



# WHAT IF...

## *Imagining Possibilities*

### How Shall We Live Now?

#### *Designing a Christian Practices Curriculum*

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

John Roberto

The first article in the “How Shall We Live Now?” proposed a faith forming dynamic of *Behaving* (practices for Christian living) leading to *Belonging* (being part of a Christian community living those practices) and integrating *Believing* (reflecting on how the Christian tradition informs our practices). This is an emphasis on forming Christians through the practices of faith: “*what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8).

The second article explored what we mean by Christian practice and which practices are central to forming a Christian way of life. Christian practices are the ways by which we live the Christian way of life and deepen our relationship with God. The Christian community gathers around Jesus, whose way of life embodies the loving, challenging life of God. Through Jesus’ presence and example, a way to live comes into focus. The community, with Jesus at its heart, experiences this model of living whenever we celebrate the blessings of life, serve the poor and vulnerable, offer our lives in prayer, forgive others, keep the Sabbath holy, discern God’s will for us, or make an effort to transform the world.

This third article in the series focuses on building a curriculum to form people of all ages in Christian practices. The fourth article will focus on the processes (methodology) of teaching and learning Christian practices. On the Lifelong Faith website there will learning activities and curated resources for teaching Christian practices, including Praying, Reading the Bible, Keeping Sabbath, Eating Well, Forgiveness, Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Honoring the Body, Dying Well, Household Economics, Caring for Creation, and Participating in Community.

# A Christian Practices Curriculum

We form people in the practices of the Christian way of life by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and Christian tradition, and connecting the practices to the “signs of the times” – the struggles, joys, needs, and hungers of people and communities today, and equipping people with the skills and tools to live the practice in their daily life.

In the second article, I suggested 23 Christian practices that emerge repeatedly in the Bible and Christian tradition, and have demonstrated their importance in forming a distinctively Christian way of life. The list is not exhaustive, but is a great starting point for building a curriculum in your church on Christian practices.

- ◆ Caring for Creation
- ◆ Discernment
- ◆ Doing Justice
- ◆ Dying Well
- ◆ Eating Well
- ◆ Embracing Diversity
- ◆ Finding God in Everyday Life
- ◆ Forgiveness
- ◆ Healing
- ◆ Honoring the Body
- ◆ Hospitality
- ◆ Household Economics
- ◆ Keeping Sabbath
- ◆ Praying
- ◆ Peace and Reconciliation
- ◆ Reading the Bible
- ◆ Saying Yes and Saying No
- ◆ Serving the Poor and Vulnerable
- ◆ Shaping and Forming Communities
- ◆ Singing Our Lives
- ◆ Stewardship and Generosity
- ◆ Testimony
- ◆ Worship

## Formation Process

The dynamic of forming people of all ages in a Christian practice has four movements. (The fourth article of the series will explore how to design and teach Christian practices formation programs.)

1. Reflecting on Life Experience:
  - Awareness of the basic human need in this particular aspect of their lives
  - Reflection on the hunger for the Christian practice and how people may already be living this practice.
2. Exploring the Christian Practice:
  - In the Bible and Christian tradition
  - In the lives of people through history and in the community
  - In its connection to the basic needs and hungers of people today
  - In its importance of the practice for life as a Christian
3. Experiencing the Practice
  - Immersion into the practice

#### 4. Applying the Practice to Life:

- Ideas and strategies to integrate the Christian practice into daily life

The essential element in formation programs is for people to experience the Christian practice, to be immersed in the actual experience of doing the practice. Understanding and reflection is important, but the key is direct experience and application to one's daily life and to community life. So decisions about the type of programming need to reflect how well they embody experience and application.

## Curriculum Approaches

Here are several approaches for building a curriculum plan for formation in Christian practices in your church. Use as many as apply to your church community in creating your plan.

### Approach 1. Engage in the Christian Practices of Your Community

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. A church teaches the practice of hospitality by how the community welcomes, or does not welcome, the stranger. A church teaches 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.

Begin by exploring how your church is already living Christian practices in its life together. Use the list of 23 practices as a guide. Think about your church's life, ministries, and activities and what they tell you about how your community participates in the Christian practices. Consider which practices are done especially well. Does your congregation have a gift for certain practices?

Second, select one or more practices that can be integrated into current faith formation programming or that can form the basis for new programming with children, youth, adults, families, and all ages (intergenerational).

Third, design "practice learning modules" to integrate into programming using a method such as:

- ◆ *preparing* people with the biblical and theological understanding of the practice
- ◆ *engaging* people in hands-on experience of the practice with the faith community
- ◆ *reflecting* on the experience and its meaning for them
- ◆ *integrating* the practice into daily life

### Approach 2. Embed Christian Practices into Existing Formation Programs.

Analyze current faith formation with all ages to determine where Christian practices can be embedded as a session or multiple sessions. For example:

- ◆ A service program or mission trip is an opportunity to teach Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, and Hospitality.
- ◆ A program preparing for First Communion could embed Eating Well, Praying, Reading the Bible, and Keeping Sabbath.
- ◆ A Christian initiation or new member formation program could incorporate many of the practices such as Discernment, Doing Justice, Keeping Sabbath, Reading the Bible, Praying, Stewardship, Testimony, and Worship.

Christian Practices	Where It Can Be Embedded
Caring for Creation	
Discernment	
Doing Justice	
Dying Well	
Eating Well	
Embracing Diversity	
Finding God in Everyday Life	
Forgiveness	
Healing	
Honoring the Body	
Hospitality	
Household Economics	
Keeping Sabbath	
Praying	
Peace and Reconciliation	
Reading the Bible	
Saying Yes and Saying No	
Serving the Poor and Vulnerable	
Shaping and Forming Communities	
Singing Our Lives	
Stewardship and Generosity	
Testimony	
Worship	

### Approach 3. Develop an Annual or Seasonal Christian Practices Plan.

Develop a church-wide annual plan focusing on a Christian practice each month (“30 Days of Practice”) through all of the formational programs in the church—family, intergenerational, and age groups—and integrating the practice of the month into Sunday worship and preaching, church ministries and projects, and even church meetings. The practice of the month can also



be a focus on social media through e-newsletters, Facebook posts, Instagram images, YouTube videos, etc.

One way to sequence the Christian practices over the course of the year is to identify times during the year when the church or society is already focused on a particular practice, such as Stewardship and Generosity for Thanksgiving in November (or October in Canada). During the Lenten Season, a church can focus on several practices, such as Forgiving, Discernment, Praying, Doing Justice, and Serving the Poor and Vulnerable.

A variation on the monthly approach is to go more in-depth on a Christian practice over multiple months, such as a practice each quarter, and focus on four practices each year.

#### Approach 4. Align Christian Practices with the Lectionary.

Connect the Sunday lectionary readings (and preaching) to Christian practices and offer formation programs for families and all ages, monthly or seasonally. (This approach is another way of implementing Approach 3).

To develop a monthly plan, review the Lectionary readings for each month and determine a Christian practice that emerges from the readings and make that the focus for the month. For example in Cycle B (Mark’s Gospel) the August through November readings provide opportunities to focus on several Christian practices in worship, preaching, and formation:

- ◆ 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday (B): Mark 7:31-37      Healing, Honoring the Body
- ◆ 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B): Mark 8:27-35      Testimony
- ◆ 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B): Mark 10:17-30      Discernment
- ◆ 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B): Mark 10:35-45      Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable
- ◆ 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B): Mark 8:27-35      Healing, Honoring the Body

#### Approach 5. Connect Christian Practices to Milestones and Life Transitions.

Utilize a milestone or life transition to form people in 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 married couple is an opportunity for “Household Economics.”

Milestone or Life Transition	Examples of Christian Practices
Birth / Baptism	Honoring the Body
Young Children	Praying
Young Children in Worship	Keeping Sabbath, Reading the Bible, Hospitality
First Communion	Eating Well, Keeping Sabbath
Receiving a first Bible	Reading the Bible

Children	Praying, Honoring the Body, Forgiving
Adolescents	Praying, Honoring the Body, Forgiving, Embracing Diversity, Discernment, Serving, Doing Justice, Caring for Creation
Confirmation	Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Doing Justice, Caring for Creation, Keeping Sabbath, Praying, Reading the Bible
Graduation (HS, College)	Discernment, Saying Yes and Saying No
A New Home / Apartment	Household Economics; Hospitality, Eating Well, Stewardship and Generosity
Career / First Job	Discernment, Stewardship and Generosity
Wedding	Household Economics, Forgiveness
Adulthood	All Practices
Retirement	Discernment
Older Adult Transitions	Honoring the Body, Dying Well

## Approach 6. Create Christian Practice Apprenticeships.

Identify “Practice Mentors” in your church, who are living embodiments of a Christian practice, such as service or hospitality or prayer. Develop formation 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 to learn about the teachings and examples from the Bible and Christian tradition. This model of mentoring could be applied across the entire church and become integral to all learning programs in the curriculum.

## Programming Models

There are a variety of programming models that can be incorporated in your curriculum plan—models you are already use and new models you might adopt. With existing models create plans to incorporate formation in Christian practices using one or more the approaches described earlier. This may be a good opportunity to consider implementing one or more new models that are better designed for forming people in Christian practices. Here are a few examples of programming models.

- ◆ **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.
- ◆ **Families at Home** programs can provide playlists of learning (print, video, audio), published on a website, to introduce families to a practice and then provide activities for family experiences of the practice at home.

- ◆ **Extended** programs such as vacation Bible school, summer camps, and mission trips can focus on several practices, and can combine study with hands-on experience.
- ◆ **Courses** and **workshops** can focus on one or more Christian practices with opportunities for people to experience the practice between sessions or as part of the program.
- ◆ **Retreats** provide an extended time setting for the development of practices that need a more reflective environment, such as Praying, Discernment, and Healing.
- ◆ **Discussions** after Sunday worship provide a setting for exploring Christian practices in the Scripture readings.
- ◆ **Field trips** provide an opportunity to see and experience Christian practices in action, such as Dying Well at a hospice center, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable at a soup kitchen, Healing at a clinic.
- ◆ **Small Groups**, focused on a Christian practice, provide a supportive setting for learning, experiencing, reflecting, and applying the practice to daily life.

## Next in the Series

The *fourth* article in the series will focus on the processes (methodology) of teaching and learning Christian practices. And the *fifth* and final article will focus on the process of forming habits of faith, i.e., making practices part of one's daily life.

Beginning the week of April 26 on the Lifelong Faith website I will be uploading learning activities and curated resources for teaching Christian practices. Each downloadable kit will include a guide to teaching the Christian practice and document with reproducible activities. Currently scheduled for publication online are Praying, Reading the Bible, Keeping Sabbath, Eating Well, Forgiveness, Doing Justice, Serving the Poor and Vulnerable, Honoring the Body, Dying Well, Household Economics, Caring for Creation, and Participating in Community.

Stay tuned!