



WHAT IF . . .

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now? – Part One

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

I believe that faith formation (and the whole church) in the emerging post-pandemic world will need to help people of all ages answer the question “How shall we live now?” The pandemic has disrupted our lives in ways that we have only begun to name. We are searching anew for meaning and purpose – now in a post-pandemic world. We are trying to process our losses and the grief that brings. We are struggling to build a world of justice, peace, care for creation, and respect for the dignity of all people. We are starting to rebuild our network of relationships and our resiliency as families and communities. We are all looking to answer the question, “How shall we live now?” in a post-pandemic world. What are the approaches, resources, people, and wisdom we need to address this question?

Theologian and author Miroslav Volf echoes this challenge in his prophetic words from 2002.

. . . the central challenge for pastoral ministry today concerns the most important mark of good ministry: the ability effectively to mediate faith as an integral way of life to persons, communities and cultures. This has been true throughout history, in every culture and for every community of faith. In our time, however, communities of faith seem to be falling short precisely at this point. . . . the main problem is that the communities of faith have not found effective ways to offer a compelling vision of an integral way of life that is worth living. Many people are seeking precisely that.

In an interview with Dr. Peter Senge (senior lecturer at MIT, author of *The Fifth Discipline*) at a conference for Christian pastors, Brian McLaren relates this story that gets to the heart of the matter.

“Hello, Dr. Senge. It’s a great honor for us to have you with us. Your image is being projected to about five hundred pastors. I imagine this is a different kind of crowd than you normally address. What would you like to say to a group of five hundred Christian ministers?”

“Well, Brian, you’re right. I don’t normally speak to pastors. Actually I was thinking about that very question yesterday when I was in a large bookstore. I asked the bookstore manager what the most popular books are these days. Most popular he said, were books about how to get rich in the new information economy, which didn’t surprise me.

“Second most popular, the manager said, were books about spirituality, and in particular, books about Buddhism. And so when I thought about speaking to five hundred Christian pastors today, I thought I’d begin by asking you all a question: why are books on Buddhism so popular, and not books on Christianity?”

“Well, Dr Senge,” I said, trying not to sound as clumsy as I felt, “how would you answer that question?”

He replied, “I think it’s because Buddhism presents itself as a way of life, and Christianity presents itself as a system of belief. So I would want to get Christian ministers thinking about how to rediscover their own faith as a way life, because that’s what people are searching for today. That’s what they need more.” (McLaren, 2-3)

This story, written well before the pandemic, illustrates our central challenge. Most published faith formation curriculum over the past 20-25 years have focused on “what we believe” or “what you should believe if you want to be a (fill in the denomination).” For children and teens we have emphasized either learning the catechism of your particular Christian tradition or learning (memorizing?) specific Bible teachings or stories as the content necessary for developing a Christian way of life.

In his reflection on Senge’s insight, McLaren writes, “The issue, of course, isn’t either/or, but both/and; it’s hard to deny that many of us have lost the “way” of our faith. Without a coherent and compelling way of life, formed in community and expressed in mission, some of us begin losing interest in the system of belief, or we begin holding it grimly, even meanly, driving more and more people away from faith rather than attracting them toward it.” (McLaren, 3-4)

I’m sure you’re familiar with the three-word dynamic of coming to faith: **Believing, Belonging, Behaving**. Since the Reformation and the era of catechisms the formula has been we *Believe* certain truths about the Christian faith, then we *Behave* in a way that reflects these beliefs, and finally we become a (full) member of that particular Christian tradition (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Wesleyan, Calvinist, et al.). This approach continues until the present day.

If the central question in the post-pandemic world is “How shall we live now?” then our focus needs to shift to **Behave** (practices) – **Belong** (a community living those practices) – **Believe** (how the tradition informs our practices. Understanding the ancient Christian practices and their applicability today is the key. Dr. Craig Dykstra, author of *Growing in the Life of Faith* and co-editor of *Practicing Our Faith*, writes:

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. (71)

People come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian community. They come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith in the context of these practices as they themselves, participating in them actively, actually doing what the practices involve. And they learn the Christian practices – not only through experience but through the guidance, mentoring, and teaching where people are learn how to live these practices.

Consider what it takes to be an actor, singer, musician, artist, dancer, writer, or athlete. They all require actually performing, developing skills, thinking, and practicing over and over again in order to do it well. While singers and musicians must learn music theory, that is not enough. They have to actually play the instrument and practice. An artist may know art history and the different forms and styles or painting, but the artist must actually paint and continue to do so to master her or his craft. We have a lot to learn from their example. Craig Dykstra notes,

The practice of Christian faith is a lot more physical than we usually recognize or let on. It is a body faith—an embodied faith—that involves gestures, moves, going certain places (where people are hungry and thirsty, for example; where suffering occurs), and doing certain things. As with every other practice, learning the practices of the life of the Christian faith involves practice, repeated participation in the bodily actions that make up those practices. (72)

What if faith formation in the post-pandemic world focused its attention, curriculum, programming, and resources on addressing the question “How shall we live now?” Consider what this might look like in practice.

- ◆ We would begin with **Behave** and formation in the Christian practices that speak especially to our lives today as the primary content of faith formation for all ages, and engage people in learning and performing these practices.
- ◆ We would build supportive communities of practice (**Belong**) in age groups, families, and all ages together that provide the environment for learning, developing skills, performing, and reflecting.
- ◆ We would engage in thoughtful reflection on the Christian beliefs (**Believe**) that inform the Christian practices. Engagement in practices helps us see how core beliefs are to be understood and applied to living as Christians in this ever-changing world. “In most cases, Christian practices come first and Christian beliefs follow—or rather, beliefs are already entailed in practices, so that their explicit espousing becomes a matter of

bringing to consciousness what is implicit in the engagement in practices themselves.”
(Volf)

What does the content of curriculum or programming for all ages look like when it is focused on Christian practices. Craig Dykstra in his book *Growing in the Life of Faith* identifies fourteen practices that appear consistently throughout the Christian tradition and that are particularly significant for Christians today. Briefly, they include:

1. Worshipping God together—praising God, giving thanks for God’s creative and redemptive work in the world, hearing God’s word preached, and receiving the sacraments given to us in Christ
2. Telling the Christian story to one another—reading and hearing the Scriptures and also the stories of the church’s experience through its history
3. Interpreting together the Scriptures and history of the church’s experience, particularly in relation to their meaning for our own lives in the world
4. Praying—together and by ourselves, not only in formal services of worship but in all times and places
5. Confessing our sin to one another, and forgiving and becoming reconciled with one another
6. Tolerating one another’s failures and encouraging one another in the work each must do and the vocation each must live
7. Carrying out specific faithful acts of service and witness together
8. Giving generously of one’s means and receiving gratefully gifts others have to give
9. Suffering with and for one another and all whom Jesus showed us to be our neighbors
10. Providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but to strangers and even enemies
11. Listening and talking attentively to one another about our particular experiences in life
12. Struggling together to become conscious of and to understand the nature of the context in which we live
13. Criticizing and resisting all those power and patterns (both within the church and in the world as a whole) that destroy human beings, corrode human community, and injure God’s creation
14. Working together to maintain and create social structures and institutions that will sustain life in the world in ways that accord with God’s will (42-43)

The next articles in this series will describe what formation in Christian practices looks like, and the resources we need to move toward a practices-oriented curriculum for everyone.

Works Cited

- Dykstra, Craig. *Growing In The Life Of Faith: Education And Christian Practices* (Second Edition). Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- McLaren, Brian. *Finding Our Way—The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Thomas Nelson, 2010.
- Volf, Miroslav. “Way of Life” in “Faith Matters.” *Christian Century*, November 20, 2002.