Shared meals and celebrations, as well as reading and talking together, help families and congregations stay together.

Because prayer can touch the deepest vulnerabilities in our lives, because prayer can be such an intimate experience, prayer can also be very intimidating. On the one hand, it can be so personal; on the other, we are addressing the Holy Creator of the universe, whose name we are forbidden to utter. This is powerful business. So it is no wonder that many parents, like many people in general, are afraid or overwhelmed to share in prayer with others, even family members. I hear from parents, “I’m not sure what to say anyway. Then with my children listening, I’m even more scared.” I believe this is another area where the resources of one’s congregation and tradition can be very helpful. Every religious tradition practices prayer in its own way. Some emphasize speaking from the heart; others emphasize formal, historical, or memorized prayers. I suggest taking your cues from your congregation’s tradition and resources. Almost any congregation can put you in touch with resources for prayer. Many have devotional books that are designed for individual use but can easily be used in family settings. Libraries, bookstores, religious magazines, and even the Internet are loaded with resources. One of the most empowering forms of family ministry a congregation can offer is to make resources available for use outside the congregational walls. If nothing else, most congregations use some

sort of worship bulletin or worship book full of prayers. Pay attention to these, and you should find plenty of help. Families could easily use, say, a prayer of thanksgiving printed in a worship bulletin as a mealtime blessing all week. Another great resource is the Bible itself, particularly the Book of Psalms, which is a book full of prayers. The Psalms have been one of the most meaningful guides to prayer in our household. Not only do they provide something to say, they put us in touch with the wisdom and history of people thousands of years ago.

For those who are motivated but not comfortable with praying aloud, using printed words can be a great way to practice prayer. It lets us do something on the one hand; on the other, it is a way of gaining facility with prayer, a way of getting accustomed to saying words of prayer in front of others, a way of learning. And so it is with children. If they hear us pray, if they learn to say prayers themselves, they will be much more comfortable with prayer and perhaps discover subtleties and meaning through it.

Sacred Texts

Parents reach a magic point in their family lives when their children learn to read for themselves. Although Jane and I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Seuss and *Goodnight Moon*, as well as all kinds of other stories and poems, after the first two or three thousand times through, enough was enough. When the children could read to themselves at night, it was a source of pride for them and a wonderful relief for us. Having said this, it caught me off-guard one night, two or three years after we had quit reading to our children, when David asked me to read, out loud, a poem from a book he had. I did.

He asked, “How ‘bout another one?”

“Okay.” I read another. This time Cora slipped in and started listening.

She said, “Do another one.” So I read a few more; then I suggested they reach read one and then go to bed.

The next night, they asked to repeat the reading. And each night, they kept asking. I was getting worried; I thought I was done with this. So before long I was talking Jane in relieving me of this duty, which had strangely returned from the past. But after a couple nights of relief, I found myself slipping in and listening, too. Finally we gave into this impulse and started by all sitting down together and reading books or stories or poems out loud together. Except for some breaks here and there, we’ve been reading out loud ever since.

Because Jane and I were so tired of reading the same preschool stories over and over again, we had forgotten the magic of reading out loud and the special time with the children reading had initially been. The hardest part for us now is choosing the next book. Sometimes we find ourselves not able to make the time to read together; someone is out of town, we have late meetings, or homework is not finished. But the truth is, we seem to find it harder to make some time to read when the book itself is not particular good. The better the book, the more likely we are to decide not to watch a television show instead, or make a phone call, or get papers graded, or check e-mail. Meaningful time, like good learning, is self-reinforcing and even has a way of creating time.

The importance of scriptures, of faith's story and the ways in which it roots us in faith, is essential. The scriptures, in fact, are so pivotal in a living faith that reading them can begin to feel like a duty. And maybe it is. But doing things out of duty alone has a way of killing the joy. So I share with you the experience of reading aloud with our children to accentuate another dimension of reading sacred texts: the sheer power of words and stories shared aloud. Some families make daily scripture reading a part of their lives. It could be as simple as a passage from a devotional book, accompanied with a prayer. It could be reading from a children's Bible at bedtime. Some make it a weekly habit, accompanied by a Friday evening or Sunday meal, for example. A friend of mine tells of the sense of reverence created when his father would go get the Bible from the shelf, open it, and begin reading. "There was just something about it, almost visceral, it felt real." This friend, a preacher, has devoted his life to exploring and sharing that reality.

Because the Bible is such a big book, the challenge is figuring out where to begin or how to find some kind of approach through it. Again, congregations, libraries, and bookstores usually have resource materials to help. Many people find it helpful to simply repeat the scripture readings covered in worship or class or Bible study. Unlike most preschool reading, going back over a passage of scripture that has been preached or taught usually reveals subtleties missed the first time. Parents can also pick the brains of the professionals, congregational leaders, or friends they respect. A parenting group, if there is one in the congregation, can play a helpful role. I know one group that, instead of focusing on how to get their children to behave or get to bed or all the other daily concerns of parents, did a Bible study. The study was intended to prepare the parents to read the passages with their own children. Inevitably, issues of discipline or the

frustrations of parenting arose, but they were placed in a large perspective. In this case, reading sacred texts had binding power in family life, as parents read with the children, but also binding power with others in the congregation.

Meals

Food has always been an important vehicle for sacred learning. The bitter herbs of a Passover seder teach about the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. The broken bread of communion teaches the crucifixion. Kosher laws, potluck dinners, meals for the grieving or ill, *Shabbat*, and Sunday dinner—these meals teach so much, including what it means to be part of this community, part of this family. Anthropologists pay particular attention to what happens around food in a society because so often the patterns and values of the society come to a head around the meal. The world-famous twentieth-century psychologist Erik Erikson would always try to have a meal with a family before treating a child. He wanted to see what was going on in the society of that child's family, and the meal was a good way to find out.

In fact, it was through meals that early Christianity and early Judaism in the first century distinguished themselves from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. As the festival meals and banquets of the Greco-Romans, it was expected that slaves, women, and children would not even attend unless it was to serve the property-owning men. In other words, they practices around the meal reflected the hierarchy of society; property-owning men were considered to be more deserving of love, respect, honor, and food itself. But then certain Jewish movements, including Christianity, challenged such ranking systems and, in turn, meals were eaten in a different way. These movements would try to accommodate large numbers of people rather than an honored few; they would insist on equality in relationships, and the numbers would include women and children. Jesus, for example, tells people not to choose places of honor at a banquet. In fact, he says, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14). Such teaching would turn the ranking system on its head. A more contemporary example would be the lunch counters and dining halls of the 1960s. Freedom Riders risked their lives to transform America's laws about eating, about who could break bread together. For a white person and a black person to sit together at the same table and share a meal was not just something nice to do, it was a revolution. So meals

are more than food. They teach and sustain a community's values.

For many households, the dinner table is a place that gathers the family and more. It may gather other sacred practices as well: a prayer, a scripture reading, or holiday celebration, for example. A friend told me of a ritual her own busy family has for supper. They light a candle, both for aesthetics and as a "reminder of God's light." After receiving a Bible from her congregation in third grade, her daughter has been reading from the Psalms, just a few verses. They take turns praying, but the other child likes to write and, with the encouragement of a Sunday School teacher, has written some prayers the family uses before the meal. As my friend told me about this, I thought it all sounded a bit too idyllic, so I had several questions:

"Does she understand those psalms?"

"Not always, but she will."

"I see."

"On the other hand, I don't always either; sometimes we talk about it; sometimes it's probably just a thoughtless ritual."

"What are the prayers like?"

"Some make me cringe; some are beautiful—a little like the psalms when I think about it."

"You all sound too good; don't you all fight or anything?"

"Who said we didn't? Who said we were good? We fuss all the time. Hell, the other night the kids got in a big argument over who would light the candle! Sometimes we argue; sometimes we tell jokes. We laugh, cry, bicker, act like babies, act like adults. Sometimes it's great; sometimes it's kinda boring. The point is—I'm not sure what the point is. We're just together. It's us. I don't think about it in terms of good and bad."

This mother may not think of the mealtime in terms of good and bad. But of particular interest to parents of older children and youth are studies pointing to the constructive role that family meals play in the lives of teenagers. Research out of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University suggests that the odds of teenagers doing drugs go down as they eat with their parents.

The odds that 12- to 17-year-olds will smoke, drink, or use marijuana rise as the number of meals they with their parents declines. Only six percent of kids who eat dinner with their parents six or more times a week smoke compared with 24 percent of those who eat dinner with their parents twice a week or less; for marijuana use, it's 12 percent compared 35 percent.

The research also gives insight into the current debate about whether parents or peers are more formative for children. "Kids who do not smoke pot credit their parents with their decision; kids who smoke pot credit their peers." Significantly, the other most helpful factor for preventing drug use is religion, specifically, attending religious services. Now there is nothing magical or mechanical about eating meals or attending services that automatically wards off these behaviors. It is more the case that eating together and participating in religious practices are part of a large fabric of living. "Parents who eat meals with their kids know where they are after school and on weekends and are involved in their children's school activities and academics."

So my suggestion is to eat together. Give the children chores in the meal's preparation and cleanup. Turn off televisions and telephones, say a prayer, enjoy the food, bicker, fuss, joke, and cherish the company. Meals are sacred.

Service

Whether it is preparing a home for homeless refugees or paying a visit to a homebound neighbor, acts of service teach children to care for others. Care is practiced within the home, just as it is within a congregation. But if it stays only in the home or congregation, children miss the greatest mission of faith itself, that is, to serve a hurting world. Each act of care and compassion teaches a child more than we can say. Some congregations facilitate the possibilities for service by organizing mission trips or having ongoing tasks such as taking flowers or meals to the elderly, volunteering at a shelter, or advocating for vulnerable people. Most congregations provide ample opportunities. My primary suggestion for parents and congregational leaders is to look for situations where it could be appropriate to include children. Could the mission trip be an intergenerational one? A child may be too young to work at the Habitat for Humanity building site, but could he or she help make sandwiches to feed the workers?

The national champion of vulnerable children, Marian Wright Edelman, tells of growing up in a household that valued service to others and how these values she learned so early shape her work with the Children's Defense Fund. In her home, "children were taught," she says, "not by sermonizing, but by personal example—that nothing was too lowly to do." She goes on to tell about a debate her parents had when she was eight or nine: Was young Marian too young to go with her older brother Harry to clean the bed and bedsores of a sick, poor woman?

She remembers, “I went and learned just how much the smallest helping hands and kindness can mean to a person in need.”

I am not suggesting that the main reason to engage in acts of service is to teach our children something. The main reason is to bring care and compassion to where it is needed. The same is true with other sacred practices. We engage in them for their own sake. Nonetheless, there are some indirect fruits of these practices. They are times together, they generate meaning, they forge deep bonds, they root our lives in deep soil, they resist the powers that hurry and fragment human relationships. And yes, these practices teach. We and our children can learn through them. So in terms of the practice of serving and caring, children not only receive care from their parents and communities, they can learn to give it and to bring care into another generation.

Personally, I believe acts of service teach the deepest lessons in the mystery of others and, consequently, are one of the great weapons against evil. The worst atrocities humanity commits against itself occur by dehumanizing others, that is, by reducing the fullness (mystery) of others to problems. Racism, genocide, torture, and violence in general all illustrate and embody the point. But compassion works in precisely the opposite direction. People are not problems, not reducible, not to be treated like dirt. Acts of service teach our children that every human being is made in the image of God. Acts of care teach the holiness of others.

Talk of God

Talking of God is not always easy; in fact, I don't think it should be. We can cheapen respect for God through cursing, for example, but we can also do so through facile explanations and easy theological answers: “God didn't want me to have that parking spot” or “Your suffering is a gift from the Lord.” Nonetheless, talking of God is important. If God is only mentioned in congregational life, it is difficult for children to see the sacred possibilities of everyday living.

Talking of God is more than simply using words for the Holy One or more than praying to God. Talking of God is akin to talking about what we believe, what our convictions are—things that really matter and fire passionate concerns. It is also akin to talking about big issues—matters of life and death, suffering and joy, or love and care. For children to be in an atmosphere where God can be revered as well as discussed teaches children how to deal with all kinds of important matters with respect and

confidence. Sex, conflict, politics, and ethical dilemmas, for example, can be all difficult to discuss.

As with praying, many parents are intimidated by God talk because they are not sure what to say. “Maybe I'll say the wrong thing.” I don't know why bad things happen to good people.” “I'm not sure what to think of miracles.” Because talking of God is so closely related to big life-and-death issues that resist easy answers, a simple question from a child can raise some of our own deepest questions and theological struggles. Sometimes it is easier to say, “Ask your rabbi” or “Ask the minister.” And there may be times when asking would be a wonderful thing to do, perhaps together. But if referring to others is the main strategy for God questions and God talk, children learn that home is not a place for discussing deep issues or difficult matters. In addition, if you do not already know this, clergy struggle with these big questions, too, and they may be no better prepared to talk to a child about them than anyone else.

One of the best pieces of advice that anyone gave me, as a parent, about such matters was this: don't be so sure your child always needs an answer. So instead of having an elaborate discussion about transcendence or referring your child to the clergy, perhaps it is enough to say, “I'm not sure why we can't see God. What do you think?” Many times this is all the child wants—a chance to wonder openly about things or express an idea. The simple response, “I'm not sure. What do you think?” can open the door to a meaningful conversation, and a child learns that home is a good place to reflect on such matters, that the child's questions and thoughts are taken seriously, and that there are big questions in life that don't always go away. Yes, parents need to be very clear with children about some things: “You do not cross that road by yourself,” “You and the car will be home by five o'clock.” Clarity in these matters secures safety. And there are also matters of convictions to be clear about: “We do not use that word in this house,” “I believe with all my heart that God loves you,” “It is wrong to judge people by skin color.” But there are other matters in life that are not so clear, so we can model how to live with difficult or even unanswerable questions.

On top of all this, the truth is that sometimes we will give bad answers. Sometimes we will fail at negotiating a good conversation. Sometimes we will not listen carefully enough or we will be too tired to realize that a perfect moment to talk about God or something important just flew by. Parents need to be gracious to themselves as well as others. And children can learn by such grace. Without a context of grace, any and all of these practices can feed an abiding sense of failure, which in turn fuels anxious

living, which is the wrong spirit. And even in a good spirit, there are no guarantees. It is easy to convince ourselves that, “If I pray daily with my child, she will be a better person” or “If we read the Bible together, my son will be more faithful.” However, religious learning and the religious life, generally, are simply not mechanical enterprises with neat cause-and-effect relationships. Nonetheless, even if our kids rebel against our values and beliefs, I would rather give them something meaningful to rebel against than a haunting void.

Then again, do not underestimate the power that any religious practice, including talk of God, may hold for a child. Author and musician James McBride tells how he asked his mother, walking home from church one day, whether God was black or white. McBride’s mother was a Jewish immigrant from Europe; his father was an African American Baptist preacher. The question held high identity stakes for the child. His mother answered that God is not black or white but a spirit. But McBride pressed, “Does he like black or white people better?”

“He loves all people. He’s a spirit.”

“What’s a spirit?”

“A spirit’s a spirit.”

“What color is God’s spirit?”

“It doesn’t have a color,” she said. “God is the color of water. Water doesn’t have a color.”

For the young McBride, thinking of God as the color of water carried deep power and meaning for him through his young life and struggle for identity. Such “teachable moments” are spontaneous times when no one would have predicted that a deep lesson could be learned. But even though these are unplanned, it does seem to be true that teachable moments are more likely to emerge in homes where religious practices have been integrated into family life. If the subject of God is always avoided, it will be difficult for a child to ask God question, especially the older they get. Praying, having thoughtful discussions, or reading scriptures, for example, can create an atmosphere where religious teachable moments are more likely to happen. And as McBride’s conversation with his mother illustrates, talk of God can pave the way for talking about other kinds of deeply personal, highly charged matters.

Celebration

Remember the joy of learning? Celebration is to the religious life as joy is to learning. Holidays and holy days, feasts and festivals, all help to sustain the life of faith. They order and shape the flow of the religious year. Christmas and Easter or Passover and Yom Kippur, for example, are times when religious

communities remember and celebrate the presence of God, the Holy One, who sustains life itself. These special times are not purely about joy and celebration, however. They also commemorate times of pain and suffering. For example, Easter recalls the crucifixion; Passover recalls the oppression of slavery. But the struggles of life are placed in an even wider context of the goodness of life—resurrection, freedom, redemption, and love.

Many homes that have no other visible religious practices in their lives celebrate the major holidays. These can be an important building block for other religious practices. Maybe a family decides to have a prayer or devotional reading every night in preparation for Christmas. Maybe a sabbath ritual is built into a weekend meal. Perhaps a meal and good company are taken into a lonely home-bound neighbor on a holiday. Religious practices have a way of working well together, each nourishing another.

Celebration, like joy, is tricky in this culture, however. First of all, most of the major holidays are pulled into the circle of a consume-and-spend economy. This can kill the joy and draw the meaning right out of a celebration. Although shopping for gifts or cards can be fun, it can easily become a duty overloaded with high expectations, competition, and greed. Parents are the main barrier between their children and such a culture. Keeping holidays rooted in their religious significance is a major way of helping children know a source of joy more enduring than the latest fad in toys or computer games. But another tricky matter has to do with joy and celebration themselves. We don’t always feel joyous; we don’t always feel like celebrating. Maybe this is the first Christmas since Mom died; maybe I just lost my job; maybe I find the intensity of the holiday overwhelming and depressing; maybe I am battling depression in a world that wants me to be happy and cheery. These are difficult issues and can plague children as well as adults. This is where, again, I think the spiritual nature of holidays is better than the pop cultural versions. For people going through a challenging time, the struggles expressed in the holiday may become particular meaningful. Stories of Jesus on the cross before Easter, of the wandering in the wilderness, of the bitterness of oppression, of the desire for atonement, or of the slaughter of the innocents at Christmas—all are powerful stories to tell. Or something as simple as reading scripture or having a prayer or serving somebody in need during a holiday can give the child or adult something deeper to connect with, a place that can meet the sadness. It is helpful for families to be sensitive to these tricky dimensions of celebrations so that they

can tailor holidays in ways to suit their own situations.

With these qualifications in mind, however, sometimes families need to cut loose and have a party, get away, take a trip, prepare a feast, dance, sing, or raise a toast to life. Vacations, trips, weddings, reunions, special meals, birthdays, the end of school year, anniversaries, graduations, games, a bike ride, or a picnic—any or all of these are ways of sustaining joy in family life and teaching children that life is very good. Here, often, adults have more to learn from children than the other way around. Children know how to play; adults, for all kinds of good and serious reasons, can easily forget. But play and joy are joined at the hip.

Many families create their own playful rituals, not only for holiday celebrations or anniversaries but throughout the week or school year. The ritual might be as simple as playing catch after work or school or having a game night once a week. Other families have special meals on certain nights: homemade pizzas or breakfast at suppertime. Some parents like to create individual times with each child; every Wednesday they might play tennis in the park; every Saturday they go for a hike. Some families have a special place they visit every year—a special camping spot, a beach, a home town. These rituals and traditions, rooted in a playful side of life, are often some of the most meaningful times in a family's life.

Building on Strengths

A major principle in education is one helpful to family life and religious practice. The principle is this: *build on strengths*. In education, building on strengths means if a student is good with language, the teacher tailors assignments around the use of language for that student. When studying history, for example, ask the student to write a report, tell what happened to the class, or perhaps write up the historical event as if it were a newspaper article. If students are particularly expressive, active, or dramatic have them act the historical event out. Ask musically inclined students to write a song about it. The idea is not that students uninterested in history should not learn history but that students learn better by approaching subject material through their gifts and interests. They are more likely to find the learning meaningful and, in turn, students are motivated to keep learning.

The implication for families and religious practice is that you can build on the strengths your family already has. If you manage to eat meals fairly regularly, perhaps mealtime would be a good time to

read a psalm or engage in prayer. If you know how to do holidays and celebrations well, maybe you can share some of that playfulness with friends or colleagues or others who could use some joy in their lives. If you read to your child at bedtime, perhaps that would be a good time to read a Bible story, too, or to say a prayer after your read. If you already pray with your children at bedtime, maybe that would be a good time to have some simple conversations about God. If you are highly creative people and enjoy creating new rituals, do so in the name of faith. If you do not feel so original, talk to other parents or ask people you respect what their families did growing up. Like anything, religious practice in home life is easier if a child grows up with it from the start. But children, even teenagers, may be more open to something new than you imagine, especially if they can have a say in it. You may have to experiment. But what if you try a devotional time and it just falls flat? Instead of giving up, it could be a time to rethink how your family does it. Maybe it starts with some drumming, or a walk, or a really good book and ends with a favorite prayer or blessing.

There is nothing set in stone about the practices identified in this article. There are certainly more, and there are ways in which the list itself is artificial. If you have a practice of inviting new congregation members to your home for a holiday meal, and at the meal you say a prayer, what practice would this be? Sharing meals? Celebrating? Prayer? Service? Perhaps you would call it something else altogether: practicing hospitality? The important thing is for children to know that faith is meaningful to you as a parent and to you as a family. And because it is so important, you want to find ways to live it out and discover ways for it to become meaningful to them as well. You can build on the strength of your family relationships to express and live into the spiritual life, even as the spiritual life strengthens family relationships.

I think of these visible religious practices, done intentionally and regularly, as analogous to a sanctuary. Recall Abraham Heschel's statement: "Even those who believe that God is everywhere set aside a pace for a sanctuary." He goes on, "For the sacred to be sensed at all moments everywhere, it must also at this moment be somewhere." Religious practices are the "somewheres" in home life that help us sense the sacred everywhere.



Faith Formation in Christian Practices with Youth and Young Adults

Don C. Richter

The twentieth century was fascinated with the spiritual formation of youth and young adults. Not just in North America, but throughout the world, leaders of all stripes were obsessed with harnessing the power and passions of youth—for evil purposes as well as for good. If we can just get young people committed to our cause, these leaders reasoned, we can tap their great reservoir of power (*potentia*) and recruit them to suffer (*passio*) and even die for the sake of our enterprise.¹ History has confirmed that these assumptions are well founded. For better or worse, twentieth-century youth movements have defined the religious and political landscape.²

With respect to youth, the twentieth century began in 1904 with the publication of G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence*. Hall described the teenage years as a “golden stage” of life in which the unbridled energies of youth were like a raging mountain river rushing wildly toward the sea. Drawing on the image of a dam, Hall urged society to contain, control, and channel the life energies of the young.

And so within a decade all manner of institutions sprang up to provide “holding environments” for adolescents: the high school movement, scouting, and Christian youth groups and associations. In industrialized countries the timing was optimal, as youth by the thousands were leaving the farm for jobs in the city. How convenient for industrial capitalism that an emergent psychological theory legitimated this large-scale social migration by advocating places of safe harbor for untethered teens and young adults.³

The twentieth century both idolized youth and domesticated them, putting youth on a pedestal while stripping them of rights, worthwhile work, and mature responsibilities. For millennia teenagers had worked alongside adults, contributing to their household economy and the greater social good. Now youth were socially constructed as “adolescents” and held in limbo for an extended period, at the very time of life they experience enormous physical, cognitive, and spiritual changes. With the advent of modern-day marketing and advertising in the early part of the twentieth century, youth came to be viewed as a distinct subculture, a commercial niche ripe for exploitation. The demographic bubbles reflected in the Baby Boom and Echo Boom generations each, in turn, accelerated this trend.⁴

The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson posited “identity formation” as the central task of adolescence. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Erikson observed how teens become a substantial social

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force through negotiating ideologies and values. Beliefs matter, claimed Erikson, especially in conjunction with behaviors shaped by those beliefs. Religious movements have recognized this and have long appealed to the ideological hunger of young people. Likewise, totalitarian movements—whether from the right or left, whether defiantly atheistic or stridently religious—make their primary pitch to the hearts and minds of youth. Convert young people and your project will become self-perpetuating.

The twentieth century did not end with the apocalyptic predictions of Y2K. The punctuation mark occurred on September 11, 2001, when the spiritual formation of young Islamic jihadists came to fruition. For those who consider ministry with youth simplistic or beneath their dignity or the stepping stone to *real* ministry with adults, let's be clear about what's at stake. Al-Qaeda is powerful and pernicious precisely because this organization effectively recruits and trains young people; it is an effective transnational model of youth ministry. For Christian communities and for the many moderate Islamic communities that hope to promote a different worldview, we must ask ourselves: are we prepared to invest our best time, talent, and treasure to strengthen alternative, life-giving models of ministry with youth?⁵

Faith Shapes a Way of Life

Christian faith is not an achievement but a gift, the assurance of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ. Faith is both personal (God loves and redeems me) and communal (God loves and redeems the whole world). Faith in both senses involves believing, of course. Belief, however, does not operate in a vacuum but comes to make sense in the midst of life. Life-shaping belief is dynamic; it gets reframed as individuals grow and change over the course of a lifetime. This does not happen automatically; rather, growth in faith can occur at any developmental age or stage. Some persons experience intense growth in faith during a brief period. Others may coast for a lifetime on childhood faith.

During much of the twentieth century religious educators asked: How do we teach and learn Christian faith in ways that are developmentally appropriate? This is an important question—but it is a secondary one. It is rooted in a psychological paradigm and focuses attention on the capacities of the individual learner. This question highlights the capacity of youth to think in a new key (Piaget, Kohlberg), to postpone commitments in service of a “psychosocial moratorium” (Erikson, Marcia), and

to search for personal meaning by going on a “faith journey.”

Without dismissing developmental insights, religious educators first need to ask a different question: How are Christian practices shaping a way of life within this faith community, and how do we teach all the members of this community through their participation in those practices? The practices paradigm prompts educators to evaluate the ecclesial health of a parish or congregation by paying attention to fundamental activities, such as honoring the body, offering hospitality, sharing life at table, giving and receiving forgiveness, prayer, and singing our lives to God.⁶ Evaluation questions include:

- Which practices are flourishing and seem most vital within this parish?
- How are people being initiated into these vital practices and led into deeper participation and more faithful discipleship?
- Which practices seem anemic and need a spiritual infusion?
- Where in the Body of Christ today or throughout history can we find wisdom and resources for strengthening Christian practices?

Knowing the practice profile of a parish is a crucial starting point for the spiritual formation of youth and young adults. Before inviting young people into a particular way of life we need to have some sense of what this way of life entails, and how it shapes our own daily lives as people of faith. This is not a simple or straightforward matter, for within North America myriad lifestyles compete for our loyalty. Followers of Jesus are not above the fray, for the competition takes place within each of us as well. That's why youth ministry needs to be understood as “growing in faith with youth.” Youth ministry is not something adults do to or for young people. It's something adults and youth do together, in partnership, as we congregate and as we go out into the world to serve.

Way to Live

From 2000-2002 the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith assembled eighteen adults and eighteen teens to collaborate on a writing project about Christian practices. Our goal was to produce a book for a teenage audience that would portray the abundant way of life Jesus invites us to live *now*—in our family, our neighborhood, our school, our world. Our hope was to provide substantive guidance and spiritual nourishment for teens as well as for their parents and other adults who care for them. The

resources we designed encourage adults themselves to grow in faith with youth.

As we prepared the book, our teen and adult group gathered four times for writer conferences, although we didn't jump into writing the chapters right away. First we spent time exploring different practices in small groups, considering biblical and personal stories, songs, and images related to each practice. We played and worshiped together as we became a community shaped by ongoing practices. Between meetings, we stayed in touch with other via mail and e-mail. Once we established sufficient trust, we presented drafts for mutual critique, aided by a writing coach. Our young contributors took their roles to heart, keeping teen sensibilities before us as *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* took shape. When we met the final time to review our manuscript, we also planned strategies for a companion leader's guide and website.⁷

In the first chapter of *Way to Live*, fifteen-year-old Martha reflects on a mission trip with her youth group. Martha notes how a way of life unfolded for her and for her companions while on the road. Each day they cared for children and helped an elderly man clean his house. They ate meals together, read the Bible, prayed, played, and sang. They didn't worry about their appearance or who had the latest cool stuff, because they all wore work clothes and lived out of their suitcases. There were no cars, no TVs, no cell phones, no i-Pods, no e-mail, no commercial clutter. With few distractions, Martha began to notice a pattern emerging: "I was getting involved in what God was doing. It was like God was working through me to care for those little kids, who usually don't get the kind of attention I was giving them. It was like I was becoming God's hands in that place." (*Way to Live*, 2)

Back in her Midwestern home Martha finds herself yearning for the clarity of life she experienced on her trip. Sustaining her convictions seems daunting, especially given the demands of school, sports, and social life. Martha knows she can't do this by herself. She needs companions—trusted adults as well as teens—to continue the journey with her and hold her accountable. She suspects and hopes that the church might offer such support.

Exploring Practices in Context

Way to Live shares reflections on what teen-adult teams discovered as together we explored Christian practices. Note first the emphasis on seeking local knowledge. Readers may be inspired, for instance, by

what WTL authors have to say about the practice of "managing our stuff." Yet our formation as Jesus' disciples always occurs in specific times and places. So "managing our stuff" will take a different shape and prompt a different call to discipleship in urban Los Angeles than in rural Iowa. *Way to Live* resources challenge youth and adults to go out and explore practices for themselves in their own local settings.

On the other hand, some features of "managing our stuff" will be similar across contexts. Consider how Christians throughout history have struggled mightily to be faithful stewards of their material resources, and how their efforts might help us resist the worst impulses of global consumer culture. Young people today don't have to reinvent the wheel or figure out how to do this from scratch. They can seek wisdom as embodied in the life and witness of forbearers such as third-century teenager Anthony of Egypt or thirteenth-century young adult Francis of Assisi. In the company of wise adults, they can learn from contemporary faith communities that share a rule of life how to manage and regard their material possessions.⁸

Household Wisdom

Young people yearn for trustworthy guidance in living wisely. Now and then they may act like rebels without a cause for the sheer sake of bucking authority. But most of the time young people crave sustained, meaningful relationships with adults who will care for them and nurture their hopes and dreams. This is a second and crucial emphasis of *Way to Live*: adults and teens grow in faith as we share life together. A group of teens led by one or two adults can explore the practice of "managing our stuff" up to a point. But engaging in this practice with an equal number of youth and adults makes for deeper exploration; it makes transparent to youth how adults discern their own participation in this practice. Why is this so?

Adults typically determine the rules for how household stuff is managed. Gospel wisdom addresses both explicit and implicit rules governing the full range of household activities, from sharing food to exchanging gifts to caring for clothes. Teens and their parents can grow in faith together as they practice good stewardship in managing their stuff. They can acknowledge the household as a pivotal locus for lifelong spiritual formation.

The importance of the parental household is corroborated by a key finding of the recent National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR): teens identify their parents as the single most significant influence

in their religious and spiritual lives.⁹ While parents look to the parish to teach their young, teens look to their parents for cues about a life of faith.¹⁰ Most teen respondents characterized themselves as religious even though they don't think practicing religion requires belonging to a local faith community. Religious teens appreciate parish life, and seventy-five percent of those who do attend worship services find them "warm and welcoming." Yet even churchgoing teens believe faith is more a matter of personal choice than communal affiliation.¹¹

Sound familiar? Religious teens are highly conventional in their beliefs—conventional in that their worldviews correspond to the worldviews of their parents. This allegiance to parental worldview lasts at least through the first year of college.¹² Few teens described themselves as "spiritual seekers" or "spiritual but not religious." What teens reported in the NSYR surveys and interviews by and large reflects what their parents believe. Again, this study underscores the vital importance of youth and adults—especially parents—growing in faith together. Today the most effective approaches to ministry with youth build-on youth-adult partnership rather than age segregation.

In the ten years since its publication, *The Godbearing Life* has sparked renewal for many youth leaders by emphasizing the spiritual formation adults need as they minister with youth. Adults often feel inadequate and self-conscious about their lack of biblical and theological knowledge. What teens need from adults, claim co-authors Kenda Dean and Ron Foster, is not more information. What they need is to know what and whom adults love. When youth leaders convey that they love God, and invite youth to join them in loving God, teens will go in search of whatever additional information they need. When we love someone that's what we do; we find out all we can about that person.

In *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli summons the entire congregation or parish to pay careful attention to young people in order to serve with them in ministry. Yaconelli counsels adult leaders to resist the latest youth ministry fads and program ideas. Instead, classic contemplative disciplines of prayer and meditating on Scripture open the eyes and ears of adults to discern what God is calling them to do with young people in their care—not just parish youth but every young person who might be considered a neighbor to the parish.

From Program to Practice

In many North American congregational religious education is chiefly driven by *program management*. The professional church educator, including the youth minister, is viewed as a program director or coordinator of parish programs. "A program is a list of events to be performed, a plan of activities to be accomplished" (Foster, 29). The program paradigm appeals to our desire to organize, schedule, compartmentalize, and offer a range of choices for consumption in the religious marketplace. "Program options emphasize personal choice, often without criteria to assess the relative value of the options offered" (Foster 29). The monthly church calendar shows meetings and events, typically clustered on Sundays and perhaps Wednesdays or other weekdays. Sometimes this calendar is shaped by rhythms of the liturgical year; more often it is shaped by school and vacation schedules as well.

In some churches, leaders are promoting a shift from program to practice. Rather than viewing parish life as a series of episodic and disconnected events, church educators and youth ministers are guided by an overarching vision of how practices nurture and sustain faith, of how practices anchored in worship flow into the world and throughout daily life.

Maria Harris, a religious educator of blessed memory, described how classic forms of Christian communal life—*kerygma*, *didache*, *diakonia*, *leiturgia*, *koinonia*—provide a framework for faithful ministry with youth. Harris redefines these early church terms in relation to contemporary teenagers. For instance, she describes *kerygma* as "the ministry of advocacy" and *diakonia* as "the ministry of troublemaking." *Portrait of Youth Ministry* is still as relevant for prophetic, life-giving youth ministry today as it was when Harris penned it almost three decades ago.

In *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry*, William Myers presents contrasting portraits of two Protestant youth ministries. St. Andrew's Church is an affluent, mostly white Presbyterian congregation in suburban St. Louis. Grace Church is a large, black, south-side Chicago congregation affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

At Grace Church the entire congregation assumes leadership for nurturing youth in faith. Every fifth Sunday the youth at Grace Church lead the entire worship service, including the sermon. Grace youth are (explicitly) taught that church is like *family*, and that survival depends on cooperation and mutual aid. For young people at Grace, the goal is to become

competent adults by resisting forces within the dominant culture.

At St. Andrew's Church, youth are provided programs directed by designated youth leaders. St. Andrew's (implicitly) teaches that church is like a *corporation*, and that success comes to those who compete well as rugged individualists. Youth are taught to become competent managers by learning to adapt to the dominant culture.

Myers's comparison of St. Andrew's and Grace shows what's at stake in the paradigm shift from program to practice. The contrast prompts questions as we evaluate our current youth ministry: What explicit and implicit formation goals does our parish hold for young people? Are these goals more akin to those of Grace Church or to those of St. Andrew's? What would it take for our youth ministry to become more courageous, more challenging, to adopt an alternative way of life?

Honoring the Body

Grace Church proclaims itself "unapologetically black and unashamedly Christian." The story of African slavery in the Americas is a story of people struggling to maintain human dignity in the face of massive oppression and humiliation. Slavery also perpetuates dishonoring the body through internalized shame and oppression. The antidote to this legacy of self-loathing is a healthy sense of pride and the practice of honoring the body. To honor the body is to respect the sacred vulnerability of oneself and others, to see every body as created in the image of God.

The Valparaiso Project describes faith practices as "embodied wisdom," to distinguish our approach from "spiritual practices" that ignore the body. Young people, especially youth of color, harbor the suspicion that Christianity is more concerned about saving their souls for the world to come than redeeming them *body and soul* for life in this world. Youth need more than well-intended slogans such as "just say no" or "true love waits." They need a capacious practice of honoring the body grounded in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, bolstered by theological scaffolding provided by Paul's insistence that human bodies are "temples of the Holy Spirit," beloved by our Creator (see 1 Corinthians 6:12–20).

Sharing life at table is a palpable practice for honoring the body. Food plays a pivotal role in founding stories of Judaism and Christianity; indeed, the Church began as meal fellowship. In my home congregation we have Sunday dinner each week following worship. Parishioners come from

throughout metropolitan Atlanta, so breaking bread together provides time and space to reconnect. Some teens dine with their friends while others sit with their families—perhaps a rare occasion given their weekly schedules. College students and single young adults are grateful for this food and fellowship opportunity. It's the best meal in town for five dollars! People who live on the streets find their way to the buffet line and appreciate the warm meal and words of welcome. Every Sunday young people witness these gestures of ecclesial hospitality and learn how they too can be more involved in this graceful activity.

Several congregations have made table fellowship the centerpiece of their ministry with youth. Matt Smith drew on insights from *Way to Live* to develop a model of youth ministry called *Grace Café* for United Methodist congregations in Davis and Sacramento, California. Supplied by local sustainable food producers, youth prepare weekly meals for themselves and various guests—some nights for presenters and some nights for street people.

Tina McCormick is associate pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Westfield, New Jersey. Tina coordinates Agape Community Kitchen, an outreach ministry that prepares and serves a nutritious meal every Wednesday night to 250 people in the nearby town of Elizabeth. Young people started and continue to lead this soup kitchen ministry, which also provides a clothing closet where guests can receive blankets, clothes, and shoes. Even teens and adults who aren't Presbyterian participate weekly, drawn into an activity that feels worthwhile, that matters, and that makes a difference in the world. What began as a hands-on service opportunity has become a weekly, way-of-life priority that, over time, forms participants in practices of offering hospitality, breaking bread, and seeking justice. Gospel stories and images emerge organically as youth and teens stir chili, wash dishes, and listen to the testimony of guests. As Tina says, "Our hope is to spread God's love and grace, create community with our neighbors in Elizabeth, and develop in our youth and adult volunteers a lifelong commitment to mission work."

From Disciples to Apostles

Rodger Nishioka, a longtime teacher in youth and young adult ministry, recounts a conversation with Suzanne, a thirty-year-old aeronautical engineer who wondered what God was calling her to do with her life. Suzanne recalled going on a mission trip during her high school years, where she felt fully alive

teaching the kids of migrant farm families in central Washington. Nishioka observes that over the course of those days, the young people on that mission trip “were not being *entertained* by high-powered glitzy presentations or *protected* from the world or focused internally on *fellowship* with each other or experiencing the *maintenance* of a holding pattern until they were ready for ministry. In those days, these young people were being the church. They were being *disciples* of Jesus, and Suzanne had recognized and claimed those days as a touchstone of significance and meaning in her life of faith.” (Nishioka, 25)

Suzanne and her mission team companions were also being formed as Jesus’ *apostles*, or sent ones. From its conception the holy catholic church was being sent even as it was being gathered. Jesus called disciples and sent them out two by two to minister in his name, even before they grasped the full scope of his mission (Mark 6). In his parting words before ascending into heaven, Jesus commissioned his band of followers into God’s larger mission activity: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Mission is not an optional or exceptional aspect of the church; being sent is as constitutive an activity of the church as congregating.

At its best, the modern short-term mission trip can be viewed as evidence of ecclesial vitality, a recovery of the church’s apostolic calling. Mission trips can also be faith-centering experiences for the millions of teens and young adults who annually embark on them.¹³ And youth leaders find that they have more contact hours with their group on a mission trip than during the other weeks of the year combined.

In *Mission Trips That Matter*, I claim that mission team members (youth and adults) often return home experience-rich yet reflection-poor. Our temptation is simply to consume the experience, for North American culture teaches us to consume things and to define our worth by what and how much we consume. If we are going to invest considerable time, talent, and treasure in planning and leading a mission trip, we need to mine the experiences that occur on such outreach ventures. The more our hearts and minds are shaped by biblical and liturgical imagination, the more connections we notice as the larger story of our mission trip unfolds.

What we learn on mission trips is that we do not presume to bring Christ to others. Rather, as we literally walk with another and accompany that person in faith, we both encounter Christ joining us

on our way, often unexpectedly.¹⁴ The best framework for mission trips is ongoing reciprocal partnership so that everyone gets a chance to serve and to be served, as befits Christian hospitality. Cultivating a culture of mission doesn’t just mean sending folks out; it also means receiving mission teams. Every parish building ought to have a shower to accommodate overnight guests. Youth will enjoy hosting mission teams from other communities. Visiting teams can help us see mission opportunities we’ve missed right in our own backyards.¹⁵

New Monasticism for Young Adults

Young adults are acutely aware that Christian faith ought to shape a way of life. Drawing on wisdom as ancient as the Rule of Benedict and inspired by the witness of Catholic Worker Houses and programs such as the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings are establishing intentional Christian communities around the country, often by taking up residence in “the abandoned places of empire.” This ecumenical movement is organized under the banner The New Monasticism Project, chartered by publications such as *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*.

Disciplines of grace are revealed as young adults share a life together shaped by *ora et labora et scriptura* (prayer, work, and Scripture). They attempt to resist the fragmentation of life by integrating the daily work of farming, cooking, and cleaning with disciplines of prayer, studying Scripture, feasting, and fasting. Houses typically include celibate singles and monogamous married couples and their children. Many locate in large urban centers, where power and powerlessness intersect, and go by names such as Sojourners Community, The Simple Way, The Open Door, Mercy Street, Reba Place Fellowship, Jonah House, Camden House, and Rutba House.

Anathoth Community Garden is an outreach ministry of Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, a rural congregation in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Participants in this ministry do not share a household; rather they share a commitment to the practice of gardening on a cultivated plot of land. Anathoth daily demonstrates fidelity to place, sustainable agriculture, care for creation, and Christ’s ministry of reconciliation across racial, economic, and political lines. Young adults, seminarians, and college summer interns are enthusiastic supporters of Anathoth, and a prophetic

teaching ministry has sprouted from the good seed of this garden.¹⁶

Not every young adult can join an intentional residential community or plant a community garden. But parishes can actively sponsor local initiatives that embody Christian faith as a challenging and worthy adventure. Parishes can also recruit and send out young adults in mission for the sake of the world. University Presbyterian Church in Seattle has been sending out college students on summer missions for fifty-three years. To date, over 1,000 students have participated in the World Deputation program, serving in over forty foreign countries and twenty states in the U.S. This congregation leads the Presbyterian Church (USA) in calling young adults into ordained ministry. It offers an instructive lesson for all parishes and communions that seek to nurture leaders for lifelong faith formation and service in the church.

Hopeful Practices

Ministry that encourages disciples to discern their *vocation*—their life calling—can liberate teenagers and young adults to be the persons God calls them to be. Cultural scripts and socially defined roles must still be negotiated, but young disciples can be set free within the context of these scripts and roles to fashion their own personhood as followers of Jesus. The way of life God sets before us will not be scripted except by the liberating word of Scripture as interpreted by communities of practice, accountability, and care. These communities practice their faith as improvisational theater, with Jesus onstage as a companion actor. Youthful actors contribute their distinctive charisms of power and passion as they practice their faith, performing the gospel in the world.

Christian practices require improvisation and adaptation in every age, by every successive troupe of actors. Those who gain skill and confidence in the practices also experience them as *means of grace* by which God sustains us throughout our earthly pilgrimage. Young persons are eager to apprentice themselves to mature practitioners, and we have emphasized how crucial it is for adults to collaborate with youth and young adults as together they grow in faith.

We want young people to seek out strong faith communities wherever they venture in this world. Yet we adults need this confidence and this resilient faith in our own lives. So all the while we're building that "field of dreams" for the sake of others, in the end we realize that we're building it for our own sakes—and our own redemption as well.¹⁷

End Notes

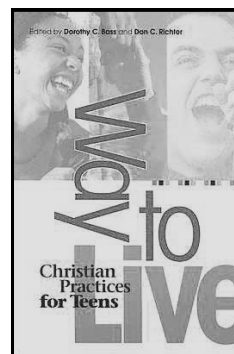
- ¹ Kenda Creasy Dean presents the most thorough discussion of passion in relation to youth and the life of faith in *Practicing Passion* (Eerdmans, 2004).
- ² Political movements in which young people played a pivotal role include the Hitler Youth (fascism), the Khmer Rouge (communism), and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (democratic reform).
- ³ David White provides a concise overview of the social construction of adolescence in "The Vocation of Youth...As Youth," *Insights*, Vol. 123, No. 2, Spring 2008, 3-12.
- ⁴ Demographers group the Echo Boom generation as the age cohort born between 1980-2000, offspring of the Baby Boom generation born between 1946-1964.
- ⁵ Eboo Patel, founding director of the Interfaith Youth Corps, describes his youth ministry as a life-giving alternative to al-Qaeda in *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Beacon Press, 2007).
- ⁶ In our work we define Christian practices as "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God's grace to all creation through Christ Jesus." For more background on this approach see www.practicingourfaith.org
- ⁷ *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter (Upper Room Books, 2002). Youth leaders report that the WTL Leader's Guide is an invaluable resource for suggested learning activities exploring Christian practices. For a free downloadable guide see www.waytolive.org. Note that this website is not simply an online reproduction of the book but is itself an engagement with Christian practices by a group of teens in an actual high school setting.
- ⁸ See *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, by Christine Pohl (Eerdmans, 1999).
- ⁹ See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton (Oxford University Press, 2005), 261.
- ¹⁰ Divorce poses a formidable challenge as the fractured parental household disrupts the continuity of everyday practices for teens. Teens must often fend for themselves in sustaining practices in the midst of chaos. See Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (Crown, 2005).
- ¹¹ See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, 72-81.

- ¹² Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- ¹³ See *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, 53-54.
- ¹⁴ The Emmaus Road story in Luke 24 portrays how Christ accompanies disciples on the road as they are walking together.
- ¹⁵ The Christian Vision Project, in cooperation with *Christianity Today*, has filmed a documentary on “round trip missions” that features a mission team from Chapel Hill, North Carolina partnering with a mission team from Nairobi, Kenya. The film and companion curriculum will be published in October 2008.
- ¹⁶ Fred Bahnson, master gardener and resident theologian, has published essays grounded in the experience of Anathoth Garden. “Compost for the Kingdom” appeared in the September 5, 2006 issue of *The Christian Century*. “The Field at Anathoth: How a Garden Becomes a Protest” appeared in the July/August 2007 issue of *Orion Magazine*. “The Salvation of the City: Defiant Gardens in the Great Northern Feedlot” is a chapter Fred contributed to *Places of God: Theological Conversations with Wendell Berry*, edited by Joel Shuman (University of Kentucky Press, 2007).
- ¹⁷ This is the lesson Ray Kinsella learns in the film *Field of Dreams* when he builds a baseball field on his Iowa farm. At first he’s convinced the field is for Shoeless Joe Jackson and the Chicago White Sox players who were banned for throwing the 1919 World Series. Later it is revealed to Ray that the field is for his own healing as well.

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Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens

Dorothy Bass and Don
Richter, editors.

(Nashville: Upper Room
Books, 2002)

Written for teens by teens and adults, Way to Live presents eighteen ancient Christian practices that provide ways for young people to deepen their awareness of God in their lives and in the world, and practice their faith in daily life. The eighteen practices include: The Story, Bodies, Stuff, Food, Creation, Creativity, Work, Play, Time, Truth, Choices, Friends, Welcome, Forgiveness, Justice, Grieving, Music, and Prayer. A free study guide is available from: www.waytolive.org.

Like its parent book Practicing Our Faith, this book advocates a set of Christian practices that are crucial to human well-being and that, together, shape a life well lived. Reflecting on and growing stronger in such practices, teens encounter the possibility of a more faithful way of life, one that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom. To deepen their insights and ground their images, adult authors partnered with teenaged colleagues throughout the planning and writing of Way to Live.

www.waytolive.org



Strategies for Faith Formation in Christian Practices

John Roberto

*In my view, an essential task of education in faith is to teach all the basic practices of the Christian faith. The fundamental aim of Christian education in all its forms, varieties, and settings should be that individuals—and indeed whole communities—learn these practices, be drawn into participation in them, learn to do them with increasingly deepened understanding and skill, learn to extend them more broadly and fully in their own lives and into their world, and learn to correct them, strengthen them, and improve them. (Craig Dykstra in *Growing in the Life of Faith*)*

How can congregations take seriously Craig Dykstra’s challenge to “teach all of the basic practices of the Christian faith?” How can congregations develop intentional strategies for a systematic faith formation in Christian practices? Craig Dykstra guides our thinking when he writes that children, youth, and adults best learn practices when the following conditions are present in a congregation or home:

- When we ourselves are active in them, actually doing what these practices involve, engaging in them personally in particular physical and material settings and in face-to-face interaction with other people
- When we participate in them jointly with others, especially with others who are skilled in them and are able to teach them to us;
- When the people involved in them with us are, or are becoming, personally significant to us—and we to them
- When we are involved in increasingly broader, more varied, and more complex dimensions of the practice, and when the activities we engage in become increasingly wide-ranging in their context and impact
- When we come more and more to connect articulations of the significance and meaning of these practices (as well as the ways in which the various practices are connected and related to one another) with our own activities in them and with the reasons we ourselves have for engaging in them
- When we come to take increasing personal responsibility for initiating, pursuing, and sustaining these practices and for including and guiding others in them. (Dykstra 71-72)

Guided by these insights, this article offers practical ideas that can stimulate your own thinking and creativity so that Christian practices can become central to all faith formation.

John Roberto is the editor of *Lifelong Faith* and president of LifelongFaith Associates. He is serving as the project coordinator for the Faith Formation in Christian Practices project, leading training seminars, and serving as project editor for the new resource, *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life*.

Strategies & Ideas

Christian Practices in Your Church Community

(This page may be reproduced for use in your church.)

Diana Butler Bass tells the story of one of the churches in her study (as reported in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*) that calls itself an “urban abbey.” They have developed a congregational “rule of life” that is given to all members, including newcomers, and that members adopt at varying levels. It consists of things like reading Scripture, daily prayer, working with the poor. This church was in a state of decline in a rapidly urbanizing neighborhood and is now experiencing new life through this vision. She notes that intentional engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in faith practices fostered a renewed sense of identity and mission in congregations. “Engaging practices elevates the sense of intentionality through the congregation that leads to greater vitality and spiritual depth” (Bass, 306).

The church teaches in everything it is and does. It teaches about matters large and small by the way it lives and practices its faith. The church teaches the practice of hospitality by how we welcome, or do not welcome, the stranger. We teach about the place and significance of Scripture by how it is read in worship, by how it is treated in sermons, and by the place it holds in our communal and personal lives.

Use the following questions to identify how your church is teaching Christian practices through its communal life, and how you can utilize the church as an integral element of your curriculum.

1. What Christian practices do you see embodied in your church? What would an analysis of a week’s or month’s schedule disclose about how various church activities embody specific practices?

- | | |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Justice | <input type="checkbox"/> Forming Community |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Service | <input type="checkbox"/> Beauty and the Arts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forgiveness | <input type="checkbox"/> Embracing Diversity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healing | <input type="checkbox"/> Honoring the Body |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dying Well | <input type="checkbox"/> Reading the Bible |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discernment | <input type="checkbox"/> Testimony |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality | <input type="checkbox"/> Stewardship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Finding God
in Everyday
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2. How is your congregation already participating in each Christian practice in its life together?
3. Are some of the practices done especially well? Does your congregation have a gift for certain practices?
4. Which practices are missing or broken in your congregation? With what practice does your congregation need help?
5. How are the practices related to one another in this congregation? How does participating in one of them lead people into the others? Or does it?
6. How does what happens in Sunday worship help the gathered people to understand and grow in Christian practices? Do the words, gestures, images, sounds and feel of the liturgy vividly manifest the active presence of God in and for the life of the world and warmly invite worshippers to offer response?

Connection to Faith Formation

1. How is your current faith formation curriculum and programming connecting with your church’s practices?
2. Are Christian practices being intentionally taught in your faith formation curriculum and programs? How well does your church prepare children, youth, adults, and families to participate meaningfully in the church’s practices?
3. Are children, youth, adults, and families engaged in the church’s practices as an integral element of your faith formation curriculum and programs?
4. How does people’s participation in the church’s practices prepare them to engage in the practices in their daily lives, at home and at work?
5. How can you strengthen the connection between faith formation and the church’s practices?

Strategies & Ideas

Christian Practices in Your Church's Curriculum

(This page may be reproduced for use in your church.)

One of the best ways to become intentional about faith formation in Christian practices is to make it a focus of your entire church curriculum. You can begin with practices already present in your faith community and prepare people to participate meaningfully in these practices and to live these practices in their daily lives—at home, work, school. Or you can use the articulation of the Christian practices in *Practicing Our Faith* or *Way to Live* (youth) as the basis of your curriculum plan.

In *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life*, our Lifelong Faith Associates team have developed a learning-living resource around sixteen Christian practices, drawn from *Practicing Our Faith*, which can serve as the basis of a curriculum plan:

- Appreciating Beauty
- Caring for the Body
- Celebrating Life
- Discernment
- Doing Justice
- Dying Well
- Eating Well
- Forgiving
- Hospitality
- Keeping Sabbath
- Managing Household Life
- Participating in Community
- Praying
- Reading the Bible
- Relating
- Serving Others

Make the Connections Intentional: Learning, Worship, Practice, Daily Life

It is important that the curriculum makes intentional connections for a holistic formation in Christian practices, i.e., what is learned in educational settings is reinforced and deepened through worship and engagement in the community's practice, and lived-out in daily life: home, work, and school. The four elements of an integrated curriculum model include: 1) learning, 2) worship, 3) engagement in community practice, and 4) living the practices in daily life.

Here are several ideas for developing a Christian practices curriculum in your church. When you are designing curriculum, educational programs, and learning sessions, use the four elements as a guide for keeping learning connected to worship, practice, and daily life.

1. Develop a Monthly Curriculum Focus

Many churches establish a theme for the month that is carried through all of the educational programs in the church—family, intergenerational and age group settings—as well at Sunday worship. There are lots of ways to do this: 1) you can take one or two practices and make them the focus for the whole year, e.g., Reading the Bible or Praying or Doing Justice and Serving. 2) you can identify several practices and focus on one practice each month, 3) you can research times during the year when the congregation is focused on particular practices (e.g., stewardship) and make them part of the curriculum.

2. Connect to the Lectionary Readings

The Sunday lectionary and church year feasts and seasons provide a framework for organizing a Christian practices curriculum. Discern the Christian practices that are embedded in the annual cycle of Scripture readings and church seasons and schedule educational programs in family, intergenerational and age group settings to prepare people for the Sunday or season. For example Lent can be an opportunity to teach about “Discernment” or “Praying” or “Doing Justice” or “Dying Well.”

3. Embed in Existing Curriculum Units

Analyze existing educational programs for all ages and sacramental preparation programs (Communion, Confirmation) to determine the Christian practices that are or could be taught as part of these units. For example: “Eating Well” and “Keeping Sabbath” at First Communion, “Praying” and “Serving” at Confirmation. A service program or mission trip is an opportunity to teach “Doing Justice,” “Serving,” and “Hospitality.”

4. Target Milestones and Life Transitions

Every milestone presents an opportunity to teach a Christian practice that directly connects to what is happening in the life of the individual or family. For example the many life decisions of the youth and young adult years provide an opportunity for teaching “Discernment.” The beginning of a new life together as a new couple is an opportunity for teaching “Managing Household Life.”

Strategies & Ideas

Program Models for Christian Practices Education

(This page may be reproduced for use in your church)

1. Christian Practice Apprenticeships

Every church has “Practice Mentors” who are living embodiments of a Christian practice, such as service or hospitality or prayer. Churches can structure learning programs around these teachers in individualized and small group settings where mentors can apprentice people who want to learn how to live the Christian practice. For example, if people wanted to learn how to serve people in need at the local homeless shelter, they can accompany the “practice mentor” when he or she works at the shelter, and learn about homelessness and the practice of hospitality and serving others. Each apprenticeship can include a study component with independent reading from the Bible and descriptions of service. This model of mentoring could be applied across the entire church and become integral to all learning programs in the curriculum.

2. Christian Practice Learning Groups

Small group learning provides a supportive setting for learning about a Christian practice, then moving into practice of what has been learned, and concluding with reflection on lived experience (see Teaching Strategies for a methodology to use). Small groups can be organized around a single practice or multiple practices. Practice learning groups can be offered on a variety of practices and at different lengths, times, and places that best fit their lives, such as homes, a local restaurant or coffee shops. A church can publish, in print and online, a whole menu of practice groups, times, and places.

Most of the resources created in *The Practices of Faith Series* have study guides that can be downloaded from the Practicing Our Faith web site: www.practicingourfaith.com.

Living the Good Life Together: A Study of Christian Character in Community (Abingdon Press) is a new series of five, 6-12 week video-and-book small group studies on Christian practices on the following practices:

- *Attentiveness: Being Present*
- *Forgiveness: Letting Go*
- *Intimacy: Pursuing Love*
- *Discernment: Acting Wisely*
- *Hospitality: Risking Welcome*

Each small group study includes:

- Planning Kit (with all of the components)
- Participant Study Guide
- Leader Guide
- DVD (one presentation for each session)

(See www.livingthegoodlifetogether.com for more information about the resources.)

3. Christian Practice Programs

Christian practices can be explored and experienced in a variety of program models. Here are just a few to consider as part of your curriculum.

- **Family and Intergenerational** programs provide an excellent format for exploring and learning Christian practices. The witness of the different age groups, especially older adults, makes for a rich learning environment.
- **Weeklong** extended programs such as “Vacation Bible School” and summer camps can focus on several practices, combining study and hands-on experience.
- **Multi-session courses, workshops, or speaker series** can focus on one or more Christian practices with opportunities for people to experience the practice between sessions.
- **Youth meetings**, weekly or monthly, provide a setting for teaching Christian practices. *Way to Live* includes 16 practices for youth and has session plans for each practice that can be downloaded from www.waytolive.com.
- **Retreats** provide an intensive setting for the development of practices such as “Prayer,” “Discernment,” and “Reading the Bible.”
- **Round table discussions** after Sunday worship provide a setting for exploring the implications of the Scripture readings for practicing faith.
- A **film festival** provides a unique setting to explore Christian practices through the lives and events portrayed in feature films, e.g., exploring “Doing Justice” in the film *Romero* or “Serving” through the film, *Entertaining Angels* (Dorothy Day).
- A **field trip** provides an opportunity to see and experience Christian practices in action, e.g., “Dying Well” at a hospice center, “Serving” at a soup kitchen, “Healing” at a clinic, “Appreciating Beauty” by hiking in a park.

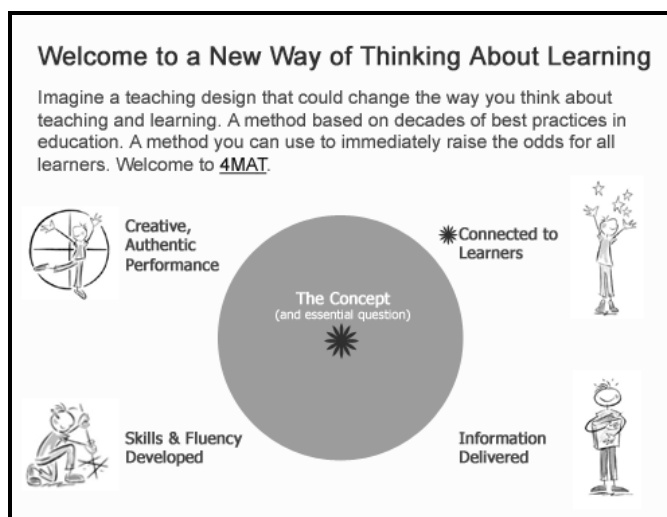
Strategies & Ideas

Teaching for Christian Practice

(This page may be reproduced for use in your church.)

The 4MAT Learning Cycle developed by Bernice McCarthy builds upon the best research on learning and incorporates four movements essential to a transformational learning experience. With its emphasis on practice and performance, it is well suited to teaching Christian practices.

The 4MAT Learning Cycle



Each of the core elements of learning—feeling, reflecting, thinking, and doing—elicits a different and crucial question from the learner. All successful learning deals with these four elements and answers four questions: Why? What? How? and If? Real learning moves. . .

- from the personal, perceived connections of Quadrant 1
- to the conceptual knowing of Quadrant 2
- to the practice and tinkering of Quadrant 3
- and then to the creative integration of Quadrant 4

In Quadrant One (Connected to Learners) the union of elements creates personal meaning, the way we question the value of new learning by connecting it to ourselves. The question to be answered is “Why?” Why is this of value to me? Why do I sense the need to know this?

In Quadrant Two (Information Delivered) the union of elements creates conceptualized content, structuring knowledge into significant chunks that

form the essence, the coherence, and the wonder of new ideas. The question to be answered is “What?” What is out there to be known? What do the experts know about this? What is the nature of the knowledge I am pursuing?

In Quadrant Three (Skill and Fluency Developed) the union of elements creates usefulness (and the more immediate the better), the transferability into one’s life, problem solving with the learning. The question to be answered is “How?” How does this work? Will this streamline my tasks? How will this be of use in my life?

In Quadrant Four (Creative and Authentic Performance), the union of elements creates creative integration, the way we adapt the learning into something new and unique. The question to be answered is “What If?” If I use this in my own way, what will happen? What can I create and how will that creation expand, enhance, and maybe even transform the world I know?

McCarthy emphasizes that knowledge must be used. It must operate in one’s life. And because all human beings are unique, we use and then integrate learning in our own inimitable, incomparable ways. What we learn is transformed into a particular use, a distinct way of doing, a matchless refinement of a method, a unique understanding. It is transformed. It becomes for us. It is in the transformation that real understanding happens.

4MAT Resources

McCarthy, Bernice and Dennis McCarthy. *Teaching Around the 4MAT Cycle—Designing Instructive for Diverse Learners with Diverse Learning Styles*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006.

McCarthy, Bernice and Jeannine O’Neill-Blackwell. *Hold On You Lost Me—Using Learning Styles to Create Training that Sticks*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006.

Designing a Christian Practices Learning Program

Here is an application of the 4MAT learning cycle to teaching Christian practices.

1. The Hunger for the Practice

- Illustrating the hunger for the Christian practice in story, music, film, and/or current events.

2. Reflecting on the Hunger

- Guiding the individual or family in identifying how they see the hunger in their own lives and world.
- Helping people become aware of how they already engage in this practice, and the things that distort or hinder the practice.

3. The Christian Practice

- Grounding the Christian practice in the Bible by describing how the biblical story(s) deepen our understanding of the Christian practice.
- Describing what people today, and throughout history, actually do when they are engaged well in a particular practice—people or communities that live the practice with exceptional grace and skill.
- Connecting the Christian practice to human needs and hungers. Identifying how and why it is important to living a meaningful life. Describing the benefits of living the Christian practice—for the person, family, and for the community and world.

Part 4. Bringing it Home: Applying the Christian Practice to Daily Life

- Giving people tools—activities, ideas, resources—for living the Christian practice in their daily lives—at home, at work, at school, and in the world.
- Showing people how to make the Christian practice part of everyday life.
- Guiding people in performing the Christian practice and then reflecting on it.

Part 5. Prayer for the Practice

- Entering more deeply into the practice through prayer and reflection.
- Offering God thanks and praise, and asking for God’s help in living the practice.

Example: “Eating Well”

To illustrate how these five elements are incorporated in a learning resource we have included the “Eating Well” chapter from the upcoming book for households, *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life* (Lifelong Faith Associates). The content of this chapter and the five elements are the basis for creating learning activities that churches can use to teach the practice.

1. The Hunger for the Practice

- Three stories focusing the hunger people have for eating well: 1) the loss of a family meal, and 2) recovering the meal family

2. Reflecting on the Hunger

- A summary of the research on the power of the family meal today
- A discussion of what makes a regular family meal so hard today
- An activity to reflect on family meals yesterday and today

3. The Christian Practice

- A presentation of Gospel teaching using the Last Supper and the Emmaus Story
- Aspects of eating well illustrated by Gospel stories and practice examples: 1) giving thanks to God for the gift of food, 2) storytelling, 3) sharing food and serving others, 4) celebrating, 5) listening to God’s Word

Part 4. Bringing it Home: Applying the Christian Practice to Daily Life

- A story of the countercultural practice of eating together as a family
- Ideas for getting ready to eat well
- Ideas for enriching the meal

Part 5. Prayer for the Practice

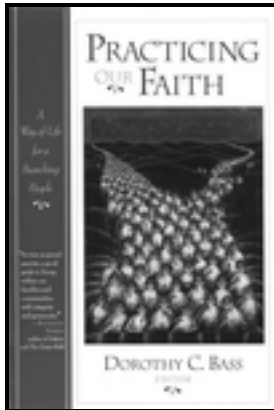
- Praying together

Living Well Resources

To learn more about the *Faith Formation in Christian Practices Project* and the *Living Well* resource go to www.lifelongfaith.com. We are developing learning activities for teaching each practice, as well as ideas and resources for helping people live the Christian practices.

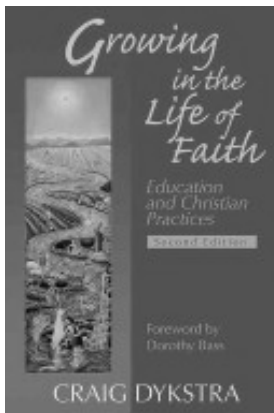
Recommended Resources

Christian Practices



Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People
Dorothy C. Bass, Editor. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) [\$18.95]

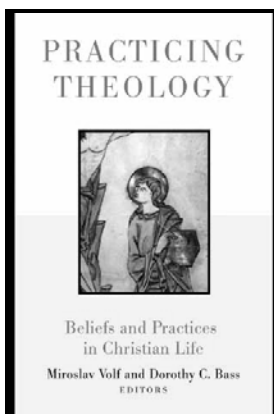
Dorothy Bass and the other contributors to this multi-denominational collection show how they can shape a faithful way of life during challenging times at work, at home, and in the community. This book explores the stuff of everyday life, placing ordinary activities in a biblical and historical context, and discovering in them opportunities to realize God's active presence in life. This is the first book in the Christian practices series and describes twelve practices of the Christian life. The practices include: Honoring the Body, Hospitality, Household Economics, Saying Yes and Saying No, Keeping Sabbath, Testimony, Discernment, Shaping Communities, Forgiveness, Healing, Dying Well, and Singing Our Lives.



Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices (Second Edition)

Craig Dykstra. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) [\$24.95]

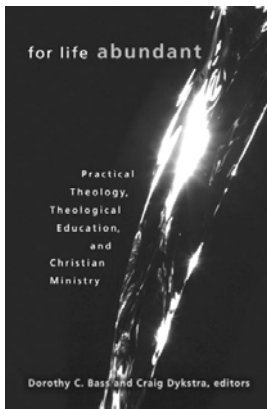
This book provides the foundation for a Christian practices approach to faith formation. Craig Dykstra explores the contributions of the traditions, education, worship practices, and disciplines of the Christian tradition to suggest how to help people grow in faith. This book seeks to provide answers to the questions: "What does it mean to live the Christian life faithfully and well? And how can we help one another to do so?" Among the twelve chapters are the following with a special focus on Christian practices: The Hunger for Daily Bread, The Faithful Life, Growing in Faith, The Power of Christian Practices, Education in Christian Practices, and The Formative Power of the Congregation.



Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life

Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, editors. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) [\$20]

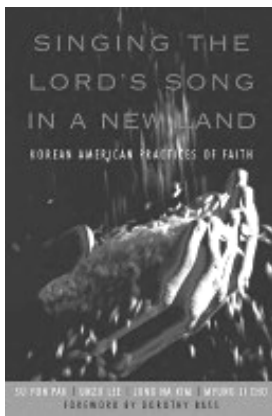
In a time when academic theology often neglects the lived practices of the Christian community, this volume seeks to bring balance to the situation by showing the dynamic link between the task of theology and the practices of the Christian life. The work of thirteen first-rate theologians from several cultural and Christian perspectives, these informed and informative essays explore the relationship between Christian theology and practice in the daily lives of believers, in the ministry of Christian communities, and as a needed focus within Christian education. Among the chapters in the book are: Attending to the Gaps Between Beliefs and Practices; Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life; Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology; A Community's Practice of Hospitality; Liturgy, Ministry, and the Stranger: The Practice of Encountering the Other in Two Christian Communities; Little Moves Against Destructiveness: Theology and the Practice of Discernment; Theological Reflection and Christian Practices; and Theology for a Way of Life



For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry

Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) [\$26]

What does it mean to lead a truly “life-giving way of life”? What kinds of learning and teaching will best prepare ministers to foster such a way of life in their congregations? How might teachers of practical theology best understand and undertake their task to educate and form ministers? The authors explore such questions in *For Life Abundant*, probing and clarifying the significance of practical theology in the classroom, in the wider academy, and in actual ministry settings. Among the chapters in the book are: Ways of Life Abundant, Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination, Teaching Worship as a Christian Practice, Liturgy and Life, Practical Theology and Pedagogy. Learning Ministry over Time, and Shaping Communities: Pastoral Leadership and Congregational Formation.



Singing The Lord's Song In A New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith

Su Yon Pak, Unzu Lee, Jung Ha Kim. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) [\$24.95]

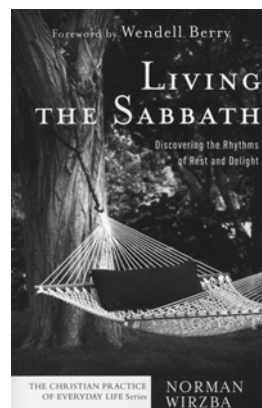
Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land explores how faith practices work differently in a racial/ethnic community. It is the only book to focus solely on ministry in Korean American churches. The authors identify eight key practices and explain how they are unique to the Korean American church: keeping the sabbath, singing the faith, praying together, remembering the generations before, shaping the generations ahead, building community, piety, and hospitality.



Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time

Dorothy C. Bass. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) [\$14.95]

Dorothy Bass invites readers into a way of living in time that is alert to both contemporary pressures and rooted ancient wisdom. She asks hard questions about how our injurious attitude toward time has distorted our relationships with our innermost selves, with other people, with the natural world, and with God. *Receiving the Day* offers a language of attention, poetry, and celebration. Bass encourages us to reevaluate our understanding of the temporal and thereby to participate fully in the Christian practice of knowing time as God's gift. Embraced in this way, time need not be wrestled with each day. Instead, time becomes the habitation of blessing.



Living the Sabbath

Norman Wirzba. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) [19.99]

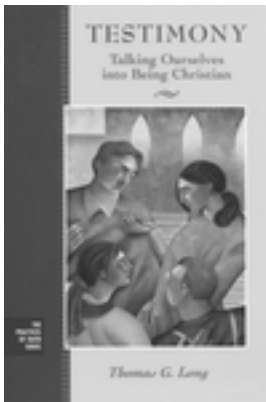
Our traditional understanding of Sabbath observance is resting from our otherwise harried lives one day a week. Norman Wirzba leads us deeper into the heart of Sabbath with a holistic and rewarding interpretation of what true Sabbath-keeping can mean in our lives today. Wirzba teaches that Sabbath is ultimately about delight in the goodness that God has made—in everything we do, every day of the week. He then shows how this understanding of Sabbath teaching has the potential to elevate all our activities so that they bring honor to God and delight to the world. With practical examples, Wirzba unpacks what that means for our work, our homes, our economy, our schools, our treatment of creation, and our churches.



A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice

Don Saliers and Emily Saliers. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) [\$16.95]

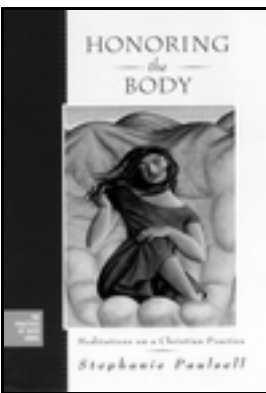
Church musician and liturgical theologian Don Saliers joins with daughter Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls fame to reflect on the what, the how, and the why of music as a vital spiritual dimension of our lives. Don and Emily reflect on how music shapes our souls in relation to justice, grief, delight, healing, and hope. This book bridges two generations, two approaches to the life of faith, and two genres of music—the music of Saturday night and Sunday morning. They open the way for those who seek to embrace new spiritual practices by creating music, sharing music, and developing their musical skills as a spiritual practice.



Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian

Thomas G. Long. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) [\$21.95]

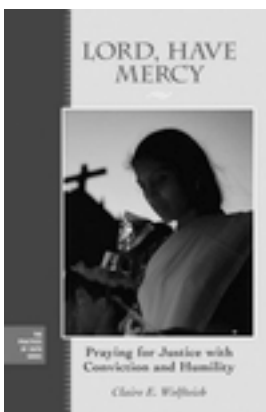
In this groundbreaking book, Thomas G. Long—a theologian and respected authority on preaching—explores how Christians talk when they are *not* in church. *Testimony* breaks the stained-glass image of religious language to show how ordinary talking in our everyday lives—talk across the backyard fence, talk with our kids, talk about politics and the events of the day—can be sacred speech. In a world of spin, slick marketing, mindless chatter, and easy deceptions, *Testimony* shows that the hunger for truthful, meaningful, and compassionate speech is ultimately grounded in truth about God.



Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice

Stephanie Paulsell. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) [\$14.95]

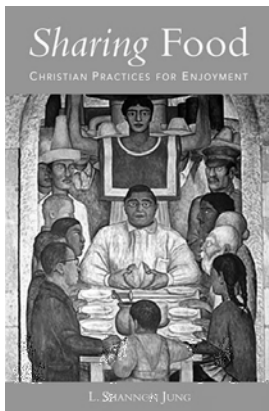
Stephanie Paulsell offers readers a much-needed guide for cherishing the human body and countering the corrosive cultural messages that prevent us from knowing that we are children of God in our bodies as in our spirits. *Honoring the Body* does more than help us cope with issues such as weight gain and loss, body image, illness, birth and death, it helps us enrich our practice of faith. Paulsell draws on resources from the Christian tradition to show how we can learn to celebrate the body's pleasures, protect the body's vulnerabilities, and develop the practices that will ultimately transform our troubled relationship with our bodies to one of honor and joy. From Paulsell, we can learn how to regain a sense of awe and wonder about our bodies and to cultivate the healing practices that lead to joyful and embodied living.



Lord Have Mercy: Praying for Justice with Conviction and Humility

Claire Wolfteich. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006) [\$21.95]

How can we respond to violence in our neighborhoods or in battle zones thousands of miles away, to layoffs in a nearby corporation, or to troubling and conflicted moral questions? What does it really mean to use prayer in bringing faith to life—in the workplace, in daily tasks, in the voting booth? *Lord Have Mercy* is a guide for those who want to move prayer beyond private devotion and engage faithfully with the questions, decisions, policies, and movements that shape our lives in society. Claire Wolfteich includes stories from around the world to show how the practice of prayer has been embodied in actual communities in times of historic confrontation with social injustice.



Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment

L. Shannon Jung. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006) [\$15]

Our everyday personal, familial, and communal practices of eating, says Jung, have the potential for making us more attentive to our life purposes, more attuned to our communal identities, and even more mindful of the presence of God.

Juxtaposing practices with values, Jung explores how food and eating function culturally today. He explores the larger dimensions of personal and group eating, the great resonance that feasting and food and fasting have within the Christian tradition, and how all this figures very practically in Christian lifestyle. His work culminates in a chapter on the Lord's Supper as a model for eating and the Eucharist as an occasion for sharing with the worldwide family of God.

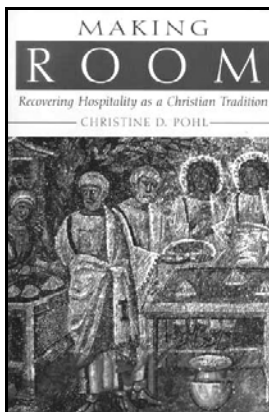


Keeping House: The Litany of Everyday Life

Margaret Kim Peterson. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007) [\$21.95]

Keeping House is a wide-ranging and witty exploration of the spiritual gifts that are gained when we take the time to care for hearth and home. Margaret Kim Peterson examines the activities and attitudes of keeping house and making a home.

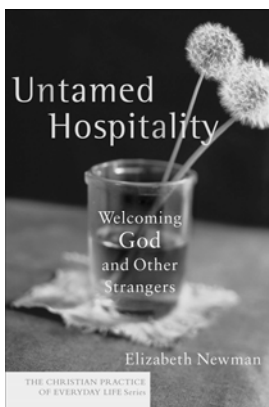
Debunking the commonly held notion that keeping house is a waste of time or at best a hobby, Peterson uncovers the broader cultural and theological factors that make housekeeping an interesting and worthwhile discipline. She reveals how the seemingly ordinary tasks of folding laundry, buying groceries, cooking, making beds, and offering hospitality can be seen as spiritual practices that embody and express concrete and positive ways of living out Christian faith in relationship to others at home, in the church and in the world.



Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition

Christine D. Pohl. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) [\$19]

Although hospitality was central to Christian identity and practice in earlier centuries, our generation knows little about its life-giving character. *Making Room* revisits the Christian foundations of welcoming strangers and explores the necessity, difficulty, and blessing of hospitality today. Combining rich biblical and historical research with extensive exposure to contemporary Christian communities—the Catholic Worker, L'Abri, L'Arche, and others—this book shows how understanding the key features of hospitality can better equip us to faithfully carry out the practical call of the gospel. The book is organized in three parts: Remembering Our Heritage, Reconsidering the Tradition, and Recovering the Practice.



Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers

Elizabeth Newman. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007) [\$22.99]

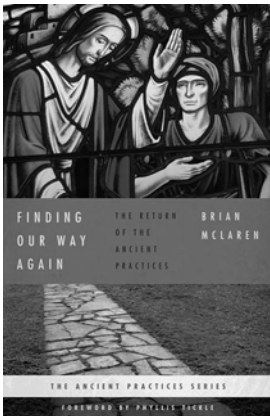
Christian hospitality is more than a well-set table, pleasant conversation, or even inviting people into your home. Christian hospitality, according to Elizabeth Newman, is an extension of how we interact with God. It trains us to be capable of welcoming strangers who will challenge us and enhance our lives in unexpected ways, readying us to embrace the ultimate stranger: God. Newman restores hospitality to its proper place within God's story, as displayed most fully in Jesus Christ. Worship, she says, is the believer's participation in divine hospitality, a hospitality that cannot be sequestered from our economic, political, or public lives.



A Praying Congregation

Jane E. Vennard. (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005) [\$17]

A Praying Congregation develop the skills to become a teacher of prayer and spiritual practices. It includes easily accessible lesson plans which enable you to share Vennard's insights with others while infusing the activities with their own spirit and creative ideas. Readers are invited to gently explore questions such as, who taught you to pray and how? what do you believe about prayer? what is your image of the God to whom you pray? and what is prayer anyway? Chapters include: Praying Congregations, Learning to Pray, What Do You Believe about Prayer? Images of God, Praying All Ways and Always, Becoming a Teacher of Prayer, and Teaching Prayer Forms and Spiritual Practices.



Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices (Ancient Practices Series)

Brian McLaren (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) [\$17.99]

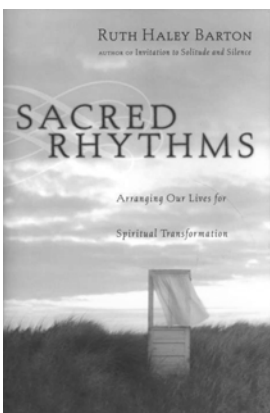
There are ancient ways that can teach us to practice peace, joy, self-mastery, and justice. The old disciplines—fasting, contemplative prayer, simplicity, spiritual reading, meditation, solitude, silence, observing the holy days—do for our souls what exercise does for our bodies or study does for our minds. These ancient practices are the means by which we prepare for grace to surprise us. They are the habits by which our souls grow weighty; actions of mind, body, and will that close the gap between the character we want to possess and the character we currently have. *Finding Our Way Again* is a guidebook to these ancient practices.



In Constant Prayer (Ancient Practices Series)

Robert Benson (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008) [\$17.99]

Robert Benson explores the ancient practice of fixed-hour prayer, a structure for our lives where we can live in continuous awareness of God's presence and reality. This classic discipline of praying at fixed times during the day and night has transformed the lives of millions around the world. Benson's goal is to open up some of the mystery of the daily office for those who have had little or no exposure to this ancient way of Christian prayer. He shares the benefits that will accrue to us if we begin to participate in this ancient tradition that has sustained the Church through the ages.



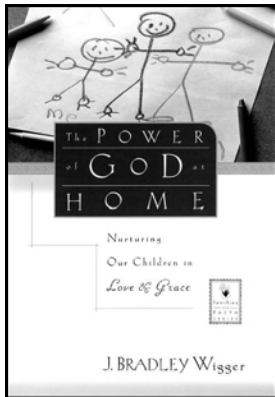
Sacred Rhythm: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation

Ruth Haley Barton (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) [\$16]

Spiritual disciplines are activities that open us to God's transforming love and the changes that only God can bring about in our lives. Picking up on the monastic tradition of creating a "rule of life" that allows for regular space for the practice of the spiritual disciplines, *Sacred Rhythms* takes you more deeply into understanding seven key disciplines along with practical ideas for weaving them into everyday life. Each chapter includes exercises to help you begin the practices—individually and in a group context. The spiritual disciplines include: Solitude, Scripture, Prayer, Honoring the Body, Self-Examination, Discernment, and Sabbath. The final chapter, A Rule of Life, puts it all together in a way that will help you arrange your life for spiritual transformation.

Recommended Resources

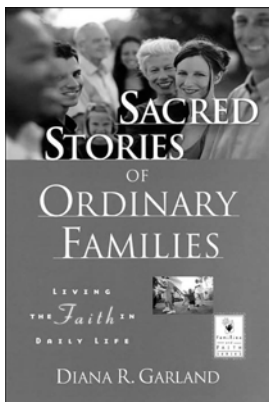
Christian Practices: Family



The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace

J. Bradley Wigger (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

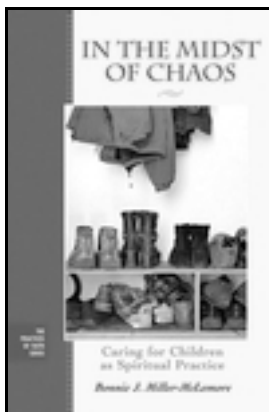
Written for parents and educators, Brad Wigger provides both a biblical model and practical suggestions for helping the entire family become aware of God's presence in everyday life. He reveals the powerful formative influence of family life and shows that homes are the places where some of the deepest, most important learning takes place. *The Power of God at Home* offers a refreshing perspective on family life, revealing families as potential bearers of God's grace and blessing, and providing church leaders with insights on how to nurture faith at home more intentionally and thoughtfully. Chapters include: The Spiritual Power of Learning, The Story of Home, The Joy of Practice, and Sacred Connections.



Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families

Diana R. Garland (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

When families are faced with crises and challenges— unemployment, the untimely death of a family member, natural disasters and chronic illnesses— those who seem to weather the crisis best are often those who have an active spiritual dimension to their lives together. And in times of joy and celebration families with strong spiritual lives rejoice in deeper and more wondrous ways. But what exactly is it that characterizes faith and spirituality in family life? Identifying resilience, strength, and faith in the stories of all kinds of families, *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families* motivates readers to think about how faith shapes their own family lives. Drawn from Diana R. Garland's extensive interviews with 110 families, this book includes stories from ordinary families whose lives together both reveal and rely on extraordinary faith.



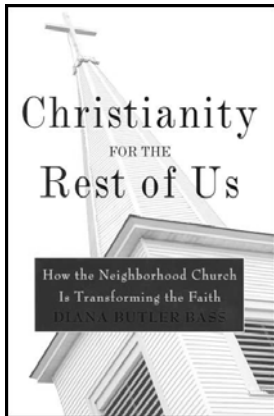
In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007)

How can we find spiritual depth in the midst of the chaos of our lives with children? Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore gives us answers to this question and shows us how to integrate and strengthen the practice of faith in the everyday (and often mundane) experience of raising children. *In the Midst of Chaos* reveals what it takes to find the spiritual wisdom in the messy, familial ways of living. By rethinking parenting as an invitation to discover God in the middle of our busy and overstuffed lives, it relieves parents of the burden of being the all-knowing authority figures who impart spiritual knowledge to children. Finding spirituality in family activities such as reading bedtime stories, dividing household chores, and playing games can empower parents to notice what they are already doing as potentially valuable and to practice it more consciously as part of their own faith journey.

Recommended Resources

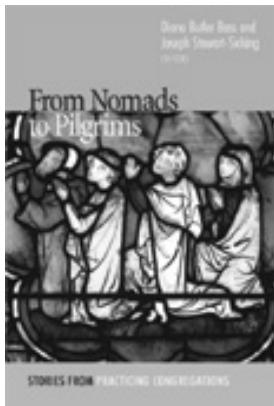
Christian Practices: Congregation



Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith

Diana Butler Bass (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006) [\$13.95]

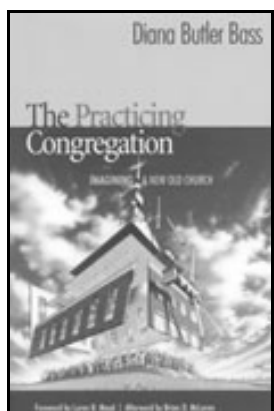
As Diana Butler Bass delved into the rich spiritual life of various Episcopal, United Methodist, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and Lutheran churches, certain consistent practices—such as hospitality, contemplation, diversity, justice, discernment, and worship—emerged as core expressions of congregations seeking to rediscover authentic Christian faith and witness today. This hopeful book reveals the practical steps that congregations are taking to proclaim an alternative message about a Christianity that strives for greater spiritual depth and proactively engages the needs of the world. The book is organized in three parts: Part 1 What Happened to the Neighborhood Church? (The Vanished Village, Remembering Christianity, The New Village Church, and Finding Home), Part 2 Ten Signpost of Renewal (Hospitality, Discernment, Healing, Contemplation, Testimony, Diversity, Justice, Worship, Reflection, and Beauty), Part 3 From Tourists to Pilgrims (Transforming Lives, Transforming Congregations, and Transforming the World).



From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations

Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Stewart-Sicking
(Herdon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006) [\$17]

From Nomads to Pilgrims: Stories from Practicing Congregations tells the extended stories of a dozen congregations that have been on a pilgrimage to vitality—retrieving and reworking Christian practice, tradition, and narrative. The book contains articles from pastors on the road to an emerging style of congregational vitality, one centered on the creative and intentional reappropriation of traditional Christian practices such as hospitality, discernment, contemplative prayer, and testimony. Congregational stories include: Rediscovery Tradition, Paying Attention to God, Enlarging Hospitality, Making Space for the Sacred, Forming Faith, Practicing Worship, Proclaiming God's Word, Speaking Faith, Taking Risks, Saying Yes and Saying No, Navigating Culture, and Engaging Creativity.



The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church

Diana Butler Bass (Herdon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004) [\$17]

Diana Butler Bass presents signs that mainline Protestant churches are indeed changing, finding a new vitality intentionally grounded in Christian practices and laying the groundwork for a new type of congregation. She describes the emergence of “the practicing congregation”—congregations that weave together Christian practices into a pattern of being church that forms an intentional way of life in community.

Living Well:

Christian Practices for Everyday Life

1 Eating Well



1 Eating Well

The Hunger for the Practice - Stories

Are You Eating Well?



Are you eating well? I don't mean having enough food. For most, but not all, Americans the problem is not finding enough food; it is eating well. By eating well we mean the whole experience of eating: purchasing and preparing the healthy, nutritious food, sharing the food and enjoying the relationships around the table, giving thanks for the food, and so on. We all know what eating well entails because we have memories of eating well—gatherings of family and friends at special times of the year, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, or for important occasions like a wedding, a fortieth birthday party, a quinceañera, a twenty-fifth anniversary, a school graduation. Yet when we think about our daily experience of eating, most of us would not say we are “eating well.” What's missing? What are we really hungry for?

Loss: No Time for the Family Dinner

Dinnertime was the centerpiece of the Graham family's life. High-energy conversations, good-natured teasing, everyone pitching in, time to linger before cleanup—and the food wasn't bad either! They had their moments of irritation during dinner, but mostly you could tell that this family really liked being together and sharing a meal. Then the Grahams lost their family dinners, without anyone even noticing.

Let's back-up a bit before describing the decline and fall of the Graham family dinners. The family consisted of two employed parents and their three children, Jon (eleven), Nathan (nine), and Lisa (seven). Dad worked the early shift as a nurse and was there when the children got home from school. He was the main cook in the family. Mom, who was a teacher, did the grocery shopping and menu planning. The three children took turns setting the table and helping with cleanup, and on Sunday mornings Nathan often made pancakes for the family. A high-energy clan, their dinners were a source of pride, a feeling that guests easily picked-up on.

And then came competition swimming. The kids must have received their mother's athletic genes, because they were all terrific athletes for their age. After several years of low-key swim teams their parents moved them up to a more intense level that required three practices per

week, a meet every weekend, and regular travel out of town. And of course their teams practiced on different days and at different times! The family's late-afternoon and early-evening schedule became a whirl of rides, drop-offs, and pickups. Except for Tuesday evening, when everyone was home, dinner became a pit stop. Dad left food in the refrigerator for the kids to pick up and chow down. Sometimes one parent and two children would eat together, but for the most part both parents were not together at dinner, and only on Tuesday (and Sunday) was there the possibility of the whole family being together. Then Tuesday dinners were lost to a special band practice for Lisa, who was the most musical member of the family. Her parents did not want Lisa to miss out on an opportunity available only to a small number of children in the community.

Sunday dinners remained, but even there, something had been lost. High energy had ratcheted up a notch, toward chaos as the children moved to and away from the table, complained more about the food, elicited more reprimands from the parents, and asked to leave the table as soon as they finished their food. The spirit was not the same.

William J. Doherty and Barbara Carlson

Recovery: “Kids in the Kitchen”

For Lynn, it started with basil. She was an overworked single mom with two sons, one still in diapers. Supper consisted of her dragging the kids away from the TV in the living room to sit in front of the TV in the kitchen. While she fed them, she picked on her own food, walked around the room, or else talked on the phone. She knew that something was wrong with the way that her family dinnertime had imploded, but she had no idea of how or what to change.

Then, one night, in desperation, she handed her bored one year-old a bunch of basil and told him to rip the leaves off. She explained that he could help her cook. Her son's competence at the job, coupled with his joy at having completed what was obviously a useful task, made it a lightbulb moment for mom. Maybe supper wouldn't always be a dead spot in her day. Maybe, instead of pushing the kids away, she could turn this into a time that could bring them closer. To hear her tell it, when she was mired in her post-divorce gloom, the basil was the first step on a path of profound family change.

Instead of focusing on how quickly she could get the meal onto the table because the kids were starving and she had so many things she had to get done, Lynn began to pay attention to the process of putting the meal together, and included her kids. Little by little, she gave



them tasks they could accomplish, praising them profusely for the success. She relaxed her standards of neatness in the kitchen. She made sure the boys had tools that were the right size for them, and she made sure they knew how to use them. Individually and together, they took pride in their work. Most important, she and her kids began enjoying themselves, and each other.

The ripples widened. Lynn noticed that if the children were involved in preparing the meal, their hunger pangs ceased; they didn't have to be fed right away. Once their egos and skills were involved, they stopped rejecting foods out of hand. Broccoli was no longer the only vegetable they would accept. They still didn't like everything, but they became much more willing to taste different foods. When she let them choose menus and ingredients, she was surprised at their adventurousness and creativity. She began taking them to the supermarket, and to the farmer's markets—real eye-openers for city kids.



In time, Fredericks shut off the TV, and then moved supper into the dining room. She says that, when she introduced table linens and cloth napkins (each person keeping his napkin for a week, conversation improved. Also important, she says, they began saying a short “blessing” before dinner, with each person saying what he was grateful for that particular day. She writes, “I would not be exaggerating if I stated that this was the last bit of glue that mended our broken family. To my great surprise, the children took this aspect of the blessing very seriously, and they continue to astound me with their offerings. Parents can learn a great deal about their children from the value judgments about what’s important to them on a daily basis.”

When she clicks off the skills her sons learned in the kitchen, she includes math, chemistry, a sense of responsibility, learning to follow directions, and learning to work as a team. For her older son especially, who was seven when the project started, cooking became linked with foreign people and lands. He started to ask, “What culture are we cooking tonight?” And she is sure that the confidence he learned through his cooking helped him through some difficult patches at school.



Years have passed. Lynn’s young son will soon be a teenager, and her elder son is looking at the end of his teenage years. Like any veteran parent, she is realistic: “Spending time in the kitchen with their mother is not where they want to be.” But, she adds, “That’s fine. Meals and mealtimes are still important to them. We still have the connection over the meal.” And having a solid background in cooking has given them many skills, not the least of which is the ability to put a meal together. “They still do things for themselves,” she says, a big plus when you’re living with teenage boys. Cooking together gave them a lot more than food.

Miriam Weinstein

The Surprising Power of the Family Meal

Who has time for supper? Well, you do. Your family does. We all do. Believe me, I would not be making such a big deal about supper if we had other, stronger communal bonds. But we are living in a time when the social fabric is fraying, and supper is one of the few habits that has not yet disappeared from memory.

Miriam Weinstein

What if you heard that that there was something that would improve the quality of your daily life, your children's chances of success in the world, your family's health, our values as a society? Something that is inexpensive, simple to produce, and within the reach of pretty much everyone?

What is it? It is family dinner. Research has been accumulating from very, very disparate fields. It shows how eating ordinary, average everyday supper with our family is strongly linked to lower incidence of bad outcomes, such as teenage drug and alcohol use, and to good qualities like emotional stability. It correlates with kindergartners being better prepared to learn to read.

Regular family supper helps keep asthmatic kids out of hospitals. It discourages both obesity and eating disorders. It supports your staying more connected to your extended family, ethnic heritage, your community of faith. It will help children and families to be more resilient, reacting positively to those curves and arrows that life throws our way. It will certainly keep you better nourished. The things we are likely to discuss at the supper table anchor our children more firmly in the world.

When families prepare meals together, kids learn real life skills. They assume responsibility and become better team members. Sharing meals helps cement family relationships, no matter how you define family.

Consider this:

- Compared to teens who have fewer than three family dinners per week, teens who have five or more are likelier to experience lower levels of tension or stress among family members. They are also likelier to say their parents are very or fairly proud of them, and that they can go to one or both parents with a serious problem.
- Those teens who live in households with these four characteristics—frequent family dinners (five to seven times in a typical week), low levels of tension or stress among family members, parents who are very or fairly proud of their teen, and a parent in whom the teen can confide—are at half the risk of the average teen for substance abuse.
- More than one in five parents and teens say they are “too busy” to have dinner together more often. Given the importance of frequent family dinners and the powerful impact parental engagement has in preventing teen substance abuse, families should identify and work to overcome the barriers to frequent family dining. Late work hours, after school activities, and long commutes all come at the expense of valuable family time.
- Studies on the subject show a number of important benefits of frequent family dining. For instance, kids who have frequent family dinners are half as likely to smoke cigarettes and marijuana, and one-third less likely to drink alcohol. Teens who dine frequently with their parents are likelier to have parents who take responsibility for teen drug use, and they are 40 percent likelier to say future drug use will never happen.



In 2006, 58 percent of teens report having dinner with their family at least five times a week.

What Makes a Regular Family Meal so Hard Today?

Researchers say we are losing the family meal and our ability to eat well. The pressures of a lack of time and overscheduled lives are the usual reasons. We are often eating on the run and often in the car, as we move from activity to activity. What is being lost?

In *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*, Miriam Weinstein writes,

As a society, we do not favor supper with preferential treatment; because we schedule everything constantly, all the time, that humble, shared meal is no longer expected. And because it is not expected, it is less likely to happen. And so it is expected even less. We stay late at the office. We stop by the gym, or catch up on our e-mail. We drive one kid to soccer, bring another one along in the car.

We grab fast food, or let the kids open the freezer and fend for themselves. Our supermarket aisles are bulging with single-serving, idiot-proof, heat-and-eat meal substitutes. And the more of them we buy, the less practice we have in putting meals together. Who even knows what a meal means? How do we learn what constitutes

reasonable portions, what tastes good, what our grandmothers cooked, what we should combine with what to make a tasty, nutritionally complete, appealing whole?

We are living in a time of intense individualism, in a culture defined by competition and consumption. It has been an article of faith that a parent's job is to provide every child with every opportunity to find his or her particular talent, interest, or bliss. But somehow, as we drive-thru our lives, we have given up something so modest, so humble, so available that we never realized its worth. Family supper can be a bulwark against the pressures we all face every day.

The family meal—dinner at whatever time works for a family—is one of the few rituals that allow us to act out our concern for each other, our need and desire to be together. The family meal is a time when family comes first; it is a time for establishing, enjoying, and maintaining ties. The goal is to create and reinforce a secure place for your loved ones in a society that can seem awfully uninterested in human needs.



Family Meals: Yesterday and Today

Each of us have a variety of eating experiences; sometimes we eat well, other times not. Our stories of eating shape who we are—from our typical family meals when we were growing up to our family meal today, from the celebrations of holidays and important family events in our childhood to the ones we celebrate in our families today.

Growing Up

What was it like in your family when you were growing up? Think about your family table and place the people around your family table.



- What was a typical family dinner like?
- What time did you eat?
- What were your typical meals? Favorites? Worst meal?
- Who prepared it? Who served it? Who cleaned-up?
- How did your meal begin?
- What did you talk about at the family table?
- How did the family meal end?

A Special Meal

Now take a moment to recall the story of a special meal—Thanksgiving, Christmas, an important family celebration— that was significant for you and/or your family?

- What did you celebrate?
- What was on the menu?
- What happened? Think of the preparation for the meal, the experience of the meal, and activities after the meal.
- Why was this meal important for you and for those who attended?

Eating Well Today

What is your typical family meal like today? A lot has changed over the past twenty-to-thirty years. A typical answer to this question is another question: “What family meal?” So what is your typical family meal like today?

- How many days a week does your family gather for a family meal together?
- What time do you eat?
- Where are your typical meals?
- Who prepares it? Who serves it? Who cleans-up?
- How does your meal begin?
- What do you talk about at the family table?
- How does the family meal end?

1 Eating Well

The Christian Practice of Eating Well

The Christian Practice of Eating Well

Food has always been an important vehicle for sacred learning. The bitter herbs of a Passover Seder teach about the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. The broken bread of communion teaches the crucifixion. Kosher laws, potluck dinners, meals for the grieving or ill, *Shabbat*, and Sunday dinner—these meals teach so much, including what it means to be part of this community, part of this family. Anthropologists pay particular attention to what happens around food in a society because so often the pattern and values of the society come to a head around the meal.

Brad Wigger

Throughout the Bible, eating a meal together has special significance. Much more happens than physical hunger being satisfied. Intimacy develops between people who share food together. Jesus used his last meal with his disciples to symbolize his continuing relationship with them, even after his death. He fed them after his resurrection, and with the bread and fish came the opportunity to talk together (John 21:9–23). It was only when Jesus fed them that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus finally recognized him: “their eyes were opened” Luke 24:30–31. Diana Garland

In the gospels, Jesus teaches us how to eat well. In the Gospel of Luke alone there are ten important meal stories. Much of Jesus’ teaching took place during meals. Indeed, meals appear to have been the privileged place for Jesus’ teaching. Meals provided an excellent setting for surfacing the various problems and issues in the community, as well as for serious conversation. In view of the importance of meals in the life of the community, the meal itself was often the subject of Jesus’ teaching at dinner. Such is the case in the dinner at the

home of a Pharisee (7:36–40), in the hospitality at the home of Martha (10:38–42), and even at the Last Supper (22:14–38).

It was at a meal that Jesus celebrated for the last time with his disciples, asking them to remember him each time they celebrate the breaking of the bread and drinking from the cup. Blessing comes through this meal as Jesus establishes the common meal that has come to mark the communal life of his followers every since. For two millennia now, Christians



have been breaking bread and blessing it and expecting as they do so to encounter Jesus and feed upon him.

Then he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way, he gave them the cup after the supper, saying, "This is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:19–20)

It was at a meal that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus discover Jesus in their midst. Neither disciple recognizes him as they recount the things that happened to Jesus in Jerusalem, how he was put to death and how they found the tomb empty on the third day. Then Jesus uses the Scriptures to explain why the Messiah had to suffer. As they came near the village of Emmaus, the disciples ask Jesus to stay with them.

"Stay with us, the day is almost over and it is getting dark." So he went in to stay with them. He sat down to eat with them, took the bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:29–32; read the whole story in Luke 24:13–35)

So many good things can happen when family members gather together to eat. Just as a meal was central in the ministry of Jesus, the family meal can be a central faith experience for family members, and the family as a whole. It is a daily opportunity to discover Jesus' presence in the midst of family life. "The simple act of eating together is perhaps the most fundamental of all the ways in which food can express and foster the community that God desires should exist among people, and between humans and God."

Margaret Kim Peterson



Let's explore several ways that you can make your family meals a time for recognizing and celebrating the presence of God in your life.

Read all of the stories of Jesus' meals in the Gospel of Luke.

1. A Great Banquet at the House of Levi (5:27–39)
2. A Great Dinner at the House of Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50)
3. The Breaking of the Bread in the City of Bethsaida (9:10–17)
4. Hospitality at the Home of Martha (10:38–42)
5. A Noon Meal at the Home of a Pharisee (11:37–54)
6. A Sabbath Dinner at the Home of a Leading Pharisee (14:1–24)
7. Hospitality at the House of Zacchaeus (19:1–10)
8. Preparing the Passover (22:7–13)
9. The Passover (22:14–38)
10. The Breaking of the Bread at Emmaus (24:13–35)
11. With the Community in Jerusalem (24:36–53)

Eating Well Involves Giving Thanks to God for the Gift of Food

Jesus' miracle of the feeding of the five thousand teaches us that food is a good gift of God. We are called to give God thanks for our food as we share it with others.

When the sun was beginning to set, the twelve disciples came to him and said, "Send the people away so that they can go to the villages and farms around here and find food and lodging, because this is a lonely place." But Jesus said to them, "You yourselves give them something to eat." They answered, "All we have are five loaves and two fish. Do you want us to go and buy food for this whole crowd?" Jesus said to his disciples, "Make the people sit down in groups of about fifty each." After the disciples had done so, Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, thanked God for them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and had enough, and the disciples took up twelve baskets of what was left over. (Luke 9:12–17)

Eating well is characterized by gratitude. Jesus is recorded in Scripture as giving thanks before meals (John 6:11), as is the apostle Paul (Acts 27:35). Christians in all walks of life have long been in the habit of "saying grace" as one means of expressing thanks to God, who sustains our lives through gifts of food.

Saying grace is a means of setting mealtime apart from the rest of the day, and of acknowledging God as the source of all good gifts, and of this food and fellowship in particular. Table graces may vary from short blessings said or sung from memory to longer or shorter spontaneous prayers said by one or more members of the household.

Try using this simple format for your prayer before a meal.

1. begin with a salutation, such as Dear Lord, or Almighty God, or Gracious Creator, or another title for God;
2. give God thanks for the blessings of the day and for the food you are about to eat;
3. remember the needs of people who need your prayer this day.

Here's an easy-to-use grace before meal that you can easily modify each day.

*Dear God,
thank you for this day,
for one another, for the food before us,
and for all who helped to grow and cook this food.*

*We remember our world
and all those who need our prayers today,
especially ___ (add the names of people you are praying for)*

*Please help this meal
to nourish our hearts and souls
as well as our bodies*

*Amen!
(Kathy Finley)*

The practice of saying grace is important. If nothing else, it preserves the form of asking God's blessing. The expression of gratitude is spiritually formative. Such rituals and traditions shape us.

Eating Well Involves Storytelling

Family meals are the central daily ritual opportunity in family life. At best, they are an oasis in a hectic day, a time to reconnect, relax, discuss, debate, support one another, and laugh together. Family dinners in particular are apt to be the only time during the day when the whole family has the chance to be together, face-to-face, doing the same activity and sharing in conversation.

Family meal rituals involve:

- *being-around talk*, as we prepare meals, set up, eat our food, and clean up
- *logistics talk*, as we use the meal to catch up with what is happening on everyone's schedule
- *connecting talk*, as we use the meal (at the best of times, anyway) to tell stories, share opinions and feelings, and generally get caught up in one another's lives.

Family meals provide time for face-to-face interaction. This is a time to look at your family members. Who looks happy? Who looks healthy? It's a time to discuss everyone's day.

Family meals enhance communication skills. Children learn how to hold a conversation by listening and participating in conversation at the dinner table. They learn how to initiate conversation, take turns, maintain and change topics, and request clarification.

The family meal provides a great setting for sharing stories. It's a time to:

- talk about the highs and lows of the day
- talk about upcoming and past events
- tell stories about the family, such as where grandparents grew up, how they met, what their parents did for a living.

With children and teens, ask specific questions to avoid the one-word answer (this also works for adults). For example: "What was something new you learned today?" "What was one interesting thing that happened today?" "How did you see God at work today?" "What made you feel happy today?" "How did you care for someone else today?" "Who needs our prayers tonight?"

**Eating Well Involves Sharing Food and Serving Others**

When Jesus was at a meal in the home of a prominent religious leader of his day, he taught the guests that their meal was not only for themselves but that they were called to serve the poor in their community as well.

The Jesus said to his host, "When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors—for they will invite you back, and in this way you will be paid for what you did. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; and you will be blessed, because they are not able to pay you back. God will repay you on the day the good people rise from death." (Luke 14:12–14; read the whole story in Luke 14:1–24)

Sharing food with those in need is central to the Christian way of life and to the practice of eating well. In Matthew 25 Jesus identifies himself with the hungry and tells us that when we share our food with the hungry, we are sharing our faith with him. Here is the story of one woman's experience.

Each Tuesday Linda prepares a meal for the women and children at the local homeless shelter. She makes a special point to cook a healthy, homemade meal, something that the homeless rarely have. It is her Tuesday evening ritual: arriving home a little early from work, cooking the meal, carrying it to the shelter, serving the food, talking with the ladies, playing with the children while their mothers eat. Her Tuesday meal is

shared with those who are hungry and homeless. Her food and presence show her respect for the dignity and value of each person at the shelter. Over a shared meal, she listens to their stories and carries them with her all week long.

One family decided to simplify its food purchases by reducing meat consumption and eliminating some foods altogether (unhealthy snacks, candy). They took the \$20-a-week savings in their food bill—about \$1000 per year—and invested the money into providing food for the local food bank, and sponsoring a child with an international relief agency.

There are many ways to share food with those in need:

- Many churches gather regularly to prepare and serve a meal at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. Look for opportunities to participate with your church in serving the hungry in your community and in the world.
- Work with local organizations who feed people at homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and food banks.
- Support the international work of organizations that help people become food sufficient, such as Heifer (www.heifer.org), World Vision (www.worldvision.org), Church World Service (www.churchworldservice.org), and Catholic Relief Services (www.crs.org).
- Support organizations that advocate for policies that will feed the hungry in our country and world, such as Bread for the World (www.bread.org).
- Support the poor economically by purchasing fair trade products, such as coffee, whenever possible. Find fair trade products online at sites such as Equal Exchange (www.equalexchange.com) and Ten Thousand Villages (www.tenthousandvillages.com).



Eating Well Involves Celebrating

So many important holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, and family events, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and accomplishments, are celebrated at a meal. These are times of grace when we can experience God's presence through celebration. Celebration is at the heart of Christ's way; the story of the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1–11) is but one example of the importance Jesus placed on celebrating life events.

Celebration brings joy into our lives, and joy—especially shared joy—gives us strength. Here is one person's experience of a birthday milestone:

It happens once in a lifetime. This particular birthday, my children were coming home for my sixtieth birthday, and we decided to play golf that afternoon. That was very nice, and I was looking forward to it.

When we got home I was pretty oblivious. As I was going up the stairs in my sweat-soaked T-shirt, I heard a loud scream, "Happy Birthday!" and saw a huge crowd. Friends and family from near and far had gathered at our house for a surprise birthday party.

Yes, I was surprised. But that was just the beginning. My wife had the event catered, and the food was terrific—hors d'oeuvres, champagne and wine, and a really fine meal. Too much.

A feast, a celebration—not something one deserves. It only happens once in a lifetime. It was great, a blessing beyond anything I could imagine.

Good family celebrations don't happen; they are planned. Look ahead on the calendar and schedule your Advent or lenten activities, or your first-day-of-school ritual. Sit down together as a family and decide what rituals you would like to try this year. Perhaps you will want only three or four. Think of possible feast days, holidays, and special occasions that you can celebrate as a family: Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, a Seder dinner, Easter, Pentecost, birthdays, a wedding anniversary, Mother's Day, Father's Day, back-to-school ritual, Thanksgiving, daily Advent and various Christmas rituals. Give each family member a particular responsibility for planning and carrying out the celebration.

Eating Well Involves Listening to God's Word

Reading the Bible and applying it to our lives is one of the most powerful ways to grow in faith as a family. Mealtime is an excellent opportunity to read a Scripture verse, whether daily or a few times a week. You may also want to discuss a Bible passage at one meal each week, perhaps using one of the readings for

the upcoming Sunday. Here is the story of one family's experience.

A friend of mine from church told me how her family (including two teenagers) has begun having breakfast together. Instead of each person grabbing something on the run, as they always had, the whole family actually sits down together on work days and school days, in one place at the same time; as the sun rises, they read from the first chapter of Genesis. Each day, they read about one day of creation and how God saw it was good. I asked about this, and the friend told me, "Everything around us tries to tell us to be cynical and dissatisfied, so taking even five minutes, including our time to teach, to know goodness, to look at each other face-to-face, has got to be worth something." Over and over again, daily, they read of the goodness of God's creative work and welcome the day with appreciation. "Breakfast itself has become meaningful to us now, in ways it never had been." This family, maybe intuitively, discovered at least a partial antidote to the perpetual dissatisfaction, cynicism, distraction, and danger always knocking at the door. The story of God's good creation feeds the soul of this family with meaning, as food feeds their body. (Brad Wigger)



Living the Christian Practice of Eating Well

We understand the powerful forces that keep many families from breaking bread together. But we believe deeply that for most families, the first beachhead in the battle to reclaim family life is their meal rituals. Make your stand here if you can. Be committed and flexible, accept where you are starting from, develop your skills in family conversation, realize that there will be dry times, and have some creative fun along the journey. In this way, you will pass along an important family tradition to your children that will carry on when they have families.

William J. Doherty and Barbara Carlson

Ten years from now, what will have been most important in building lifelong family relationships: adding an extracurricular activity, or having meals together? How can you more fully live the Christian practice of eating well everyday? To get you started here is a story to inspire you, and a simple guide for using the ideas in this article.

“They Think We’re Crazy”

David and Darlene have been married for ten years and have lived all of those years in a southern town where David is a medical doctor and Darlene is a social worker. They each brought a son and a different religious tradition to their marriage. David has continued to be involved in the Catholic Church with his son, Pete, age fourteen. Darlene is a member of the session (the governing body) of her Presbyterian congregation. Darlene’s son Paul, age eleven, is involved with her in the Presbyterian Church.

When I asked them to relate to me a picture of their family doing something together that really says who they are as a family, David began, “Having dinner together is important to us. We might not plan on it or talk about the fact that it is important, but it is, and we make it happen.”

“Sometimes, it’s impossible with Pete’s basketball,” his wife added. “The games start at 6:00 PM. But generally we really try to eat together. We have so much fun when we eat at night; their friends come over and just sit there going....”

Paul interrupted his mother, “They think we’re crazy. The TV is off....”

Peter interrupted Paul, “The family is more entertaining than the TV, anyway.”

Outside activities pull these family members away from the family dinner. But they work at making their dinner table a place to gather, where friends are welcome. The very telling of this story illustrates that this is not just significant to parents but to teenagers as well, as Paul interrupts his mother, helping to build the story of how their friends see their family as “crazy,” and Pete in turn interrupts his stepbrother and builds on his words. The boys have a sense of pride in their family; they are quite willing to invite friends in and expose them to their “crazy” family that actually turns the television off during dinner. Mealtime is often the only time the whole family is gathered in one place. As a teenager in another family said, “The dinner table is the place where you find out what’s going on.”

Diana Garland





Getting Ready

- **Find time for family meals.** Decide to be together for a meal certain days and times each week, and then do it. Find good places to eat together—think of where you can eat meals together at home and away. Develop a family meal calendar each week. Consider the following questions in preparing your calendar:
 - Who will be there?
 - Where will we eat?
 - When will we eat?
 - What is going to be served?
 - How will the meal be prepared?
 - Who is doing what to get ready for the dinner?
- **Prepare meals together as a family.** Create the menu. Shop for the food. Clean up together. Make mealtimes special with candles, good dishes, and a tablecloth. Eat in the dining room. Have special meal nights that celebrate a particular ethnic tradition or family recipe, or a special accomplishment of a family member.
- **Tune out distractions.** Turn off the TV and radio. Take the phone off the hook or plug in the answering machine. Put away the newspaper or magazines. Put all the things that could distract you from eating well— cell phones, pagers, iPods, magazines, work projects, and so on—into a box during dinner time. You can get them back when dinner is over for everyone!

Enriching the Meal

- **Give thanks to God before eating.** Pray real prayers that reflect gratitude, warmth, hospitality, and a genuine awareness of those who live without enough food each day. Use the simple format for grace that was presented earlier in this chapter.

- **Make conversation and storytelling central at your meals.**
 - Talk about the highs and lows of the day.
 - Talk about decisions that need to be made as a family or by individual members.
 - Talk about one interesting thing you learned today or one thing that happened today, or something that made you feel happy/sad today.
 - Talk about how you saw God at work in your life today.
- **Share food with those in need.** Find ways to serve the hungry and needy in your community by working together as a family or with your church. Consider adjusting your diet and food expense so that you can find ways to financially support those who are hungry around the world.
- **Celebrate church seasons and family events.** Incorporate the celebration of important rituals—in the life of the church and in your family—into your meal tradition. Find ways to include Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter traditions as part of your meal, such as a daily table prayer, an Advent wreath prayer, and so on. Find special ways to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and accomplishments with a simple prayer, Bible reading, decorations, special foods, and so on.
- **Read the Bible as part of your mealtime.** Begin your meal with a Bible verse or devotion each day. Select one meal to read and discuss the Scripture reading from a past or upcoming Sunday worship service.

Resources for Living the Christian Practice of Eating Well

Go to our project web site
www.lifelongfaith.com
 for exciting ideas, practical resources, and recommended books and web sites to help you live the Christian practice of eating well.

Praying Together

A Rich Feast

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips.

Psalm 63:5

O God, our help, bless you.

When we are thirsty,
you pour water
When we are hungry,
you offer good food to eat.
When we are tired,
you hold us up.
When we are hurting,
you care.

Feast with us today, God of love,
so our lips can celebrate your glory.

Bless you.
Brad Wigger

