PRACTICING OUR FAITH

A Way of Life for a Searching People

Second Edition

Dorothy C. Bass, Editor

M. Shawn Copeland
Craig Dykstra
Thomas Hoyt Jr.
L. Gregory Jones
John Koenig
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Don E. Saliers

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Praise for *Practicing Our Faith*

"Bass and her colleagues are thinking of 'practices' in a different way. They have in mind things Christians do together over time in response to and in light of God's active presence for the life of the world. Their purpose is to reclaim spiritual practices many . . . Christians have forgotten . . . [T]his volume represents an extraordinary shift and gift . . . *Practicing Our Faith* represents a change not only in its perception of the current challenge to people of faith, but also its response to the perennial question of how to build a bridge between Sunday and Monday . . . How do we embody and witness to our faith in the office, shop, and classroom? For Bass and her colleagues, the connection is built by concrete practices of communities and congregations, individuals and families . . . *Practicing Our Faith* harkens back to the monastic movement as well as to the pre-Constantian church and its efforts to form and embody a way of life that is at odds with, and an alternative to, the prevailing culture."

—*Christian Century*

"[*Practicing Our Faith*] sparked a small movement, a whole way of thinking. That book really crystallized the insight that the Christian faith is not just a set of cognitive beliefs, but a way of life. A way of life that is communal, not just individualistic; not just beliefs but also practices, actions, attitudes, dispositions. It has been a stimulus to a holistic, communal way of thinking."

—John Witvliet, in *Faith & Leadership*

"Groups who read the essays in Bass's book together should find themselves engaged in both conversation and action regarding such matters as health, testimony, even household economics, all of which concern Christians in the modern world. The essays from a wide range of ecumenical writers are … all provocative."

—*Word & World*

"This book vigorously, knowingly, and at times eloquently, addresses the hugely important matter of how we ought to live this life—those of us who continue to believe that Christ's teachings matter in that regard. Here are wonderfully suggestive and edifying essays that will help 'people of faith' put their beliefs and convictions to that ultimate test of conduct—how we call upon our ideals in the everyday lived life that is our great opportunity, but also our demanding test, and at times, trial."

—Robert Coles, author of *The Spiritual Life of Children*

PRACTICING OUR FAITH

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Dorothy C. Bass, Series Editor

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New Preface for the Revised Edition

I am delighted to have the opportunity to offer this book to readers once again, thirteen years after its initial publication. This is not a matter of pulling an old volume down from a dusty shelf and sending it off to be reprinted. It's more like sending out new invitations to a long-running event.

This revised edition provides an opportunity to expand a conversation that began among the authors whose work is gathered here, a conversation that has since grown to include readers across the United States and abroad, in cities and rural areas, in retreat centers and reading groups, on campuses and in congregations. Many who have read *Practicing Our Faith* have come to see that they are more than readers and conversation partners, however. They are practitioners, people who enact in their own lives—in their own way, in their own distinctive places—the practices described in this book. Almost all of these people would have been practicing our faith if this book had never existed, to be sure; these practices belong not to this book but to communities of faith across the centuries and around the world. Still, when someone tells me that reading about

honoring the body broke through her dislike of her physical self, or when I hear that a congregation is starting to understand that their annual meeting is part of the practice of shaping community, I am grateful to have contributed to a book that helps readers perceive the practices of faith in a fresh way, and live them more fully.

Twelve practices stand at the center of this book. I recently contacted the authors and asked if they would like to make any changes for this revised edition. Remarkably, all are happy to stand by what they wrote almost fifteen years ago. These chapters still speak with clarity and relevance, they thought, and I agree. Besides, these twelve chapters have integrity and a shared history as a group. Therefore, they have not been changed, apart from minor corrections. To update, a few new books on each practice have been added to the References. We have also removed several breathless anticipations of the "dawn of the new millennium"—an event that looked a lot more earthshaking in 1997 than it does today.

The things that make this edition different come at the book's beginning and end. In this new Preface, I take a look back and ask how the context in which we practice our faith has changed. I also share some of the insights we have learned along the way, thanks to others who have been part of this conversation about practices. In the last two chapters, both written especially for this edition, Craig Dykstra and I offer a more deeply theological account of practices as responses to the active presence of God in Christ Jesus than originally appeared. We also make the way of thinking that lies behind *Practicing Our Faith* more explicit, so that readers can learn to employ it in their own situations. We hope that this new material will be especially helpful to communities where Christians gather to worship God and share their lives with one another, regularly and over a sustained period of time.

A Way of Life Abundant

In the years since *Practicing Our Faith* was first published, Craig and I have thought a lot about Christian practices. During these years, however, another term from this book has become just as significant. Back in 1997, we simply tucked the term into the subtitle, but

gradually we have come to see it as the point, the purpose, of all the practices. The term? *A way of life*.

These short and apparently simple words refer to something that belongs to every social group, for good or ill. Yet they also call to mind an ancient community of which we are heirs: the earliest Christians were known as men and women "who belong to the Way" (Acts 9:2). And heard in faith, these words shine with Jesus' presence: "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

A way of life abundant: this is God's gift in the midst of the ordinary stuff of existence. This way of life—abundant not in money and possessions but in mercy and hope—is given not only for the sake of those who are its members. It is given that these might live for the sake of others, and indeed for the sake of all creation. The challenge is to discern how to live this way of life within a specific context, at *your* moment in history.

Even if they do not use this specific language, this is the concern of parents and pastors, of educators, of health care workers and public servants, and indeed of anyone who yearns to live faithfully where they are and through all that they do: to discern the contours of a life-giving way of life here, now. Questions arise over dinner tables, in the meetings of church councils and hospital boards, and in many other settings. *What does it mean, here and now, to practice hospitality or forgiveness or testimony?* people ask one another, even if not in these exact words. And how can we help one another do so? What need for healing is at our doorstep, or even within our home, and how can we address it? How can we become more generous and more just, especially for the sake of those who are damaged by poverty, disaster, or war, and where should we begin to respond? How might we sing our lives more truthfully, in lament for those who suffer both close at hand and in distant places, and in praise and thanks for God's strong and lasting love for us and for all? Often these questions are prompted by a particular crisis or challenge, but sometimes they come when people realize they need to be proactive and undertake deliberate, long-term efforts to build up communities of hope.

Practicing Our Faith proposes that discerning the contours of a way of life abundant proceeds best when we give analytical, imaginative, critical, constructive, theological, prayerful attention to one

practice at a time. This kind of attention is necessarily open ended; it leads us deep into Scripture and history while it also calls us to notice compelling witnesses and daunting challenges in today's world. Thus perspectives on these twelve practices continue to evolve. Three of the authors have extended their chapters into entire books on honoring the body, Sabbath, and singing our lives, and other authors have written books on hospitality, testimony, and household economics. (All of these books, as well as other resources mentioned in this Preface, are listed in the References at the back of this book.) More important, readers have given this kind of attention to practices in the midst of actual places of ministry. In congregations, camps, schools, and an array of other nonprofit organizations, practitioners have reflected together on what practices need to be strengthened in their communities, and they have worked together to practice these in creative new ventures or in thoughtfully renewed older ones. Dozens of practitioners share stories and pictures of what they have done in a still-growing gallery at www.practicingourfaith.org.

A Time of Change

The notion that we live in changing times is a strong theme in *Practicing Our Faith.* In fact, a sense that the tectonic plates of society and culture were shifting in ways that reach into every corner of daily existence was one of the main reasons Craig and I initially gathered colleagues to ponder how faith might shape a life-giving way of life in our time. So it's a little startling to look back on the mid-1990s today and see a scene that looks relatively stable compared to now! It is true that powerful forces were at work: globalization, a revolution in communications technology, political chasms opened by the end of the Cold War, and more. Still, our authors' meetings were never interrupted by calls, because none of us carried cell phones then. Airport security was light, and getting to our meetings was quicker and less stressful than travel is today. We communicated by snail mail, land lines, and fax—a hassle in some ways, but helpful too, as they gave us time to think between editorial exchanges.

Even so, change truly was shaking our homes, our workplaces, our schools, our churches. And the practices we chose to explore

were practices we thought were both urgently needed and under severe pressure in that historical moment. As an example, take the practice about which I wrote: keeping Sabbath. The 1990s were a period of rising awareness that economic and cultural pressures on time were squeezing joy and freedom from the lives of many Americans. Many of us, myself included, were keenly aware of our need for this practice, and readers responded with gratitude to my chapter. Even as the ink dried on the pages, however, I could see that economic and cultural obstacles to Sabbath keeping were intensifying. I offered a more thorough and flexible approach to the practice in my next book, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (2000), and what I wrote there is still helpful to me and, I am told, to others. However, if I were writing today, during a period of economic crisis and high unemployment, I would give more attention to the burden of time that is empty, when productivity and purpose seem out of reach. Christian practices are rooted in deep wisdom, but the contexts in which we enact them are constantly shifting. Ongoing reflection and continual discovery are part of this way of life.

Further, some additional practices cry out for attention today. Though it is not random, our list of twelve is not exhaustive. All twelve of the original practices are big enough to address an entire aspect of fundamental human need, and we made a serious effort to create a varied set that attends to most crucial aspects of human existence. Still, if we were identifying indispensable and endangered practices that are urgently needed today, the list might be somewhat different.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the perilous stockpiling of weapons at home and around the globe, I would argue for including the Christian practice of peacemaking. In exploring this practice, we would encounter the nonviolent way of Jesus, centuries-long arguments about just war and pacifism, and courageous contemporary practitioners of reconciliation.

As climate change endangers our planet home, I would seriously consider identifying caring for creation as a distinct practice. (It is now one aspect of household economics.) This is a hands-on local practice with global reach that is deeply rooted in Scripture and important in the historical and contemporary witness of many

Christian practitioners, though disregard for creation's well-being has also distorted this tradition at times. Craig and I have invited further attention to this practice in our teaching and in this book by adding "and creation" to our basic definition of what a Christian practice is. Christian practices do more than address fundamental *human* needs and conditions; they also respond to God's active presence for the world in Christ Jesus by fostering care of the larger *oikos* of which we human beings are part, the household of earth.

Increasing public concern about what and how we eat suggests widespread yearning for another life-giving practice, one we sometimes call breaking bread. This concern often emerges when people become aware of the harm done by prevailing patterns of production and consumption—environmental degradation, animal abuse, bad health, alienating mealtimes—and deepens as they discover the pleasures of good food that is justly produced and generously shared. This book is not at all responsible for the emergence of this concern. However, Christian resources for renewing the practice that addresses this area of fundamental need are exceptionally rich, and some readers have made powerful connections that bring the approach developed here to the search for better ways of growing and sharing food.

When my colleagues and I invited communities to propose ways of strengthening practices in their own situations, many of the best projects focused in one way or another on the practice of breaking bread. In collaboration with Church World Service and the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Advocate Health System in Chicago developed the curriculum *Just Eating: Eating Well as a Christian Practice*. Many congregations have used this curriculum, especially during Lent, a season when Christians traditionally fast, pray, and give alms while reflecting on our own physical hunger, our hunger for God, and God's hunger for justice; versions for youth and in Spanish are also available. Elsewhere, vegetable gardens have become not only sources of food but also places of practical engagement where a way of life abundant begins to grow. Near Cedar Grove United Methodist Church in rural North Carolina, for example, a community garden has become a place of healing for a neighborhood terrified and torn by racial discord and an unsolved murder. In Anathoth garden,

experienced farmers without land of their own (some born nearby, others displaced from the Mexican countryside) and folks who have never before worked the soil contribute time, labor, and money to a common venture. They are black, white, and brown; Protestant, Catholic, and unchurched; economically privileged and immersed in poverty. Come harvest, vegetables abound, and so do hospitality, community, household economics, forgiveness, and testimony to justice, mercy, and hope. One of Anathoth's leaders is Fred Bahnson, a fine writer whose essays on this garden are already influencing others who yearn to foster a way of life that is abundant in mutual assistance and respect for persons and creation. Other practitioners around the country have strengthened their participation in the practice of breaking bread through intentional theological reflection and practical creativity in inner-city homeless shelters, summer camp programs, and other endeavors, including efforts to foster more mindful participation in the Lord's Supper on the part of both children and adults.

In my teaching, I sometimes deliberately choose to focus on a practice not treated in this book. Breaking bread is a favorite. This book's final chapter includes suggestions for exploring this practice in your own context. *Bon appétit!*

New Insights Along the Way

Thinking about gardens reminds me of something else about Christian practices that I've long wanted to say. Think of dirt. Sore muscles. Bugs and blight. Drought. Failed crops as well as bountiful ones. Often, readers pick up *Practicing Our Faith,* see the lovely titles of the practices—hospitality, Sabbath, healing, and so on—and grow mushy and sentimental. Their glazed eyes and fond smiles rest on a misconception! Hospitality, to take but one example, is not just a quality of the spirit or a special kind of niceness. As those who receive guests know—whether those guests are strangers in homeless shelters or new acquaintances invited to their homes—hospitality can be harsh and dreadful. The practice requires material as well as emotional resources: meals and linens, patience and hard work. It takes time, it is often frustrating, and it can be dangerous. Gifted practitioners have learned that offering welcome requires them to

structure their entire way of life in specific ways, as Benedictine monastic communities have done for centuries, and as organizations serving those who are homeless do in every major city today. Work is shared, boundaries are clear, economics are simple—but, within limits, specific arrangements are subject to revision, which typically comes after conflict of some kind. And even when the challenge is apparently slighter, as when a congregation invites newcomers to join, far more is needed than smiles on the faces of the greeters. Practicing hospitality is likely to cost you your usual pew and force you to talk at coffee hour with someone you don't know. And no matter how welcome newcomers are, sometimes they bring with them changes that feel impossible to embrace. At times, every other practice is just as harsh and dreadful as this one.

Gardens also call to mind another insight I've been eager to share with readers of *Practicing Our Faith*—something we stated in the first edition but that I would emphasize more vigorously today. Bugs, blight, and drought are not the only forces that threaten crops and communities. Someone forgets to water. Someone else fails to do his share of the weeding or carelessly wrecks an important piece of equipment. Worse yet, or so it can seem, a third person appears never to do anything wrong and makes sure everyone knows of her superior record. Error, sin, self-regard—every group at practice is riddled with these, in spite of most practitioners' well-intended resolve to embrace certain practices steadily and well.

The first edition of *Practicing Our Faith* contains repeated assurances that practice does not make perfect and need not be perfect. What I have since come to see more clearly is how readily talk about practices can lead to legalism or performance anxiety. There is something in our human nature that looks at a list of good things and sees only a catalogue of demands. You should! You must! Follow the rules! Multiple "oughts" weigh so heavily on us that we forget to notice and lean on the freeing power of the Holy Spirit. To see the world and God through the thick lenses of obligation does not lead to a way of life abundant.

In recent years I have become more and more certain that the life-giving way of life portrayed in *Practicing Our Faith* is not in its essence a matter of consistently righteous behavior. To practice our faith is not a matter of trying very, very hard until finally we learn

to keep things under control. Although 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, master time in the practice of keeping Sabbath, or master strangers in the practice of hospitality. Instead, in trying to engage in such practices faithfully and well, we seek to enter more fully into receptivity and responsiveness, to others and to God.

When we are defining practices in a book such as this one, it is easy to idealize them and the way of life they comprise, making them seem more smooth and coherent than they actually are in the midst of everyday conditions. However, the fact that reality is messy need not be cause for despair. In many ways, messy everyday practices, embraced humbly yet boldly, are precisely the forms of life that bear help and grace and companionship and challenge amid the actual complexities of contemporary society. Again, take keeping Sabbath as an example. A busy mom trying to deal with an overload of demands admits that getting a BlackBerry and "setting priorities" do not help much. Then she discovers that the Christian community over time has developed embodied wisdom and ways of living in time upon which she can draw and in which she can participate. So, in mutual support with others who likewise need respite and admit they can't get everything done (which is a sign of their mortality, after all), she begins to take one step and then another, shaping just one day each week to receive time as God's gift rather than as a series of demands. Her practicing is not perfect, but it becomes a channel of grace even so. Similarly, a Christian practice of household economics, even when imperfectly understood and undertaken, can reframe the self-understanding and expand the options of a teenager who feels that she is drowning in an ocean of material things. As she discovers that she belongs to a historical and global community that includes many other people who have longed for a different way of dealing with material goods and their consumption and exchange, she enters a context in which she can meet, live with, and learn from others who have experimented in actual forms of life that are guided by human mutuality and attuned to the generosity of God. With newfound companions, she begins to see through the false promises of consumerism, decides not to spend her time and money at the

mall, and starts raising funds for the Heifer Project. There is much imperfection in both cases—I know because these practitioners are I and my daughter—but even so we have found that these changes were and are good for us, for others, and for creation. Simply to imagine a way of life that prizes an abundance of life rather than an abundance of things to do and things to possess puts a new frame around the world in which many middle-class North Americans live at this point in history. Moreover, within these practices we discover time and space for God.

One more mistaken impression also needs to be addressed: the notion that the *doing* of practice stands in opposition to, or even negates, knowing, thinking, and believing. Perhaps our definition of practices as "things Christian people *do* together over time" is one source of confusion; but action *is* important, and other definitions we considered ("a practice is an interrelated cluster of acts, ideas, images") seemed too abstract. Another source of confusion may lie in this book's intentional effort to reach out to those who have drifted away from faith by emphasizing its practical purpose rather than its harder-to-understand doctrinal dimensions. I am pleased that so many readers appreciate the down-to-earth, let's-do-something-together quality of *Practicing Our Faith*—but I want to encourage you also to notice its theology. Thinking, knowing, and believing are all present—indeed, crucial—within each practice, sometimes consciously and critically and sometimes in natural, flowing integration with one another.

On the Horizon

As I write during the second year of the worst economic and financial crisis since the Great Depression, I sense that many people in North American cities and towns are ready to take up a more life-giving way of life. If life abundant is to emerge and endure, we will need to be patient as well as resourceful, alert to urgent need and also willing to sustain our efforts over an extended period of time. Again a garden comes to mind. Although it's possible to force growth and forestall blight with chemicals, more and more of us are realizing the value of horticulture that builds up the soil from year to year.

Likewise, we yearn for a way of life in cities, suburbs, and rural areas that leaves creation more verdant than we found it, both locally and in distant regions. Similarly, it's possible to have cheaper vegetables if farm workers earn little money and labor too long; but today many of us seek more just relations with those on whom we rely for food and other goods, both nearby and around the world. Broke and broken after years enmeshed in the now-discredited cycle of overwork and overspend, we are increasingly aware that fast and glitzy things are often less valuable than they at first appear. Some things take time—not just vegetables, but other goods we need even more: coming to know and trust one another, face-to-face and on a larger scale (shaping community); restoring communion with enemies and those from whom we are estranged (forgiveness); learning to sing harmoniously a vast repertoire of lament, praise, and thanks (singing our lives).

We who are human will never have enough time to bring these and the other practices to complete fulfillment, whether in our own lifetimes or within human history as a whole. Nor will we have enough strength and virtue. But over time, now as in ages past, God finds surprising ways to work in, through, and in spite of the fragile and finite efforts of those who respond to God's active presence not only for themselves but also for the whole world.

The world needs communities engaged in the practices of faith even more today than it did in 1997, when this book first appeared. And today, in the midst of historic uncertainty and change, those who wrote and who read this book may also be more aware of our own need for life-giving ways of life than we were back then. The span of years between the first edition and this revised edition is relatively short, especially when compared with the vast sweep of Christian practice across centuries and cultures emphasized in this book. At the same time, every decade and every day provide opportunities for deeper participation in practices addressed to the genuine needs of humanity and the rest of creation, and we have no time to lose. To support one another in this, not just for a brief period of crisis but over the long haul, is a large part of what it means to practice our faith in these changing times.

This book, like Christian practices themselves, was forged in collaboration. The acknowledgments section in the Preface to the

1997 edition names those who were especially helpful in shaping the book, and they deserve additional thanks on this page. Three dear friends thanked there have died since 1997: my Valparaiso University colleagues Thomas Droege and Janet Lynn Kerr, and Sarah Polster, who was the editor of the first edition of *Practicing Our Faith. Requiescat in pacem.* Sheryl Fullerton became the editor of the Jossey-Bass Series on the Practices of Faith after Sarah's death; she suggested this new edition and has been thoughtful and helpful along the way. Craig Dykstra continues to be my most important colleague and friend in this work. He and I learned a great deal about Christian practices from our colleagues in writing *Practicing Theology* and *For Life Abundant.* I have had my imagination stirred and my hope renewed in countless conversations with readers of *Practicing Our Faith,* and also with the coauthors and young people who worked with me and my coeditors, Don Richter and Susan Briehl, on *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* and *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life.* I also thank Don and Susan for their fine work with people in communities around the country who developed projects designed to strengthen their participation in Christian practices, and Doretta Kurzinski for her work in managing the Valparaiso Project and preparing the manuscript.

Holden Village Dorothy C. Bass
Chelan, Washington
Summer 2009

Preface to the 1997 Edition

Every summer, my family visits a retreat center high in the mountains. My husband delights in the hiking and fishing; I thrive on the absence of phones, televisions, and grocery stores; and the children revel in the freedom they have to roam about unsupervised in a small, safe, mostly outdoor community of friends. All of us enjoy the natural splendor of this place. But there is also something stronger and deeper that keeps us going back, something harder to describe. When we are there, we slip into a way of life that comes pretty close to our vision of how things are supposed to be. As staff members, we work; we consume appropriately, eating lower on the food chain and doing without the goods and gadgets that usually clutter our lives; we worship daily. In other words, we enter a community shaped by shared practices that make sense, and as we adjust to them we feel ourselves becoming a little different, a little better.

Back home, we find patterns of shared life that are less coherent, less morally clear. But we jump right in; the kids are back to school and their playmates, while we adults return to jobs, to housework, to worship, to friendship. But now we are doing these good

things in a divided, fast-paced society. Here, eating and consuming are not patterned for the good of creation. Work and play and rest are out of balance. Expectations coming from different parts of our lives conflict with one another. It is hard to keep our moral and spiritual bearings. We yearn once again for a way of life that is whole, and touched by the presence of God.

Many people today share this yearning, or are on a search like the one that led my family to the mountains. And many share in the sense of fragmentation that settles in once we are home. How can we live faithfully and with integrity here, where the pace of existence is so fast and life's patterns are changing all around us? Can we conduct our daily lives in ways that help us not just get by but flourish—as individuals, as communities, and as a society, in concert with all creation and in communion with God?

These questions are in the hearts and minds of many seekers who are exploring spirituality today. Whether they grew up beyond religious communities or left the religious households of their childhood, they are now searching for some context of larger belonging and some pattern of believing and valuing that are richer and deeper than those offered by the wider culture.

And many thoughtful Christians are also pondering these questions. We yearn for a richer and deeper understanding of what it means to live as Christians in a time when basic patterns of human relationship are changing all around us. We want to know what Christian faith has to do with our work, with friendship and marriage, with the way we raise our children, with public and political life, with how we spend our money. Some Christians cut the search short, perhaps after finding that when they ask, they get stock answers that are no real help at all. But most of us continue to look for greater insight into how our faith can help us discern what we might do and who we might become.

This book offers people who are asking such questions help that is rooted in Christian faith and tradition. For some readers, what it contains will be a new discovery; for others, a fresh way of thinking about cherished beliefs. The authors invite both sorts of readers, as well as the many who find themselves somewhere in between, to explore a Christian way of life that can be lived with integrity at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

We invite you, in particular, to think with us about *practices*. Practices are those shared activities that address fundamental needs of humanity and the rest of creation and that, woven together, form a way of life. Reflecting on practices as they have been shaped in the context of Christian faith leads us to encounter the possibility of a faithful way of life, one that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom. And here is the really important point: this encounter can change how we live each day.

Audience

The book is addressed both to seekers on journeys of the spirit and to committed Christians searching for ways to practice their faith more fully. It is also addressed to people of every faith who are concerned about human flourishing, including people in the helping professions and those who guide public policy. Educators concerned about bridging the gap between theory and practice will also find useful insights here.

Overview of the Contents

The first chapter, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," considers the spiritual hunger of our day and suggests that thinking about Christian practices can help contemporary people envision a vital and authentic way of life. It also explains the terms and sets forth the purposes of the book.

Our exploration of specific practices begins in Chapter Two with a story of birth and the practice of honoring the body, acknowledging in this way that we come to all the practices not just spiritually—as some books about faith would have it—but as embodied beings. This exploration ends in Chapter Thirteen not with death (the practice of dying well comes *next to last* here) but with singing, the practice in which our very breath sounds the truths of our lives and responds in music to the active presence of God. In between are other practices that add essential strands to the tapestry of life.

The practice of hospitality comes early to welcome readers to this book, just as we all need to welcome one another in life. In Chapter Three, we consider how our lives can be patterned to provide *posada,* a place of shelter, for one another. This practice leads us to think in Chapter Four about our households, and about the importance of our economic practices to the well-being of all who share this planet that is our home. The practice of saying yes and saying no follows in Chapter Five, where we retrieve ancient wisdom that insists that if we want to say yes to God and to life abundant, we must also say a related no to other things. This practice, which will be important if we are to persevere in living out any of the others, is strengthened by the disciplines of prayer, examination of conscience, and small faith-sharing groups. Keeping Sabbath, the subject of Chapter Six, forms us to say yes to regular rest and worship and no to a society and economy that force—or lure—many of us to work too hard.

The three practices that follow focus on our urgent need for speech that is truthful, decisions that are well considered, and communities that are structured to permit the just and full participation of all. We are guided by a variety of Christian models—historically black churches, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), the Society of Friends (Quakers), and the young churches led by the apostle Paul—as we reflect on the importance of giving truthful testimony (Chapter Seven), making discerning choices (Chapter Eight), and shaping worthy communities (Chapter Nine). The practice that follows in Chapter Ten—forgiveness—is one without which none of these, or indeed any other practice, could continue for long. In the practice of forgiveness, Christians participate in the divine activity of reconciliation, making God's forgiveness palpable by forgiving one another. The grace, generosity, and power of God's love also provide the foundation of the practice discussed in Chapter Eleven, healing. Dying well, the subject of Chapter Twelve, rests on this same foundation; this practice shapes us in lament, hope, judgment, and mercy, not only in our last hours but as we respond to the reality of human mortality through all the years of our lives. As already noted, we conclude our exploration of specific practices with singing.

Guiding Purposes

We have chosen the twelve featured practices because they are practices that human beings simply cannot do without, particularly at this time in history. Many forces make it difficult to discern and persevere in life-giving forms of practice today. Hospitality and Sabbath get squeezed out of our lives, and testimony and discernment are lost amid the din of sound bites and opinion polls. But the Christian community bears wisdom about these practices, and learning that wisdom will help us, and the world, to flourish.

Practicing Our Faith offers reflection on practices as a way of connecting our faith with our daily lives. It also opens a path of spiritual formation: taking part in practices that have been shaped by the Christian community over the centuries in response to God, we develop virtues and experience growth in our spiritual lives. The book's approach represents a refusal to leave our beliefs in the realm of theory, insisting that they can make a difference in our lives.

The Authors and Our Hopes for This Book

This book originated in Craig Dykstra's insight that the idea of "practices" provides a helpful way of addressing the yearning of contemporary people for deeper understanding of and involvement in the redemptive practice of God in the world. He developed this idea in his work as a Christian educator, drawing especially on the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's work on social practices. When he became vice president for religion at Lilly Endowment Inc., Craig invited me to join him in leading a seminar of theologians and educators to think further about practices and to develop a book that would share this idea with others.

The eleven theologians who joined us soon became our friends. We had not known them all before, nor had they known one another, but from the beginning our conversations had a special quality. We talked about the practices in our lives, institutions, and families, as well as about the philosophy, history, sociology, and theology of practices. We grew excited about sharing this way of thinking with others. We prayed together.

Now we invite you to think about practices as they take shape in your own life. This book will stimulate your imagination by offering stories from Scripture, history, and the contemporary world that run counter to some of our society's patterns. It will encourage you to reflect on how you spend your weekends, how you pray, how you offer care to others, and much else. Unlike some books on spirituality, it will not offer rules or set forth numbered steps to wholeness. Rather, it initiates a conversation that we hope will spread to many contexts, each of which presents unique opportunities for noticing, discussing, and living the practices of faith.

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