



PRACTICING
OUR
FAITH

PRACTICING OUR FAITH

*A Guide for Conversation,
Learning, and Growth*



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FIRST EDITION

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INTRODUCTION



Discussing a book can be a stimulating and enlightening experience. In a good conversation, we delve more deeply into the material the authors have presented. Just as important, we question that material and wrestle with it. We apply it to our own situation, adding our own insights to those on the pages and discovering how the ideas we have encountered can make a difference in our lives.

Practicing Our Faith is especially suitable for group discussion. Indeed, there is something about practices themselves that almost demands it. Practices are activities that are shared with other people. We do them with and for one another. Growing in our understanding of practices is also something we must do with other people. Moreover, practices constitute a way of life. They are concrete, not abstract. Growing in our understanding of and participation in practices requires us to look hard at the everyday realities of our lives—not in general, but in the specific places where we live, work, worship, and play.

Where are the practices in our own homes and churches and schools and workplaces? They are there, but are we aware of them? Could thinking together about them help us to live more faithfully? “Education in Christian practices is always going on within the life of Christian communities,” Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra point out in Chapter 14 of *Practicing Our Faith*. “But there is also a place for more deliberate efforts to help one another grow in understanding and doing the practices in light of our faith.”

Deliberate efforts take planning. They need to be focused for the particular group of people involved. They need to be attuned to the life situations and learning styles of those who will gather in search of deeper understanding and richer action. They need to be set within the framework of a certain period of time, a certain physical space, a certain commitment to persevere when tough issues emerge. It is the task of a leader to attend to these needs.

This guide is for the leaders who will be responsible for these more deliberate efforts. We hope it will be helpful as you consider how specific educational events might help a specific group of people, gathering in a specific place, to explore Christian practices. Our approach is different, however, from that of leaders’ guides that offer set curricula and very detailed instructions. We hope instead to provide the kind of guidance that will help you structure educational activities appropriate for your own setting.

Part 1 offers an orientation to your role as a leader in educating for Christian practice, together with some guidelines for structuring group exploration of practices.

Part 2 provides an assortment of resources that can be used to help groups draw on their own experience and explore their own context in connection with the chapters of *Practicing Our Faith*.

Part 3 shows how you might go about exploring Christian practices in some specific life settings. Each is a place where we can hope to grow by thinking about our way of life and what it would mean to live more faithfully. The models offered here could also be adapted to other settings.

The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* found that talking about Christian practices together helped us to see our way of life more clearly and to envision fresh possibilities for faithfulness. We hope that your discussion of the practices will be as full of discovery and

growth as ours was. The groups that gather to discuss this book will possess insights far beyond what we authors were able to present. Participants will bring wisdom rooted in other traditions, knowledge drawn from other fields, observations made in other places, and lifetimes of experience. The process that we began in the writing now continues as you read, think, talk, pray, and act together.

Part 1

HOSTING THE CONVERSATION



P*racticing Our Faith* can provide a focus for reflection in a wide variety of contexts. Many church groups—including Bible study groups, sacramental preparation classes, youth groups, retreats, and governing boards—will find it germane to their concerns. It can also be used in classrooms, within families, at the workplace, and in nonprofit organizations. Less formally, a group of friends could agree to read and discuss the book together.

Whatever the setting, it is important that the person or persons hosting the conversation honor the hopes and longings participants will bring to this disciplined consideration of their way of life. The leader is charged with shaping a community of learning—one that may last only a few weeks, to be sure, but whose structure will be an important factor as participants seek to help one another grow in the practices of faith. After all, every group will not only *study* the practices during its time together. It will also *engage in* some of them in a preliminary way—saying yes to clearing time for reading and talking, discerning together what action will result from their learning, offering testimony about their convictions, forgiving one another for

the misunderstandings that will surely occur at some point along the way, and, perhaps, honoring one another's bodies by exchanging hugs or sharing a meal. These are small acts in a way, but how the leader helps them to take faithful form is a crucial matter.



LEADING AS TEACHING

When you take responsibility for leading a series of conversations or even a single session, you become, in effect, a teacher. Whether you are a solo teacher or part of a leadership team, it becomes your special charge to foster a situation in which those present can help one another grow in the practices of faith. This does not require that you be an expert, for your role is not primarily to impart information to the participants. *Practicing Our Faith* will provide much of the information your group needs—the biblical, historical, theological, and ethical material that will fuel your process of reflection. (You may want to find other resources as you and your group advance, but these are not essential as you begin.) From the outset, however, being a teacher/leader requires that you give deliberate attention to the specific nature of your group and how it can best explore the Christian practices.

As a teacher/leader, you will be guiding a specific group of people on a specific day for a specific period of time. This is the *live event* of teaching. In that live event, energy will surge and recede, momentum will develop and ebb, the flow of conversation will twist and turn, and any number of planned and unplanned things will happen.

A voyage at sea provides a good analogy. When a group of people embark on a journey together, someone comes with a map and an itinerary to navigate the way. This does not ensure that the travelers will reach the destination they have set out for, but it might help them to stay afloat and to find a worthy port. In the live event of the voyage, when all are out on the sea together, the group may find that the seas are calm and the map is easy to apply; sailing is smooth, just as the navigator hoped. At other times, however, the sea may turn out to be unexpectedly stormy, and the original map seems irrelevant.

Educational designs chart a teacher's hopes for what might happen in an educational event, enabling the leader to guide reflec-

tion when that is helpful and to adapt when it is not. They crystallize important issues for reflection, take account of the specific needs of the particular people who will participate, and draw together the resources and ideas that are most likely to fit the circumstances. They lend focus and intentionality to an exploration that could conceivably go in hundreds of directions, making it more likely that learners will be engaged and challenged.

Creating a good educational design is an artistic process. It is a process that is unique to each situation—as unique, indeed, as the teacher, the participants, and the local culture. A fruitful educational design for a session on Christian practices will connect all of these elements—teacher, participants, and local culture—with the larger contexts discussed in *Practicing Our Faith*, including the Bible, history, and what is happening in the world beyond this place.



SHAPING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The following pages offer suggestions for charting a single group session. Because a session will usually be one in a series, it is important to plan carefully about creating the series as well. Many different formats are possible: a weekly study group (possibly during Lent), an intensive process of reflection during a weekend retreat, a daylong workshop on a single practice of great relevance to your group, or a yearlong series with meetings once each month. Any of these, or others, may suit your situation. Whatever format you choose, help the group be clear about what it promises to do over the term of the series as a whole—to read, for example, or to undertake certain activities, such as journaling or experimenting with the practices. In addition, be aware that it is not necessary to work through the chapters in sequence. Groups can benefit from deciding together which practices they want to study first and which they want to linger over.

The following suggestions are offered to help you, the teacher/leader, as you prepare an educational design for any given session on *Practicing Our Faith*. Use it in conjunction with other sections of this guide. More important, rely on your own common sense and educational experiences as you chart the educational course of your group.

Develop a Clear Sense of What the Session Is About. Read carefully the relevant chapter in *Practicing Our Faith*. Your group will not have time to examine every aspect of a practice, but it is wise to explore as many as possible in your own thinking. How does the author define this practice? What specific forms of the practice does the author describe? What fundamental human needs are associated with the practice? What stories, quotations, and biblical material touched you in this chapter? To what extent is this practice something that people do together, as opposed to alone? Why does the author think this practice is in trouble in our society?

Wrestle with the Material in the Chapter. Work through the questions on page 199 of *Practicing Our Faith*. Has this author answered all of them to your satisfaction? Allow your reflection to go beyond the discussion in the book. What other examples of this practice occur to you? What other biblical stories are relevant? What questions do you have? Where do you resist entering this practice as the author has portrayed it? Do you need to do further reading or talk with someone who engages in this practice with special grace and skill?

Reflect on Your Personal and Institutional Involvement in This Practice. Try to identify the patterns of activity that already tie you to this practice, in positive and negative ways. Some may be hard to recognize because you take them for granted. What assumptions, prejudices, and passions do you bring to the practice? What yearning, pain, or experiences of new life do you bring? What responsibilities regarding this practice do you have within your own community, and what are your hopes and fears about exploring the practice in light of these? Do you have a special perspective that arises from your denominational or cultural identity?

Think About the People with Whom You Will Be Exploring the Practices. Teaching only works when it is designed with the specific participants in mind, and all that they bring to the event. As you chart an educational event, reflect on who is likely to be present. How do the communities and traditions that they represent already engage in this practice? What life circumstances are you familiar

with that may resonate with this practice? Do you suspect that your participants have experienced pain in relation to the practice? Joy? Confusion? What prejudices and passions do you anticipate they will bring? What gifts and wisdom? Where do you think they need to be challenged in relation to this practice? What styles of learning and group structures will be comfortable for them?

Identify Your Hopes for the Session. Try to articulate in your own mind what you hope for those who will gather. The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* have certain hopes about the kinds of reflection it might generate. As you identify your own hopes for the group you are leading, you might find it helpful to dialogue with the hopes of the authors.

The authors hope that readers will develop a particular way of thinking about their lives and the life of the world. And we hope that this way of thinking will lead readers into a certain way of living. Let's now break that large hope into parts. We hope that readers will:

- Come to greater recognition that God is active in the world, in our communities, and in our lives
- Become more aware of their yearning for a way of life that is whole and holy
- Understand more deeply the rich resources biblical faith and Christian tradition hold for shaping a way of life that can be lived with integrity today
- Become more aware of the various forms of practices developed by faithful people in history and around the world today
- Reflect critically on the deformations of practices that exist in church and society
- Grow in the skills and language that will help them engage in Christian practices with greater fluidity
- Discover fresh forms of the practices that are responsive to God's activity in the changing circumstances of our world, communities, and lives
- Be challenged and motivated to engage in practices with greater intentionality, energy, reflectiveness, and commitment

Consider a Variety of Ways of Exploring the Practice. Reflecting on Christian practices takes more than general conversation. It happens best as part of a process in which participants engage with this material in a variety of ways. Fruitful sessions will usually include activities, exercises, and questions that nurture various forms of personal and communal engagement. The following forms of engagement are crucial to exploring a practice fully:

- Exploring participants' experience with the practice, helping them to identify formative memories and to name where they presently engage in this practice, or where they feel they need to do so
- Considering the emotions stirred by the practice—the group's yearning for it or joy in it, and the stories, dreams, and promises it evokes
- Thinking through the analysis of the practice set forth in *Practicing Our Faith*, making sure that its main points are understood but giving participants an opportunity to affirm, question, or challenge issues raised by the reading
- Exploring the theological character of the practice, as it is found in the Bible and in the author's presentation, and thus what the practice has to do with God's activity and our faithful living
- Reflecting critically on how the practice is deformed and violated in our lives and in our society
- Taking on a challenge to live the practice more fully and faithfully, beginning perhaps with some change the group will decide to undertake together

Create a Design. Arranging elements like these into a design appropriate for a particular group is one of the chief challenges of the teacher/leader. Often, posing discussion questions seems to be the easiest way to proceed. But in most education—and particularly in education in Christian practices—other approaches must also be incorporated. Creative exercises, field trips, forms of artistic self-expression, rituals, songs, writing in a journal, interpreting a piece of art, reflecting in silence, sharing in groups of two or three—all these are activities that can enhance learning when used with good judg-

ment. In addition, Part 2 of this study guide offers a number of suggestions for nurturing reflection. Look through these as you prepare a session, but don't rely on them alone. Develop your own ideas, attuned to your hopes, the suggestions in this guide, and—especially—the specific character of the people and place of your teaching.

There are no firm rules about how to design an educational event. Different groups are led, by their own traditions or deep convictions, to prefer one starting point vastly more than another. In some churches, for example, it will be important to start with the Bible, while in other places starting with a contemporary ethical issue or an invitation to share a personal experience would work better. Use your common sense, experience, and powers of observation as you determine what will be most fruitful in your situation.

Two more words of advice arise from our sense of the kind of education that nourishes growth in faithful practice. First, be alert to the *concrete* character of practices, and actually do something together. Offer welcome, or take a worshipful rest, or sing some stirring hymns—all in ways that are informed by what you are learning about the practices of Christian life. Identify the gestures and glances, the words and food, the touches and thoughts that make up these activities, and do them together with greater intentionality.

Second, be alert to the *challenges* inherent in Christian practices. It is easy to get people talking about practices, because practices are basic to human well-being, and we easily grasp that we are already doing them. The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* hope to provoke much more than smiles of recognition, however. We hope to stir up some discomfort, too, by encouraging readers to think hard about what it would mean to engage in practices more faithfully than they presently do. This requires facing the places where we or our society violate the practices. It also requires efforts to envision changes in our way of life in light of the biblical, theological, and ethical perspectives we encounter.

Set up the Physical Environment. Though it is easy to overlook, this step is a crucial one. A Bible study in an elementary-grade classroom feels different from one taught in the warmth of someone's home. Reflect with care on how the physical space available to your group can be arranged to enhance the educational climate.

- Sitting in a circle on comfortable chairs (as opposed to sitting in rows with a leader in front) can open up dialogue and invite mutuality.
- The presence of sacred symbols can stimulate the imagination of those gathered. A candle, a chalice, or a small altar might serve your group in this way. Or consider setting out some of the tools or other things associated with the practice you will be discussing.
- People can converse more deeply when they are physically comfortable. Do what you can to arrange for good lighting, heat, and seating. Sometimes having food and drink available helps, but sometimes it does not. Use your judgment.
- Prepare in advance whatever materials will be needed, such as markers, drawing supplies, writing utensils, and paper.

Create an Appropriate Emotional Environment. The emotional climate of any educational setting is crucial to its success. But this is especially so when the topic at hand is Christian practices. How can the life of the group reflect the quality of the Christian practices themselves? How will hospitality, forgiveness, testimony, healing, and other practices be embodied in the very shape of this small community of learning?

An atmosphere of *mutuality* is important. When people are treated with dignity and respect, they participate more fully in transforming and challenging reflection. Remember, as teacher/leader, you need not have all the answers. Try to show respect for each member and instill in others a sense of mutual regard and gratitude for the variety of gifts and experiences members bring to the group.

An atmosphere of *trust* also needs to be fostered. In sharing thoughts and experiences, people expose vulnerabilities and are sensitive to how they will be received by others. Attentive listening, a supportive word, and a nonjudgmental spirit help to foster deeper conversation and greater growth. In many groups, it may be helpful to make these expectations explicit and to agree not to repeat personal information shared in this setting.

Directive but noncontrolling leadership can also enhance your educational event. Conversation that meanders without any direction can be frustrating for everyone involved. One of the roles of the teacher/leader is to gauge the interests of the entire group and assist

it in moving toward its goals. On the other hand, you should not act too heavy-handedly or feel that you have failed if the group does not address all the issues you had charted. The stifling of honest and lively engagement will frustrate participants, too. What you are seeking is a delicate balance sustained by close attention to the needs and interests of your particular group.

Honest questioning is another aim. The questions you will pose—including the ones you discover in this guide—should have the purpose of opening up dimensions of human experience and reflection. They should not be used to trick participants into saying something you want them to say, and they are not meant as quizzes to which people will give answers that are correct or incorrect. Ask questions in order to open, not close, discussion.

Encouraging *shared participation* is also important. Everyone has been in groups where one or two members dominate the conversation. We may also have been surprised by an unexpected insight from a person who usually remains silent. Try to find comfortable ways of making it possible for everyone to participate, even if this means asking a dominant person to give someone else a chance to speak. Let the group be silent for a spell when that is helpful, too. Show that you think it is all right if there are some minutes when no one speaks at all.



A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Reflecting on the practices of faith as they take shape in our lives and communities can be a generative experience. When you lead others in doing this, you are initiating a process far richer and lengthier than the group meetings themselves. As we have noted, your sessions are occasions when people participate in many of the practices of faith. They are also times of planting, times when ideas are encountered that may lie dormant at first but later grow in unanticipated ways.

You cannot control the outcome of a single session or of the group's experience as a whole, nor should you hope to do so. But you are nonetheless offering a wonderful gift when you agree to serve as a host at the table of mutual learning. May you find this table to be one where you are a guest as well.

Part 2

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR EVERY CHAPTER



In this part, we offer a sampling of material from which you might choose as you design educational events using *Practicing Our Faith*. This sampling is not a set of lesson plans but rather a collection of suggestions from which you should select whatever may address the concerns and stretch the thinking of the group exploring the practices. You should feel free to ignore some and alter others, depending on the needs and rhythms of your specific group. You will also want to devise fresh questions and activities tailored specifically to your own situation, and often to invite participants to contribute to this creative process as well. Space is provided to add your own questions.

In your own educational design, weave these suggestions together with other resources, including the activities suggested in the various chapters of *Practicing Our Faith* and your own sense of the issues facing your particular group. In addition, be creative about drawing on material beyond the book and this guide. The references at the end of *Practicing Our Faith* cite books and articles on each practice. You can also consult people in your community who know certain practices especially well.

A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT A WAY OF LIFE

Some questions can be asked about every practice. In fact, returning to them on a regular basis would be a valuable way to foster a sense of how the practices are related to one another and to various aspects of faith and life. Review this list each time you begin to study a different practice, so that these questions become familiar. When this happens, they can provide not only tools for prompting discussion but something far more important: the elements in a way of thinking.

Where in your life are you already taking part in this practice? Where and how did you learn it?

How do you actually engage in this practice in your parish, town, neighborhood, nation, denomination, family, or workplace? Be specific as you try to recognize the things people do together that make this practice real in these settings.

Tell about a person who engages in this practice in an inspiring way. Be concrete. Describe what this person actually does when performing this practice with exceptional grace and skill.

Why do we need to have this practice flourish in our own lives and in the world?

Where is this practice broken in your life and in our world? Where do you yearn for it? Whom else do you sense needs this practice to be strengthened?

Give an example of a time when you saw this practice being violated, or used in a distorted way.

What material in the relevant chapter of *Practicing Our Faith* gives you clues about how you and your community can express your faith more fully through this practice? Where else would you turn for such clues?

What are various forms this practice has taken in history and in different faith communities?

How does the liturgical life of your community embody the meaning of this practice?

How is this practice interwoven with the others in your life and in our communities?

How does this practice resist the patterns of the larger culture? What structures impede the embodiment of this practice in our society?

If you wanted to participate more fully in this practice, where would you start?

What could you do with other people in your parish, town, neighborhood, nation, denomination, family, or workplace to participate in this practice in more vital and authentic ways?

Education in Christian practices ultimately instills not just information about practices but a *way of thinking* that is related to a *way of living*. Being attuned to questions like these is a vital part of entering this way. Keep them in mind as you move through the patterns of your week, and perhaps you will notice important things about the practices in which you engage every day. We hope that these questions will stay with you long after your formal study of *Practicing Our Faith* is finished.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

CHAPTER ONE: TIMES OF YEARNING, PRACTICES OF FAITH

At your first meeting, have one person read aloud the first two paragraphs of the preface to *Practicing Our Faith*. Is there a time or place in your experience that you would identify as “pretty close to [your own] vision of how things are supposed to be”? What factors contributed to the feeling of wholeness you remember?

What associations does *practices* or *practicing* carry for you? Activities you enjoyed or despised? The practice of medicine, the practice of law? “Practice makes perfect”? Are there any of these associations you might need to let go of in view of the description of practices Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass provide on pages 6–8?

In Romans 8:26, Paul says that we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that the “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Spend a few moments in silence, allowing the Spirit to listen to your yearning. What is it you most deeply long for as a regular aspect of your life? As you listen to that yearning, what does it seem to be asking of you?

Which of the twelve practices speaks most immediately to you, and why? Which makes you most uncomfortable? Discern with your group where the best place is to start your study together.

Sketch a diagram in which you place the practice you find most compelling in relationship to the others.

Toward the end of your first session, ask this question: Which of the practices have we been engaging in here, as part of the life of our group? Return to this question in later sessions.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER TWO: HONORING THE BODY

Since talking about this practice may be a sensitive matter for many people, do not put pressure on participants to say out loud what they are thinking. Try providing opportunities for individual writing and reflection if that seems helpful. Indeed, it might be illuminating to discuss with the group why talking about this practice can be difficult.

What are you wearing now? What do you hope your clothing says about you? Look around the room. As you notice how people are dressed, think about the word “adornment,” which Stephanie Paulsell uses to describe our clothing in Chapter 2 of *Practicing Our Faith*. Notice the variety of ways people adorn themselves. Have you ever experienced adornment as something that gets in the way of your relationships with other people, or with God? Has it ever helped you to be more attentive to God’s presence?

Read Luke 7:36–50. Notice the touching in this story. Does the woman honor Jesus’ body? Could she have communicated her feelings as powerfully without touching Jesus? Have you experienced moments in your life when you were able to communicate through touch only? Why were words inadequate in those moments? What were you able to communicate through touch that you could not through words?

Ask each person to pick up the hand of his or her neighbor and look at it closely. Give participants time to look carefully at these hands as

you slowly introduce the following ideas (and add similar ones of your own): imagine the experiences this hand has had—how in infancy it curled around the much bigger finger of a parent, how it first threw a ball or held a pencil. Imagine the caresses it has given and received. Think of the work it has done and the care it has given. Look for signs of age and injury. Reflect on how much you desire the well-being of this hand. Pray that God will bless this hand.

Reflect together on 1 Corinthians 6:19–20. What are actual ways in which we sin against our own body? What are things we do—or could do—that show that we value our bodies? What comes to mind when you think about the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit?

What do you celebrate about your body? And what do you not? How have other people helped you to celebrate your body? How have some people nurtured shame about your body? Reflect on this in your journal or with one other trusted person.

Consider doing one of these activities with someone else, or with your group:

Cook and share a delicious meal together.

Make a commitment to exercise regularly.

Ask a practitioner of yoga or tai chi to lead you in an exploration of one of these bodily disciplines.

Volunteer in a hospital or nursing home.

Learn a new way of caring for the bodies of others—for example, through massage, CPR, or childbirth preparation.

When you have gotten started, discuss what you are learning about the sacredness and vulnerability of the body.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

CHAPTER THREE: HOSPITALITY

Have you ever experienced being a stranger? Describe the situation, the emotions, the story. Did anyone receive you with hospitality? If so, what forms did the hospitality take?

Look around your group and, in your mind's eye, look around your community as well. What faces are missing?

How are strangers welcomed to your community? Are there some individuals in your group or organization or neighborhood who seem to practice hospitality especially well? Ask them to talk with you about hospitality, where they learned it, and how they understand it.

What do the physical spaces in which you live “say” to strangers and newcomers? Does your church, your workplace, your home invite others to share the gifts they may bear? What specific features—doors, furniture, accessibility ramps, and so on—speak welcome, or don't?

Have you ever been a guest who became the host? Or a host who became the guest?

Reflect on an extraordinary story of hospitality, such as the story of the French village of Le Chambon, where Christians sheltered thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. The story is told in the book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* by Philip Hallie (Harper & Row, 1985) and in the video *Weapons of the Spirit* (Friends of the Le Chambon Foundation, 1989). What *way of life* sustained the villagers in this practice? How did faith and experience sustain them? Can you imagine offering hospitality at such risk?

Read Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33–34; Deuteronomy 10:17–19; and Deuteronomy 24:19–20. These are only a few of the biblical passages enjoining hospitality to the stranger and the alien. What would it

mean to “love the alien as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34) in your own community? In our nation? Who are the strangers and aliens among us today?

During the Christmas season, involve both children and adults in a festival of *Las Posadas*, enacting in your setting the story of Mary and Joseph searching for a place for Mary to give birth. Discuss in intergenerational groups what this story teaches us about the practice of hospitality and how it might apply to our own lives.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER FOUR: HOUSEHOLD ECONOMICS

When you were a child, what was your favorite room in the house? Why? As an adult, what is your favorite room in your house, your anchoring space? Why? When do you spend time in this space? How does that time affect daily living?

One woman used to spend much of her annual vacation wishing she owned one of the large homes on the beach. Then one year something hit her: the vacation itself was enough. Write answers to the following questions in a journal, and then, if you wish, discuss your answers with others:

- What are three things “I want to have or do.”
- How quickly did I think of three things?
- How much time do I spend wanting more?

- When have I thought, “This is enough, I need nothing more to be happy”? Ever? What difference does this make in daily living?

Read Luke 12:22–34. Suggest that participants put themselves in the reading, and then reread and silently reflect on the passage. Allow five minutes for silent reflection and then share in pairs.

- What did you see?
- With whom did you identify—Jesus, the lilies, the sparrow, the worrier to whom it is addressed?
- What did you feel?
- Where is the good news in this passage for you?

Where do you experience being at home in the natural world? Describe this place. How often do you dwell there? How does the way you structure your household economics enable you to care for this and the rest of the created world?

Think of a way in which the natural world has been wounded by human behavior. How do the economics of society and of your own home and community participate in inflicting this wound? How can you contribute to its healing?

Agree as a group to cut the amount of time you spend shopping (in whatever form—browsing through catalogs or in bookstores, going to the mall, planning future purchases great or small) to a bare minimum for a week or a month. Later, report back on what you experienced. Revise the experiment and try again. What are you learning from this experiment in renunciation? What do you miss, and what needs go unmet? Does this suggest ways of changing your practice of household economics over the longer term?

On page 56 of *Practicing Our Faith*, Sharon Daloz Parks describes a group of church members who discuss their household economics with each other on a regular basis. As a simple way of exploring this possibility, invite participants to bring their checkbook register and credit card receipts from the last month to a workshop. Give each participant a worksheet and ask each to divide the month’s expenditures

into three categories: essential, nonessential, and in-between/unsure. Then reflect together:

- How did you decide what was essential?
- Which category has the most entries?
- Are there any surprises?
- As you look at your list, where does it seem your treasure lies?
- Who benefited by your last five major purchases? Who/what was harmed?

You may do this exercise in small groups or as a whole group—or even privately. At the end, reflect on the process, how it felt, and what was learned.

If you wanted to simplify your life in a responsible way, what would be the first step you would take? The second?



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER FIVE: SAYING YES AND SAYING NO

What form of artistic or athletic skill would you love to master? What kind of disciplined practice would you need to dedicate yourself to in order to achieve the level of virtuosity that you desire? What yeses and noes would that entail? How do you react to the proposal that you think about your spiritual life in this same way?

M. Shawn Copeland says that many of us simply drift along in our spiritual lives. Is this true in your own experience? If so, what keeps you drifting?

Describe a time in your life when you felt close to God. Where were you? Whom were you with? What were you doing? How might you nurture that kind of closeness more fully now? What yes and no might make a real difference for you?

Have you ever felt forced into a form of Christian training or discipline that squelched life rather than enhanced it? Describe that experience. What can you learn from it about the yeses and noes you need to say?

What is the most demanding yes you have ever said?

Where does your community flourish? Where does it languish? What patterns of shared life in this place contribute to each of these conditions? What does this community need to say no to, as you see it? Does God seem to be inviting this community to say any particular yes?

Create a ritual together based on Deuteronomy 30:19. Have the various members of the group identify where God is inviting them to choose life, and also where they need to turn away from death. Speak these choices in a litany. Pray that each person may be strengthened in choosing life.

Describe a person who embodies for you an inspiring example of a spiritual heroine or hero. What were the important yeses and noes in this person's life?

Consider a form of social injustice that concerns you. What would be required to say no to this injustice? What yes would be tied to this no? Reflect on what this yes and no would mean for you as an individual, as a family, as a community, or in the larger society.

M. Shawn Copeland offers specific suggestions for praying and for examining our conscience. Take up one of her suggestions and try it for a week or longer, then describe to your group what it was like for you to do this.

How have the various groups, institutions, and communities to which you have belonged helped you to say yes and no more wisely? Reflecting on this and on the various dimensions of this practice, discuss how you can help young people in your community say yes and no more wisely.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER SIX: KEEPING SABBATH

What memories does the word *Sabbath* evoke for you? How have your patterns of keeping Sabbath changed during the course of your lifetime? How would you assess the differences these changes have made in your life and in society?

Compare the two versions of the Sabbath commandment on pages 78 and 79 of *Practicing Our Faith*. Explore the way in which Sabbath keeping is a remembrance and perpetuation of God's liberation of an enslaved people (Exodus 20:8–11). How might Sabbath keeping resist various forms of enslavement today, for ourselves and others? Next, explore the way in which Sabbath keeping is rooted in God's creation of the world (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). How does our society's Sabbath keeping (or lack thereof) express our relation to the created world?

Invite an observant Jew to explain how his or her family keeps Sabbath and what this practice means to them.

Dorothy C. Bass suggests resting from a few specific activities on the Sabbath, such as shopping, paying bills, and having church committee meetings. Were you to keep Sabbath in your life, what activities would you most need to rest from?

If you kept Sabbath, how would the rest of your week need to change? What would you need to prepare beforehand in order to have a restful Sabbath? How might ceasing from work one day a week reshape your work and your attitudes on the other six?

When in your week or year do you experience real Sabbath? Where do you go, what do you do, and who are you with? How do these places, activities, and people contribute to this experience of rest and renewal?

How do the particular institutions in which you live—your family, church, workplace, town—structure Sabbath keeping? What small or large changes in these structures can you imagine?

Read the poem by Wendell Berry on page 77 of *Practicing Our Faith*, and ponder it in silence. What do you think the poet means by “a Sabbath mood”?

What would you have to say no to in order to say yes to keeping Sabbath? Is there some beginning step that lies within your reach?



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

CHAPTER SEVEN: TESTIMONY

The practice of speaking truthfully about what is seen and experienced is an art to be mastered in a world manipulated by advertisements and “spin doctors.” To rehearse, watch some television commercials with a group and discuss:

- What is being sold, and to whom?
- What is the producer using to sell the product?
- What do you suspect this product will in fact do?
- What testimony does this ad give to the values and priorities of our society?

Practice speaking out loud the truth that God is connected to daily life: bless your children; hand anxieties to God and say that you have done so; give yourself permission to publicly testify to your belief.

Do you feel anxious when you consider speaking out loud about your faith? Can you articulate the reasons for, and nature of, your anxiety? Do you feel any yearning to be more free to speak?

What are the various forms in which people give testimony, verbal and nonverbal? Which of these does your faith community encourage? Where does it discourage testimony? Are some forms more comfortable for you than others? Do you think it would be faithful to move beyond this zone of comfort?

What voices are silenced in your church, your workplace, your home, and the larger society? How might the testimony of these voices be encouraged?

Write a letter in response to your pastor’s Sunday sermon. Use the opportunity to testify to your own beliefs as well.

Has there been a time when you experienced the activity of God in your life? Can you tell that story, speak it out loud?

Read together the story of Jonah. How does Jonah relate to the practice of testimony at different points in the story? When God calls him to prophesy? When he is in the belly of the fish? When the fish has spewed him up? Do any parts of this story resonate with your personal story?

Think of someone whose living and/or dying has been a testimony of faith. Describe the person and why you value him or her. In the coming week, find a way to share this story with a niece or nephew, a godchild, a son or daughter, or another young person.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCERNMENT

Recall a decision that in retrospect was a wise one. How did you make it? What factors did you weigh? With whom did you consult? In what ways was the process by which you made that decision similar to and different from the discussion in the chapter on discernment in *Practicing Our Faith*? What would have been the consequences if you had made a different decision? How do you know that it was a good decision?

Recall a decision that you have made in your life that you now regret. What was the process by which you made that decision? Are there clues within the chapter on discernment about how you could have made that decision differently?

What important decision are you facing now for which you yearn for a process to guide you? Write your fears and longings regarding this decision in a journal. Are there clues in Chapter 8 about how you might practice discernment more intentionally in making this decision?

When you are faced with a tough decision, whom do you call? What do you look for from that person or community? How do they help you?

Do you pray when you make decisions? How is your praying similar and dissimilar to the Ignatian prayer described in the chapter?

How are decisions made in your community, family, or workplace? How is that process similar and dissimilar to processes described in Chapter 8? Does your process work well? What would it look like if the group you have in mind sought to embody some of the processes described in the chapter? Would there be ways to suggest or teach the processes of discernment to persons or groups who are involved in the decision-making roles of your community? What gets in the way of practicing such discernment together?

As a group, role-play the process of communal discernment as if you were a decision-making body of your community. You could choose a real decision that faces your community or make up a hypothetical scenario.

Reflect together on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane facing his own agonizing decision (Mark 14:32–42, and also the other Gospels). How did he engage that decision? What part did prayer have for him in the process? How did he look to the community to support him in the decision? What community of disciples do we look to when we are in our own Gethsemanes? In what ways do you fall asleep when others are facing difficult decisions? What would it mean to stay awake for each other?

Reflect together on the story of the rich man in Mark 10:17–22. What decision faced him? What decision did he make? What decision did Jesus long for him to make? What attachments keep you from choosing that which God intends for you?



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER NINE: SHAPING COMMUNITIES

As you discuss this practice, be conscious of which community or communities your comments refer to. Remembering the concrete character of practices, ask the basic questions of this chapter about a specific community: What are your stories? What is your bread? Who are the people?

Influence, authority, power—what associations do you have with these words? Does the chapter on shaping community help you to see them in fresh ways? Who in your community has influence? Authority? Power?

Reflect on the people in this group. What gifts do the various people have to bring to the community? In what ways could you help draw out the gifts that are present and weave them into the life of the community?

Read together Luke 22:24–27, in which Jesus admonishes the arguing disciples to be more interested in servanthood than in lording it

over others. What are the places in your life where you have authority? In what ways are you a servant in these positions of authority? Who are the servants within your community? Are they the same persons as the official leaders? How might servant leadership be encouraged in your community? How might you acknowledge and celebrate the servant leaders that are already within your community?

How do the dynamics of an institution you care about embody the dimensions of community described in the chapter?

Read 1 Corinthians 12. How is the image of the many members of the Body of Christ reflected in your community? How is it not? How are the other practices in this book part of this Body?

Reflect on Larry Rasmussen's idea that the practice of shaping communities "provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society" (p. 120). Can you describe this choreography as it exists in your own community?

Write a letter to a leader you appreciate.

Larry Rasmussen mentions several Christian communities that, for him, embodied significant dimensions of a faithful shaping of community life. Describe a Christian community you think embodies the church at its best. What characterizes its forms of leadership and its power structures? Who is included in its people, who participates in its breaking of the bread, who tells its stories?



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

CHAPTER TEN: FORGIVENESS

Share stories with each other of times in which you have forgiven someone or have received forgiveness yourself.

Keep a journal for one week, noting situations of small and large conflict and how you and others did (or did not) deal with it.

Consider a worship service in your congregation. In what ways is forgiveness explicitly and implicitly acted out and spoken of?

Write a paraphrase of Psalm 51. In paraphrasing, each person rewrites the psalm, line by line, in his or her own words. Give people an opportunity to read aloud their paraphrases if they wish. Share your experience of engaging the psalm in this way.

Read Matthew 7:1–5, where Jesus admonishes his listeners to take the log out of their own eyes before worrying about the speck in someone else's. How is our inability to recognize our own sin related to being judgmental of others? What are the logs that block our vision, and what are the specks we see so easily in the eyes of those around us?

Call a bookstore, adult or children's, and ask if they will help you develop a reading list on the importance of forgiveness in daily living. If they consent, ask them to place this list in a prominent place, with space for customers to add their own suggestions, whether fiction or nonfiction. The result is that people think about the topic, you get a book list, and the idea is out in front of people, on display.

Write a letter to someone you are struggling to forgive. Name the wrongs that have been done: state as clearly as you can what the injury is, why it still hurts, and why it is difficult to forgive. Imagine lifting up this difficulty and giving it to God. When you are finished, burn the letter and scatter its ashes.

Repeat the previous activity, but this time write the letter to someone whose forgiveness you seek.

View the movie *Dead Man Walking*. What does the movie say about forgiveness? Imagine that you are one of the characters in the movie. How do you feel? What does that character teach you about forgiveness?

Can you narrate the life of a person or community that lived the practice of forgiveness? What key features made a difference?

Agree as a group that each of you will use more frequently the “words, gestures, and actions” of forgiveness, such as those described by L. Gregory Jones on page 137 of *Practicing Our Faith*. Support one another in unlearning hatred, bitterness, and indifference. Reflect together over time about what you are learning by doing these things.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER ELEVEN: HEALING

Make an inventory of the places in your life where the practice of healing takes place—medical facilities, your congregation, your home, and so on. Thinking about these specific places and your experiences of healing, consider the understanding of healing presented by John Koenig on pages 149–150 of *Practicing Our Faith*. What do you make of his suggestion that we think of healing as “not *cure* but *wholeness*”? Where do you find wholeness in the places on your inventory?

Describe a personal experience of healing in a journal, in a conversation with one partner, or in your small group. What happened?

Did you experience the activity of God in this healing? How did other people practice healing with and for you at this time? What did you learn from this experience that can strengthen your own practice of healing with and for other people in the future?

Similarly, describe an experience in which healing has seemed slow in coming.

Invite health care professionals in your worshiping community to reflect on how they practice their faith in their daily work of healing.

Read the sections of your church's book of worship that deal with healing. There may be a service for anointing the sick. Reflect on the words and actions of this liturgy.

The Vietnam Memorial is a symbol that provides our society with a place to gather and to grieve. It is a place that allows many people to walk, to touch, and in these physical gestures, to begin the process of healing a wound that divided this nation. Do you know other public places of healing?

Write the word *HEALING* on newsprint. Invite the group to brainstorm associations with this word. When the exercise has run its course, read Luke 6:6–11 or Luke 5:17–26. Explore one or both of these stories.

- What is withered within you? What needs to be healed?
- What is the role of the community in healing?
- Imagine you are the person in need of healing. See Jesus walk to you . . . touch you . . . heal you. Sit in silence and reflect on this experience.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

CHAPTER TWELVE: DYING WELL

Recall a period of mourning in your life when others attempted to speak words of consolation. What words brought comfort? What words seemed, despite the best of intentions, to be inappropriate or insensitive? As a group, discern some guidelines for speaking words of consolation on the basis of your experience and your reading of Amy Plantinga Pauw’s chapter on dying well.

In what ways do we honor the bodies of others as we help them to die well? What other practices are involved in dying well?

Reflect on the words and actions that surround death within your own community. How do they enable people to die well, or prevent them from doing so? How might they be modified or supplemented, in light of what you have read in this chapter?

Create a ritual similar to the one described by Amy Plantinga Pauw, where the names of those who have died at the hands of injustice are read aloud, evoking a community response of “*Presente!*” Who are the people whose names cry out to be spoken by your community?

Read through the funeral service in your church’s book of worship. Reflect together on it. Do you see elements of lament, hope, judgment, and mercy?

Read Hebrews 11:1–12:1 together. Envision the “great cloud of witnesses” whose lives still bear faith even after they are dead. Who are the persons that form your own community’s cloud of witnesses?

How would you like to die? Whom would you like to have with you, and in what kind of place? What would you like the people most important to you to know, and what would you like them to tell you? How does your faith inform the way you envision this?

Death can be an occasion for truth telling, for acknowledging frailty, brokenness, and sinfulness in healing ways. If it has been such an occasion among your family and friends, share one moment of that truth telling that you found significant.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SINGING OUR LIVES

Sing a song from childhood that is a part of your faith tradition. What is the most powerful memory the song evokes? Where are you? Who is there? What does this memory say about the faith of your childhood? Are there connections to the faith of your adulthood?

“Cheer, Cheer for Old Notre Dame” has the ability to evoke strong emotion within a particular group of people. Are there other songs that move other groups to strong emotion? Identify some of these. Then ask, What groups sing these songs and why do they sing? Can you name a time when singing drew you into a strong group experience?

What has been one of your most memorable experiences of singing? Of listening to others sing? What is the most heartbreaking music you have ever heard? What is the most joyous and ecstatic?

Reflect on the various ways in which music is sung in worship services. Sometimes everyone participates, and sometimes those who are especially gifted and prepared do much of the singing. Today there is much debate among church leaders and musicians about the

options, with some valuing near-professional performance and others insisting that full participation is the most important thing. How does your experience as a worshiper and singer bear on these issues?

Describe the patterns of singing in your own worshipping community. Have they changed within your lifetime? In light of what you have learned from Chapter 13, explore the specific ways in which your community hymns the world to God.

The Bible contains many songs, including the Psalms, the songs of Miriam and Moses (Exodus 15), Mary's song (Luke 1:46–55), and Zechariah's song (Luke 1:67–79). Recall and survey some of the representative songs of the Bible. Choose one that represents the song that you would sing at this point in your life. Why do you choose this one?

What are your favorite songs, and what do they say about you?

If you were planning your funeral, what hymns, psalms, and songs would you include?

Bring a song that is special to you to the next gathering of your group.

Visit a synagogue or church not of your own tradition where singing is a central part of the worship service. And/or sponsor a hymn festival including churches of different traditions in your area.

Gather folks in your home for an evening of singing favorite songs—from folk songs to Broadway standards to spirituals.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: GROWING IN THE PRACTICES OF FAITH

Which of the twelve practices seems most sorely missing in your own situation (parish, home, workplace, school, or whatever situation you choose)? What could you do to help this practice take root there?

Which practice is most strongly rooted in your present way of life? Explore how this practice is related to other practices. Draw an image of this practice, and then sketch in where the other practices exist in relation to it.

During these weeks of exploring the practices of faith, which ones have been taking root in your own way of life? Have you tried to be more intentional about one or more practices? What have you learned from this? How have you changed?

If you were asked to illustrate *Practicing Our Faith*, how would you go about doing that? What would your illustrations look like? Try one if you wish.

If you were to write a brief letter to any one of the authors of the book, to whom would you write, and what would you say?

If you were given five free copies of *Practicing Our Faith*, to whom would you give them? Why?

With your group, design a simple ritual that celebrates what has happened among you and that will encourage you to continue your growth in the practices of faith.

Is there a practice that still seems strange to you or that is still hard to understand? Why do you think this is so?

If you were asked to write an additional chapter for the book—a chapter on another practice—what practice would you choose? What other important practices would you like to add to the twelve in the book?

What difference has the discussion of this book made in your life? Express this in words if you wish, or in music, art, or mime.



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

Part 3

PRACTICING OUR FAITH IN SPECIFIC LIFE SETTINGS



Practices are woven throughout all the areas of life. However, there are certain settings that hold special promise as locations for deliberate efforts to understand the practices more fully and practice them more faithfully. Each is a place where people are particularly open to thinking about their way of life and what it would mean to live more faithfully.

We hope that the material in this final part will help you to envision how *Practicing Our Faith* could provide a focus for reflection and growth in a number of these settings. We explore one of them at length—a home where children are present. We choose this setting because it highlights the lifelong character of practices (something we did not adequately address in *Practicing Our Faith*), and because it offers an especially good opportunity to think in very down-to-earth ways about practices and the promise they hold for more faithful living. Then we explore several other settings more briefly. The models here can readily be adapted to even more settings, as long as leaders give careful attention to the specific contours of those settings and the concerns of the people involved.

This part is meant to supplement, not to replace, the suggestions offered in the previous parts of the guide.



AT HOME

Where does one begin teaching the Christian practices in the home? How shall parents raise their children to lead lives shaped by the practices of hospitality, forgiveness, healing, and Sabbath keeping? When does a child learn to honor her body and to honor the bodies of others? How can faith shape the daily tasks of living together in a household, as well as preparing the young to practice their faith as they move from the home into a wider world?

Parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors, godparents, and others ask these questions. This part aims to help such people move toward answers that fit their circumstances and households. It shows how awareness of practices can help us to draw the connections, always present but often invisible, between the corporate worship of the church, the rhythm of daily life, and faithful engagement with the world.

Your Home

Picture the place in which you live, whether it is an apartment or a house, modest or grand, on a farm, in the suburbs, or in the heart of a city. Draw a simple floor plan of your home. Each person in the household could draw his or her own, or the family could make it a joint project. Add the table at which you eat, the bed in which you sleep, the sink at which you wash your face each morning and brush your teeth at night. This is the place where you practice your faith with your closest neighbors, the members of your family. In the ordinary fabric of your life together—the food you buy, prepare, and share, the celebrations you keep, the stories you tell, the decisions you make about spending time and money, and the chores you do—God is present.

Look at your floor plan as you identify where and when and how you already practice your faith in your home. Share with one

another creative and concrete ways in which you might deepen and expand the ways you practice your faith. You could move from room to room, practice by practice. For instance, you could begin at the door with the practice of hospitality.

The Door. Picture the door to your dwelling, the threshold you cross when you come home and when you leave to enter the world of work or school, commerce or play. What does your door say about you and your way of life?

Each door tells a different story. Some doors swing open and shut all day long as children run out to play, dash back for juice or mittens, run out again to meet friends, and reappear when supper time or sheer exhaustion draws them in. Other doors are opened rarely, timidly, or fearfully. Some seem to welcome all kinds of people for any number of reasons, and others receive only those people who live behind them.

During a time of persecution, early Christians marked their doors with a simple drawing of a fish. *Ichthus*, the Greek word for fish, also starts with the initials of *Iesus Christos*, Jesus Christ. Only those who knew its meaning recognized this sign. To every follower of Jesus, the sign said: “Welcome. Here you will break bread with those who call you brother and sister.”

On the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, many Christians mark their doorposts in chalk with another sign. They write the numbers of the new year (say, 2001) and the initials of the traditional names for the three magi who followed the star to bear gifts to the Christ child: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. It looks like this: 20✠C✠M✠B✠01. To those who know its meaning, this sign says: “Welcome. Those who live in this place will receive friend and stranger from near and far.”

The chalk mark above the door says as much to those who live behind the door as to those who come knocking. Every time they enter the home, they are reminded of who they are: people whose faith calls them to practice hospitality. Even the small child can learn to “read” the message written in chalk and renewed each year in a family ritual: “Our door opens to receive others. This is who we are. Jesus received us, just as he did the magi. Now we extend to others the welcome we have received.”

During the Great Depression, men without jobs, sometimes called hobos, traveled from town to town, knocking on doors and asking for food. When a man was received and fed from the table at which the family ate, he would scrawl a form of graffiti on the porch as he departed. Other hungry men knew what it meant: “What this household has, it will share with you.” This was a statement not only about the hospitality practiced in that home, but also about their household economics, the use to which they put what goods they had.

How do people in your neighborhood decorate their doorways? In what ways might your door become an invitation to others? How could it become a reminder to you of who you are and how you practice your faith? How might a traveler mark your back porch? Who is welcomed in your home? What gifts do they bring? How might you extend the hospitality you have received from God beyond the walls of your home? Who, near or far, hungers for food, safety, or friendship? Is your “door” open to them?

The Table. Picture the table in your home. Where do you eat together? When? Many families live such hectic and divided lives that table times for shared meals and conversation are infrequent at best. Yet the table can be a wonderful place to begin to focus the practices of the household. Christians always have been a people of the table. Jesus ate even with sinners and outcasts, creating a scandal among some people of his day. At table with others, Jesus practiced God’s hospitality.

Wherever Christians gather to break bread and share the cup in Jesus’ name, he promises to be present as host and feast. At the table of the Eucharist—also called Holy Communion and the Lord’s Supper—God’s gifts of hospitality, forgiveness, and healing are given and shared. Everyone is fed, and none go away hungry. In this, God’s household economics are made visible. At this meal, leadership is known in servanthood, and the community is shaped accordingly. Around this table, we share the stories of faith, bearing testimony to the marvelous acts of God throughout history and in our time. Here we raise our voices in songs of thanksgiving, lament, and hope, singing our lives to God, even as we long for the promised day when all creation, united and whole, will sing God’s praises. Finally, we are sent into the world to be to others the gifts we have received.

Think about how your family table is like the table of the Lord. Who is invited? Do you give thanks for the food and those who labored to bring it to your table? Who shops for groceries, cooks, serves, and washes dishes? What does this say about how the community of your family is shaped? Is there time to tell and hear one another's stories from the day? When might these become testimony? What does the food you eat say about your household economics? How might your table practices extend to a world where many are hungry? Do your household economics reflect a longing for the healing of creation?

The Bath. Besides singing in the shower, you might wonder how this humble room becomes a place for practicing your faith. Yet we are a people of the bath as well as of the table. The great bath of Baptism is the source of our identity and our entry into the Body of Christ. Water is a sign of God's presence and promises. The sink, the tub, the shower are places of cleansing and renewal. With a little help, children can make the connections between their daily washing and God's refreshing and renewing promises.

Beside the mirror above the sink in one family's bathroom is a sign: "Remember you are a child of God." The morning ritual of washing their faces becomes for the members of this household a baptismal reminder, a declaration of their identity, and a call to cherish themselves and one another because God has declared them to be precious. What a powerful message! It counters the other voices in a child's life—voices that tell him that his worth is measured by how he looks, what he owns, and how he performs.

Perhaps in this room, above all others, a child learns to honor her body and to have her body honored by others. How a baby is touched and bathed speaks of how his body is cherished and honored. When bathing is a time for playfulness and joy, for the sensual feeling of warm water and soft towel, a child comes to know how precious is this body. Here a child learns to care for her own body for the length of her life and to treat the bodies of others with care. How we treat our own bodies as we age, as well as those who are frail and infirm among us, may find its root in how we were treated as children.

Later, privacy appropriate to the child's age and needs honors the child's body. Rites of passage often are associated with the bathroom: a

boy's first shave, a girl's first menstrual period, the physical changes the mirror reflects back to each of us. These changes can be celebrated simply and powerfully when you connect such milestones with growth in faith, discernment, and responsibility.

The bathroom is also a place of healing. Any parent who has knelt beside a sick child in the middle of the night knows this to be true. Anyone who has locked the bathroom door to weep in private when her heart was pierced by grief or guilt or shame knows it, too. Washing the tears from your own eyes or wiping another's feverish forehead with a cool cloth, cleansing the scrapes and scratches of childhood, anointing wounds with healing balm, removing splinters and bee stingers—all of this happens in the bathroom. Such common acts take on deeper significance when they are woven with prayer, the laying on of hands, and anointing with oil, for these are signs that healing is more than the body's route to recovery. Healing brings the peace and power of our suffering and healing God to the whole person.

The Bed. “Now I lay me down to sleep.” Many children learn this prayer at an early age. It speaks a simple truth, not only to children, but to adults as well. Falling asleep makes us vulnerable. We need others to watch over us through the night. We sleep best, as we live best, embraced by God's presence. Inside this embrace, our beds become places of prayer, rest, and healing. For the same reason, they often are places of struggle and discernment. When the noises of the day are quieted, we can hear the deepest questions of our hearts. Steeped in a lifetime of nightly prayer, we learn to listen for the voice of God from the sanctuary of our beds.

Sometimes, beneath the cover of night's darkness, we can speak of things to one another that seem impossible to say by day. Spouses, or siblings who share a room, often have their most intimate conversations after the lights are turned out. Tucking a child into bed can become a time of testimony as the stories of the child's day are met with the story of God at work through Jesus Christ. Bedtime stories can be biblical stories, as well as historical, cultural, and familial stories of faith. These stories bear witness to God's faithfulness in the past and God's promises for the future, thus tucking the child inside the embrace of faithful love.

The bed is a place not only of intimate conversation, but physical intimacy, too. Think of the loving and tender touches you share in your home. How are rocking a baby to sleep, kissing a child good night, and snuggling on Saturday morning expressions of love? Sexual intercourse between faithful partners can reveal the life-giving love of God. In bed, when trustworthy touch honors our vulnerable bodies, we are reminded that God knows us in our nakedness and loves us still.

Nighttime also can be a time for confession, which is another kind of nakedness—the baring of our wounded hearts. And the forgiveness that follows is a powerful form of healing. Making a space for apologies, reconciliation, and the sharing of Christ’s peace can be part of the regular rhythm of saying goodnight. You can make a simple ritual woven of silence and word and gesture. In this way, parent and child, sister and brother, husband and wife are granted a time before sleep to let go of the hurts and angers of the day and to commit themselves and one another into God’s keeping.

Perhaps the practice of forgiveness at twilight could give us the courage in the light of day to create simple rituals for reconciliation in our relationships at school and at work. How might a family that practices forgiveness in the home effect such healing in other places? How has unresolved conflict with someone in your family spilled over into your other relationships? When have you experienced forgiveness at home?

Forgiveness is one form of healing. Often when we are sick and in need of other forms of healing, we long to be at home in our own beds. Families and the community of faith gather around hospital beds to watch and pray during sickness and when death draws near. Many of us hope that when death comes, we will be surrounded by the people, the practices, and the promises that spoke life to us throughout our days. The practices of our faith that help us make the twilight transition into sleep each night help prepare us for death—both the death of those we love and our own. Dying well is learning to fear the grave as little as our bed, as we let go one last time, releasing our lives into the arms of God, saying, “Now I lay me down to sleep.”

IN TEEN AND YOUNG ADULT GROUPS AND CLASSES

Practicing Our Faith offers an approach that can help teens and young adults explore the many challenging questions they face.

In High School Settings

The book can be used in high school religion classes, on retreats, or in youth groups. It offers teens a fresh and down-to-earth way of seeing the connections between Christian faith and the realities of their lives.

As an adult leader, you might begin by inviting teens to think about their lives, their questions, their fears and dreams. Talk together about these concerns and hopes. What practices best respond to them? How are the things on their minds and hearts related to the practices identified in *Practicing Our Faith*?

Have the participants draw a floor plan of their high school or whatever other place is the most relevant setting for them. Identify where, when, and how various practices are present or absent each day. Invite them to tell concrete stories. What do they value in the specific activities they associate with each practice? What would they like to change? Explore together one of the Scripture passages in the chapters of *Practicing Our Faith*, or the other ideas presented in the book. Talk about films and music that help them more fully understand or live this practice.

Some of the practices you might address include the following:

- Honoring the body, in relation to adolescent issues of self-esteem, acne, healthy eating, sports, and alcohol and drug abuse.
- Hospitality, in relation to the issue of who is popular and who is not. Who makes such determinations and how do inclusion/exclusion issues affect teen life?
- Household economics—in relation to decisions on how to spend or save money made from babysitting, mowing lawns, waiting tables.

- Saying yes and saying no—in relation to peer pressure, use of time, and the choices teens must make between studying and playing.
- Singing our lives—in relation to the importance of music to the teen generation.
- Forgiveness—in relation to the complexity of teen relationships, both within the family and with one another.

In Campus Ministry

Many young adults—both those raised in a household of faith and those who were not—are seeking a way of life that has integrity, meaning, and hope for the long term. Gather a small group of six to twelve students. Begin with their lives, their longings, their hopes, fears, and questions. Discover which practices speak most directly to their situation. They could then draw floor plans of their childhood homes and identify where, when, and how these practices were present during their growing-up years. How was a given practice distorted, misused, or neglected? They could also draw a map of their student world and ask similar questions about the places where they now live, study, play, and work. Finally, they could also situate the practices on a larger social map.

Invite them to tell concrete stories. Ask what they would like to continue from their childhoods into their adult lives. What do they hope to do differently? Have them explore one of the suggested Scripture stories together. Discuss films, books, and examples from their studies that lead into deeper dimensions of a practice. You could stay with one practice for several sessions or have the students decide together which practice to look at the next time they meet.



IN OUR CHURCHES

Near the end of *Practicing Our Faith*, the authors say that the best place to find all the Christian practices woven together is in a worshiping congregation. But they also note that this may not be obvious

to newcomers, and that even loyal members sometimes overlook the gifts that are present in the practices. If the leaders and members of local congregations looked for the practices that shape their life together, what might they learn that could help them to see and to strengthen their patterns of faithful living?

For the Leaders of Christian Congregations and Parishes

The practices of faith appear in slightly different forms in each unique local worshiping body of Christians. Exploring how the practices are present in a specific place can open fresh perspectives. Suppose that a parish council, a board of elders, an educational team, a finance committee, or some other group studied *Practicing Our Faith* together. What would they see as they considered the specifics of their own church life in relation to the practices identified in the book? The concreteness of practices and their grounding in the Bible and theology make them an excellent means of focusing on many dimensions of a congregation's life, both as they are and as we yearn for them to be.

An exploration of this sort might begin in any number of ways, so leaders will need to discern which would be most fruitful in their particular situation. You might begin (as we suggested you do with youth) by exploring where the issues and concerns of those gathered lie. Or it might be important in your setting to turn first to the Bible. Wherever you start, it will be important to consider a number of questions at some point along the way:

- How is this congregation already participating in each practice in its life together? Go through a week's schedule and see how church activities embody particular practices. Walk through the church building and ask where people participate in specific practices.
- Are some of the practices performed especially well here? Certain congregations have a gift for a certain practice, such as offering hospitality or surrounding one another with care when death comes. Similarly, particular denominational or cultural streams within Christianity are more closely attuned to a certain practice, such as testimony, forgiveness, or Sabbath keeping. Identify the gifts you bear.

- Where are the practices missing or broken among you? Do you sense pain or yearning in yourselves or in church members that suggests that a certain practice is in trouble? With what practice do you need help?
- Look for patterns of relationship among the practices. How does participating in one of them lead people into the others? Or does it? Be concrete.
- How does what happens in Sunday morning worship help the gathered people understand and grow in the practices of faith? In Chapter 1 of *Practicing Our Faith*, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass write that “worship distills the Christian meaning of the practices and holds them up for the whole community to see.” Then they cite a pastor who said that “worship is to daily life as consommé is to broth.” Consider these statements. Do you agree?
- How does your church’s participation in the practices prepare members to engage in the practices in their daily lives, at home and at work? Conversely, how does their participation in the practices in those places influence what happens when the people gather at church?

Deliberate efforts to grow in Christian practices require conversations that are specific and concrete. Don’t just say, “We do hospitality well.” Explore what people actually do, what gifts they bring, what biblical stories they remember, what blessings they speak, and what words they share as they engage in this practice.

Also help your group to develop an eye for how these specific actions and words have connections far beyond this place. Start with the concrete things people at practice do, then look for the connections that link these things to larger patterns of meaning, including your beliefs about what God is doing in the world. Explore how your congregation’s practice is related to what you do in worship; to fundamental human needs; to your lives at work and at home; to issues in our larger society.

Finally, your efforts will require a willingness to do as well as to talk. Chapter 14 of *Practicing Our Faith* provides glimpses of how this doing has taken hold in some churches. What stories of practices could your church tell?

For Adult Study Groups

The material in Parts 1 and 2 of this guide is tailored for use in small groups. Therefore, we need only to remind you at this point that *Practicing Our Faith* sets forth an approach that directly addresses the concerns most adults bring when they gather to study their faith together. We hope that it will help them to see in fresh ways the connections between their faith, their worshiping community, their daily life, and the life of the world.



WITH COLLEAGUES AND COWORKERS

Practicing Our Faith offers a way of thinking about the shared life of any group that has important work to do together.

In Intentional Communities

Exploring practices can provide a way to reflect on the shared life of a community—such as a retreat center, religious order, or volunteer service group—that lives out a distinctive religious mission. Members of the community might consider questions like these: How are we doing in the practices set forth in this book? Are certain practices particularly important to our mission? Which practices are we doing well, and which need to be strengthened? Wrestle with the biblical and theological foundations of each practice, adding your own wisdom and insight to what is in the book and stretching toward the more faithful life for which you yearn.

Such groups should also explore how their shared patterns of life push beyond the material in *Practicing Our Faith*. Are some practices that are important in this group's identity missing from the book? One congregation of Roman Catholic sisters, for example, identified two other practices that are central to their life in community—coming home and sharing silence—and decided to write their own chapters about these. Other groups could also write chapters about the practices that are important to them.

Through Bible study, prayer, and honest conversation with one another, a community could identify its gifts and problems, gaining clarity and opening a path to growth. Becoming more conscious of the practices that shape their common life, community members might then devise concrete ways to make changes that reflect more faithful patterns.

In Nonprofit Organizations

Agencies that specialize in a single practice are numerous in our society. Hospitals and clinics practice healing, environmental organizations teach household economics, courts weigh testimony, and YMCA/YWCAs honor the body. What fresh insights might the board or staff of such an agency gain by interpreting what they do as a “practice”? Consider the definition of practices that appears in Chapter 1 of *Practicing Our Faith*, and also the guide to exploring practices in Chapter 14. Read the chapter on the relevant practice carefully, but add your own knowledge and experience as a practitioner. Consider the biblical, theological, and ethical points raised by the author, as well as those that are in your own hearts and minds.



IN SMALL GROUPS

Both *Practicing Our Faith* and this guide emphasize the importance of having companions as we explore our way of life and the difference that faithful practices can make. Often, the companions who will read and discuss *Practicing Our Faith* may be gatherings of friends, book clubs, parenting groups, support groups, and spiritual growth groups.

The material in Parts 1 and 2 of this guide are especially suitable for small group study. Attend with special care to our suggestions for creating an appropriate physical and emotional environment for your conversations. Feel free to use the chapters of *Practicing Our Faith* in any order and to adapt our suggestions to your particular group. Having the group decide where to begin—by discerning

which practice lures their initial interest—may be particularly important in informally constituted groups. At the end, figuring out what difference practices can make in how you live may become an individual activity rather than one situated within the shared life of a family, school, church, or workplace, but be sure not to leave that step out.



A FINAL WORD

There are, of course, numerous other settings in which it would be rewarding to study *Practicing Our Faith*. Those will readily spring to mind in teachers and leaders who give thoughtful attention to the book and this guide. The work of reflection now belongs to you, as you carry the book into the unique and gifted groups of people that will discuss the practices of faith and, we hope, find in those practices encouragement for faithful living in our time.

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