RECEIVING THE DAY

Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time

A Guide for Conversation, Learning, and Growth

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The Practices of Faith Series

In an age of rapid social change and widespread spiritual seeking, many people yearn for a way of life that is good in a deep sense and attuned to the active presence of God. This series proposes that the practices of living religious traditions have great wisdom to impart to those who share such yearning. Books in this series explore practices that provide the contours of a life-giving way of life, considering both their ancient grounding and the fresh and vibrant forms they take today—and could take tomorrow. Rejecting the separation of spirituality from action, of theory from practice, and of theology from real life, these books invite readers to consider the patterns of their own lives. We hope they will stimulate conversation about how to live with integrity and hope amid the challenges of our time.

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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 an author has presented. Just as important, we question it 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.

The books in the Practices of Faith Series are especially suitable for group discussion. This is partly because of the nature of practices themselves. Practices are activities that are shared with other people. We do them with and for one another. Therefore, growing in our understanding of practices is something we must do with other people too. Moreover, practices are not abstractions. 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. It is wise to look at these realities with more than one pair of eyes. This is surely so when it comes to the vexing topic at the center of *Receiving the Day:* distress about the shape of time in our lives and the strong wisdom

about time embedded in faith practices. How can any of us, by ourselves, resist the expanding culture of 24/7? (We note with a some alarm that this phrase has evolved to 24/7/365 in the year between the publication of the book and the writing of this guide!)

So conversation is crucial. But excellent conversation is not inevitable. Excellent conversation is more likely when a discussion is carefully tended, and this takes some planning. Excellent conversations are structured to allow space for attention to the particular contexts and thoughts of participants. They are attuned to the life situations and learning styles of those who will gather in search of deeper understanding and more authentic action. They need to be set within the framework of a certain period of time, a certain physical space, and 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 hosting such conversations. We hope that it will be helpful as you think through how specific occasions can help a specific group of people, gathering in a specific place, explore what steps would make it possible for them to perceive time as a gift rather than as a taskmaster. We do not intend to provide you with a set curriculum and detailed instructions, however. We hope instead to provide guidance that will help you structure conversations that are appropriate for your own group.

Part 1 offers an orientation to your role as a leader, together with some guidelines for structuring group exploration of Christian practices for opening the gift of time.

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 each chapter of *Receiving the Day.*

The Practices of Faith Series began with the book *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People.* It is no accident that *Practicing Our Faith* was written by a team of thirteen authors, rather than by an individual. We found that talking about Christian practices together helped us see our way of life more clearly and envision fresh possibilities for faithfulness more imaginatively. *Receiving the Day* grew from that book's chapter on the practice of keeping sabbath. As I discussed that chapter with many readers, I decided to write an

entire book about the Christian practices that allow us to live more faithfully in time.

Now it is a joy to encourage you to discuss *Receiving the Day* in your community. I am confident that readers will bring to it a range of insights wider than my own, because they bring wisdom rooted in other traditions, knowledge drawn from other fields, observations made in other places, and lifetimes of experience. I hope that your discussion of this book will be full of discovery and the beginning of a richer experience of the days, weeks, and years God has given you.

Dorothy C. Bass

Part 1

HOSTING THE CONVERSATION

Receiving the Day 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 this 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 how we live in time. This person is charged with shaping a community of learning—one that may last only a few weeks, to be sure, but one whose structure will be an important factor as participants seek to help one another learn and grow. After all, every group will not merely study Christian 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 arise 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 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. *Receiving the Day* 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.) Becoming a teacher-leader does, however, require 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 embarks 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 originally set out for, but it might help them stay afloat and 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 water is 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 turbulent, and the original map may seem irrelevant.

Educational designs chart a teacher's hopes for what might happen in an educational event, enabling the leader to guide reflection when that is helpful and to adapt when it is not. They crystallize important issues for reflection, attend to the specific needs of the individuals 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—indeed, just as the teacher, the participants, and the local culture are unique. A fruitful educational design will connect all of these elements—teacher, participants, and local culture—with the larger contexts discussed in *Receiving the Day,* including the Bible, history, and what is happening in the world beyond this place.

Preparing to Lead Educational Events

The following pages offer suggestions for charting a single group session. In most cases, such a session will be one in a series—so a few words about creating a series are important 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, 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 daily attentiveness, weekly sabbath keeping, or activities related to specific seasons.

These suggestions are offered to help you, the teacher-leader, as you prepare an educational design for any given session. 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. Carefully read each relevant chapter in *Receiving the Day*. How does the author define the problems people face regarding time, and what practices does she commend? What stories, quotations, and biblical material touched you in this chapter? How is life in time something that people do together, not just something a person does alone?

Wrestle with the Material in the Chapter. 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 is more familiar with Christian rhythms of living in time?

Reflect on Your Personal and Institutional Involvement in This Practice. Try to identify the ways in which you are already involved in the patterns of activity described in the chapter, both positive and negative. Some may be hard to recognize because you take them for granted. What assumptions, prejudices, and passions do you bring? What yearning, pain, or experiences of new life do you bring? What responsibilities do you have regarding this practice 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 in Conversation. Teaching works only when it is designed for the specific participants 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 they represent already engage this practice? What life circumstances are you familiar with that may resonate with the chapter? Do you suspect that they have experienced pain in relation to time? 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 about their relationship to time? 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 the people who will gather. The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* had certain hopes when writing that book about the kinds of reflection the book might generate. These hopes now inform the Practices of Faith Series. As you identify your own hopes for the group you are leading, you might find it helpful to dialogue with the hopes of those authors: 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 Practices in Each Session. 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 by helping them identify formative memories, present realities, and hopes for the future

- Considering the emotions stirred by the practice—the group's yearning for it, joy in it, or worries about it and the stories, dreams, and promises it evokes
- Thinking through the analysis set forth in *Receiving the Day,* 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 human life in time, biblically and as the author presents it, and relating this to God's activity and our faithful living
- Reflecting critically on how time can become deformed and violated in our lives and in our society
- Taking on a challenge to live 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 judgment. 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 solely on them. Develop your own ideas, drawing on your hopes, the suggestions in this guide, and—especially—what you know about 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; for example, in some churches 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 story 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* nature of practices, and actually do something together. Offer attention to the present moment, take a worshipful rest, or sing some stirring hymns of the season—all in ways that are instructed by what you are learning about Christian practices for opening the gift of time.

Second, be alert to the challenges inherent in Christian practices. It is easy to get people talking about time. However, we hope that discussing *Receiving the Day* will evoke much more than smiles of recognition. We hope to stir up some discomfort, too, by encouraging readers to think hard about what it would mean to live in time in a way that goes against the grain of contemporary society. This requires facing the places where our society—including ourselves—violates or neglects the spiritual dimensions of time. 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 conversation in an elementary grade classroom feels different from a conversation in the warmth of someone's home. Reflect with care about 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 mutuality.
- The presence of sacred symbols can stimulate the imagination of the participants. A candle, a chalice, or a small altar might serve your group in this way. Or consider setting out some symbols of what you will be discussing, such as a datebook, a cellular phone, or an Advent wreath.
- 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 all materials that will be needed, such as markers, drawing supplies, writing utensils, paper, or directions to a site.

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 the life of Christian faith. How can the interactions among the people who will gather reflect the quality of Christian practices themselves? How will hospitality, forgiveness, testimony, healing, and other practices be embodied in 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. 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 create an atmosphere of 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. However, do not be overly directional or feel that you have failed if the group does not address all the issues you had charted. Stifling honest and lively engagement frustrates 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 might give answers that are "correct" or "incorrect." Ask questions to open, not close, discussion.

Encouraging *shared participation* is also important. Everyone has been in groups where one or two members dominate the con-

versation. We may also have been surprised on occasion 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.

Encouragement: Beyond the Guidelines

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 practice together. 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 that at this table you are a guest as well.

Part 2

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR EVERY CHAPTER

In Part 2, we offer a sampling of material from which you might choose as you design educational events using *Receiving the Day*. 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 your group. 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 for your own situation and to invite participants to contribute to this creative process as well. In your own educational design, weave these suggestions together with other resources, including the activities suggested in *Receiving the Day* 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 *Receiving the Day* cite numerous books and articles. You can also consult people in your community who possess life wisdom about the practices the book explores.

Chapter One: Experiencing the Fullness of Time

Someone has said: "Show me your checkbook, and I'll show you what you believe." We can do the same with datebooks or calendars. Look at yours. Then ask yourself, Could I let someone else look at this and draw conclusions about what I believe?

Bring datebooks or family calendars, and invite each person to share a few pages of what's in them. What do you use yours for? How does your datebook or calendar help you see time as a possibility, as a gift? How does it truncate your notion of time as a gift? What do you think of the author's suggestion on page 1 that "a datebook can become a template for visualizing time as a sequence of little boxes waiting to be filled"?

Where do you experience the greatest pain and challenge in relation to time?

How has the pace and shape of time changed since you were a child? Compare your life as a child to the lives of children you know today. Compare your life as a child to your own life as an adult today. And compare how society's structuring of time has changed in these years.

Conduct your own "time" retreat with others who wish to reevaluate their relationship with time. Take a close look at this relationship by asking yourself and each other: Who taught you to manage time? Where did we get our attitudes about time? How did your family of origin handle time? Was use of time discussed in your family? Who kept track of time? How did your family members handle "free" time? How did you feel about the pace? Ask each other these same questions about your present households. How and when does your domestic atmosphere get charged with a sense of the importance, cost, and scarcity of time?

The ancient Romans employed officials to oversee the addition of days and months to the calendar. However, the calendar got very

confusing when they abused their authority in order to prolong their term of office or gain other advantages. Name ways that you have seen time get abused or manipulated.

Tell stories about when you were kept waiting. What did you feel? What did your body do? How have others responded when you've kept them waiting? How did you feel about their responses?

Have you ever visited another country or region and noticed an approach to time and appointments different from yours? Notice other customs and approaches regarding time: "Hawaiian time," "Brazilian time," or others you know.

Brainstorm a list of time-related expressions: "Time flies," "killing time," "make it worth your while," and so on. Ask of each expression: What does this say to us about time? Do any of the expressions help us see time as a gift? Which ones make time seem like an adversary?

Days are like manna: once they're gone, you can't get them back. And you also can't hoard them. They arrive fresh and new each morning, a gift. Read Exodus 16:4–31, the story of how God provided the Israelites with manna in the wilderness. Then, wherever the word *manna* appears, substitute the word *time,* as in the following excerpt.

> Then the Lord said to Moses, I am going to rain hours, time from heaven for you, and each day the people shall rise up and have time enough for that day. . . . On the sixth day, when they gather up time, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days. Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, who has heard your complaining about lack of time. . . .'" The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "At twilight you shall eat with plenty of time, and in the morning you shall have your fill of time stretching out before you; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." In the evening time came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of time upon the camp. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" Moses said to them, "It is the time that the Lord has given you. This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Take as much time as

> you need for the day.'" Those who had too much time on their hands measured it in hours and had nothing left over, and those who had little time discovered they had no shortage, they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of the time over until morning." But they did not listen to Moses; some used up the hours of the night until morning, and the time became to them foul; for they were tired and irritable. The house of Israel called it "time"; it was a new gift every day. [Adapted from Exodus 16:4–31]

Read Psalm 90. Begin by reading it slowly and thoughtfully until you are attracted by a particular phrase, sentence, or longer section. When you sense unusual power, beauty, or truth there, stop reading, and sit quietly for a moment. Read that passage over, slowly, again and again. Do not reason about the text. Do not analyze it. Just listen to the words and meaning. Let it do its work in you. Stay with those words as long as they hold your attention. When this passage has finished with you, simply resume reading. (This form of prayerful reading is known as *lectio divina*.)

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

Chapter Two: This Is the Day That God Has Made

What would you like to be able to say when someone asks, "How was your day?" (page 15). How do you usually answer this question? Deliberately? Vaguely? Why?

Here's the voice of a young girl, on her first visit with a friend who helped her start a weaving project: "How long was I there? It was so much fun, I had no idea the clock was moving." What engaging things do you do that make you lose track of time?

When does your day begin? In the Bible, the day begins at sundown (Genesis 1:5). That means the first part of each day passes in darkness; we rest, getting ready for the gift of light and activity. As Eugene Peterson notes, "I go to sleep to get out of the way for a while" (page 18). God and nature go on without us, and we join the work in the morning. How might "beginning" the day in the Genesis way change the attitude with which you start and end your day? What evening hymn, prayer, or other act could help you start your day at dusk?

In the African American church tradition, a preacher might begin morning worship by shouting, "This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!" What testimony could you make every morning about the gifts you have received? A traditional rhythm of prayer begins with thanksgiving, then moves to confession and petition. For morning prayers, try restricting yourself to thanks for what you have. Petition, asking God, comes later. For example, a traditional morning prayer begins, "Open my lips, O God, and my mouth shall declare your praise" (Psalm 51:15). Many communities also sing the Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68–79).

How do you respond to Martin Marty's gesture (page 21), a sign to remember his baptism and forgiveness each day? What sign would help you express that you are ready to receive the upcoming promise of the day and to let go of the sin from the day before?

Visit a monastery that follows the rhythms of the Liturgy of the Hours of the Order of Saint Benedict. If possible, either have a retreat at the monastery or conduct a retreat in your own setting that is ordered according to the Liturgy of the Hours.

Ask yourself in the evening before sleep: "Where did I meet God today?" Then include your thoughts in your evening prayer.

Day and night come in regular rhythms. What rhythms do you remember from childhood, things that happened with regularity each day? What rhythms do you cherish now? Share with one another your daily rhythms of prayer or worship. Do you feel a need to change your present patterns? Help one another decide how to do so.

Dorothy Bass says on page 28 that today the "domestic atmosphere is charged with a sense of the importance, cost, and scarcity of time." Is this true in your home? Can you imagine this changing?

What's the difference between "receiving the day" and "seizing the day" (*carpe diem*)?

When have you ignored the natural strictures of dark and light, such as being awake at night (talking with a friend, partying) and sleeping during the light? Did you find these experiences freeing or oppressive? In what ways? Did they make you lose your bearings? Describe how.

Do you agree with the author that time driven by the clock has a different quality than time marked by the earth's turning toward darkness?

How do things in your household change when electricity is out and you are forced to pay attention to dark and light?

Remember a precious open day. What did you do? How did you feel at the end of it?

Have you ever caught yourself saying, "If I only had thirty hours in the day . . ."? Map out your "typical" day. If you really had six more

hours in it, what would you do with them? Be specific. How long do you think you could "protect" those six hours for the things you planned and not let other things encroach?

Now map out two days as if you had just twenty hours in each. What gets left out or squeezed?

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

Chapter Three: Receiving This Day

Name three things you do every day to honor your body's needs. These have rhythms, and these rhythms can turn your mind to God. For example, at mealtimes, some people give thanks. A shower can be a reminder of baptism. In what other ways do your daily activities turn your thoughts to God?

Do you nap? What is your attitude toward napping?

What brings you to attention? What happens in your body when you are attentive? "Frequent and regular acts of attention are anchors for the practice of receiving the day" (page 35). What such anchors do you have? Would you like to have? Share ideas for learning to be more attentive.

Regular routine sometimes has a negative side. What routine of yours throws you off if you can't do it? What are ways to keep your practice regular without becoming rigid? In what ways do others help you avoid crossing the line from regularity into rigidity? How do you help others do this?

How would you spend a day if you knew you would die tomorrow? Do you know anyone whose sense of time has been disrupted or changed by an encounter with death? Read aloud Jane Kenyon's poem on pages 41–42.

Praying, honoring bodies, offering attention—all sound appealing, but all are costly in terms of time. What do they take time from? What keeps you from doing these things? What are you willing to give up in order to have time to pray, to honor the body, to offer attention?

Henri Nouwen lamented the frustration of work interruptions until he was reminded that interruptions might be his work (page 40). Does this make sense in your experience? In what ways might interruptions be your work?

Write down what you did yesterday that seems like clutter. What would it have been all right not to do?

Read the children's book *Goodnight Moon,* by Margaret Wise Brown. It rehearses letting go of all the activities, preoccupations, and focal points of the day; we might say that Brown is trying to help children to receive the night. What boundaries and rituals help children (and others) find restful sleep? How does this statement strike you: "At bedtime, we are practicing for our dying, and for the dying of those we love" (page 43). Share your bedtime rituals and bedtime prayers with one another.

Watch the movie *Groundhog Day* with some friends. Then talk about parallels in your own life. How do you experience the ringing of your alarm clock each morning? Identify and discuss the different responses the main character has to being stuck in time. Do you see

similar responses in yourself or others at times? What does the movie's ending suggest about the relationship among hope, freedom, and mortality?

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

Chapter Four: The Sabbath Opens Creation for Its True Future

Do you ever find yourself complaining, like the author's group of friends (page 45), about how much you have to do? Make lists of what you have to do this coming week. Share them. Do some of you outdo the others? Is this complaint about being very busy really a boast?

What memories does *sabbath* evoke for you? How have your patterns of keeping sabbath changed during the course of your lifetime? How have society's patterns changed? 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 47 and 48 of *Receiving the Day.* 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? Then 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.

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 give new energy to your work?

When in your week or year do you experience real sabbath? Where do you go, what do you do, and who are you with that contributes 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?

What would you have to say no to in order to say yes to keeping sabbath? Is there a first step toward sabbath keeping that you can take right now?

Do you know people—perhaps even in your group—who have too little to do? Propose ways to invite such people to use their time more fully. How might underworked people and overworked people trade work? What stands in the way of this now?

Read together the story of Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees about sabbath in Matthew 12:1–14. In this story, what do you think sabbath means for those who are hungry? What does it mean for those who cannot work because of disabilities? Notice that Jesus healed a withered hand that could then be employed as well as keep sabbath.

Dorothy Bass claims that keeping sabbath can teach us to receive time as a gift rather than viewing it as an adversary to be mastered. If we are not mindful of sabbath as a gift, the culture will not be mindful for us. Society challenges sabbath. Sabbath challenges society by nourishing an alternative vision of how things could be. If you resonate with these ideas, get specific: How does society challenge sabbath today? How does sabbath challenge society?

"Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." What does it mean, to keep something holy?

Keeping the sabbath is a commandment. What feelings does this word *commandment* conjure up in you? Apathy? Resentment? Commitment? Chafing?

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

Chapter Five: Keeping This Sabbath

In what ways do you practice your sabbath freedom? If you are studying in a group of people who know each other well, note for each other ways you see your group members practicing joy in creation and freedom from bondage.

Name three things you might do to rest from commerce on the sabbath.

What activities summon worry or anger in you (such as paying bills, doing tax returns, making "to do" lists for the coming week, thinking of certain things or people)? If you knew you could rest from those worrisome activities for twenty-four hours every week, how would it change your week? How might it help you let go of slights and grudges?

How can we spend sabbath practicing a way of life that is good for creation? Be specific. What might this do to us during the other six days?

Suppose you were to resolve not to work one day each week. Now you must decide what you mean by "work." As a group, make lists of what activities count as work to be avoided. Is refraining from these activities feasible for you? With which could you begin?

What is your reaction to Sietze Buning's poem "Obedience" (pages 68–69)?

Do you know anyone who is required to work on Sundays? Name what sabbath might mean in this person's situation. How can you help this person find joy in sabbath? How might this person (or you) make it possible for others to keep sabbath?

Some people who are lonely miss the busy-ness of work on sabbath. Reach out: invite people for Sunday dinner, volunteer in soup kitchens, visit or call those restricted to home.

Marva Dawn calls worship "a royal waste of time." Do you think worship is a good "use" of time? Why or why not?

What happens to your body when worship goes past the time you expect?

Discuss the difference between clock time and event time (pages 70–71). Does this distinction make sense to you? What's the best thing about clock time? What's the worst thing about it? Try not wearing a watch for a day. What do you notice? Try removing all timepieces from the sanctuary. Check watches at the door. What would happen if you left your watch off all day on Sunday?

Try taking a break from clock time by eating only when you're hungry, sleeping only when you're tired, and ending a meeting promptly when the agenda is finished. What do you notice? Is it possible to live this way on a daily basis? Why or why not?

Consider how participating in sports affects church and sabbath (page 74). Do you draw any lines about playing or watching sports on Sunday?

View together the film *Chariots of Fire,* the story of Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, rival sprinters in the 100-meter dash in the 1924 Olympics. One theme of the film is the challenge of keeping sabbath. What is your reaction to the way each of the main characters views his commitments?

Must Christians observe sabbath on Sunday? What does it do for your sense of community to know that as you worship, other Christians all over the world are worshiping at about the same time? To know that worshiping on Sunday links us with the ancient celebration of Christ's resurrection? What would happen if these common threads were cut?

How would you answer a child who asks, "Why do we have to go to church every Sunday?" Read and discuss with the children in your life some or all of these books about Sunday:

- *Come Sunday* (about life in the African American church), by Nikki Grimes
- *Everyday and Sunday Too,* by Gail Ramshaw
- *Chicken Sunday,* by Patricia Polacco

Say you are trying to come to a new sense of sabbath freedom. Try this exercise to imagine (and discuss) how your freedom might contribute to the freedom of others and to the well-being of the natural world: Take a sheet of writing paper and write "Sabbath Freedom" in the center. At the top edge, write, "What does it give?" On the bottom edge, write, "What does it take?" Fold your paper in half lengthwise, and then again crosswise. On the top left quadrant, write "me." On the top right quadrant, write "others/world." On the bottom left quadrant, write "me." On the bottom right quadrant, write "others/world." Now fill in the page. You'll discover answers to what sabbath freedom gives to you, what it gives to your community and the natural world, what sabbath freedom means you may have to give

up (they may be things you'd be glad to be rid of), and what sabbath could mean other people and the natural world might have to or get to give up.

Some Christians have taken one small step to recover sabbath in their lives: they don't spend money on Sunday. Try it for a month and report back.

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

Chapter Six: The Circling Year Draws Us into the Story of God

Bring in music or songs that attest to the passing of seasons and time (Joni Mitchell's "Circle Game"; Jim Croce's "All My Life's a Circle" and "Time in a Bottle"; Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Cradle"; Vivaldi's "Four Seasons"; "Sunrise, Sunset," from *Fiddler on the Roof*). What do you feel when you hear each of these pieces of music? Discuss the various attitudes toward time expressed in the pieces. How are they alike? How are they different?

If you were to narrate the events and stories of your life, would you put them on a straight line or on a circle? Is time to you more a line or a circle?

How closely does your congregation observe the Christian year? What place do liturgical seasons have in your congregation, if any? If you don't celebrate them, do you know why not? If you do, learn more about the stories, prayers, and colors of each season.

On a large piece of newsprint, draw a circle of the Christian year. Head it "How the Church Tells Time." Begin with Advent, and fill in the circle as best you can, brainstorming as a group. When you get stuck, use the information in this chapter to fill it in. Finally, augment it with the information in a ministry manual. Color the circle with the liturgical colors associated with each season. What is the significance of the colors? You can also make tissue overlays of other ways our culture tells time, such as seasons of nature, school seasons, work seasons (busy and slack), or hunting or fishing seasons.

What Holy Week observances are most meaningful or compelling for you? Why? What other holy days (or holidays) are most meaningful? Why?

Do certain times in the Christian year deepen your experience of Christian faith? Do certain times often prove difficult for you?

Write a list or a poem on this theme: What is time for?

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

Chapter Seven: Living in the Story, This Year

Have a "Taste of the Church Year." Come up with one or more foods or beverages or tastes associated with each season or special day of the church year. Present them as a cornucopia, a celebration, an education, for all to share.

Have a "Sing Through the Church Year" program. Beginning with Advent, sing a hymn or two representing each season or special day of the church year. Listen as the Christian story is told in song. Does this experience stir up personal stories too?

To pay attention to seasons, try having a family or church meal in which you eat only produce that is in season in your area.

We thrive on rhythm:

- Concentrate on breathing rhythm—lungs fill and release, fill and release.
- Choose a hymn, and read it together (without music) with no rhythm at all, with each syllable receiving the same length and emphasis. How does it feel? What do you get out of the poetry or text? Now read it again, this time following the rhythm of the notes (still without music). What do you get out of it this time? Now sing the hymn.

Dorothy Bass claims that truly to appreciate the feast, we need to fast (pages 104–108). Some congregations don't sing Christmas carols until December 24. What do you think about fasting from carols about Christ's birth during Advent?

What do you think about the historian Leigh Eric Schmidt's observation that it's appropriate for commerce to lend energy and publicity to our festivals because all human beings need periodic revelry and extravagance (page 107)?

Dorothy Bass contrasts the American "Christmas season" and the Christian season of Advent (page 106). How do your church, family, friends, and workplace observe these overlapping seasons? Are there ways in which your faith puts you "out-of-step" with secular and commercial Christmas festivities? The church's Christmas season begins on Christmas and lasts until January 6, Epiphany. In some countries and some U.S. families, gifts are exhanged on Epiphany, which tradition marks as the day the Magi visited the infant Jesus and offered their gifts. How would making this change affect your experience of Christmas?

What might it mean to call the liturgical year the "root of Christian life"? How might the liturgical year become a "decoration of religion," rather than the "root of Christian life" (page 109)? Have you ever seen this happen? How? If you see it, how can it be remedied?

Even festivals have their "season." We may need to be willing to let some seasonal traditions die in order to pick up the thread in a new way. For example, an alternative "Christmas Faire" got harder and harder to staff until it was put on hold for a few years; it found renewed energy some years later. Examine annual customs every now and then. What annual customs do you, your family, or your congregation observe that could use a critique?

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

Chapter Eight: Learning to Count Our Days

Think of someone who gave you the gift of time at some point in your life. Thank that person. Ask yourself who needs a gift of time from you.

Someone once said, "No matter how long a person lives, in retrospect somehow it seems to have been a 'complete' life." When have you known this to be true? When has it not been true in your experience?

Read the children's book *The Relatives Came,* by Cynthia Rylant. What does your family do when it spends time together? How does your community spend time together? How do you know when the time has been enough? What are the signs? Discuss this statement: "Time in itself is not enough [for building relationships], but when time is absent, nothing else is present" (page 117).

In an era when many of us feel that time is our scarcest resource, both common courtesies and crucial help to others can falter because they take time. When has this happened to you? How do you guard against it?

Return to Psalm 90. As in Chapter One, begin by reading it slowly and thoughtfully until you are attracted by a particular phrase, sentence, or section. When you sense unusual power, beauty, or truth there, stop reading and sit quietly for a moment. Read that passage over, slowly, again and again. Do not reason about the text. Do not analyze it. Just listen to the words and meaning. Let it do its work in you. Stay with those words as long as they hold your attention. When this passage has finished with you, simply resume reading. How has your experience of "praying" this psalm changed from the beginning of this study to now?

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

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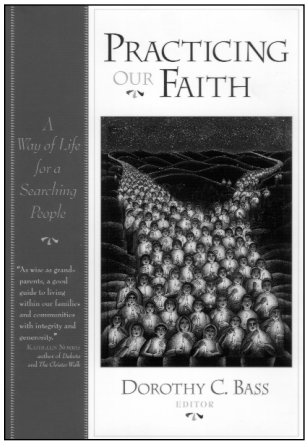
OTHER BOOKS OF INTEREST FOR GROUP STUDY



Practicing Our Faith

A Way of Life for a Searching People

Dorothy C. Bass, editor

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"As wise as grandparents, a good guide to living within our families and communities with integrity and generosity."

—Kathleen Norris, author of *Dakota* and *The Cloister Walk*

Many Christians are looking for ways to deepen their relationship with God by practicing their faith in everyday life. Some go on retreats but are often disappointed to find that the integrated life they experienced in a place apart is difficult to recreate in their day-to-day world. Many thoughtful, educated Christians search for spiritual guidance in Eastern religious traditions, unaware of the great riches within their own heritage.

To all these seekers, *Practicing our Faith* offers help that is rooted in Christian faith and tradition. Refusing to leave our beliefs in the realm of theory, this book explores twelve central Christian practices—shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life. The contributors explore each practice in depth by placing it in its historical and biblical context, reexamining its relevance to our times, and showing how it gives depth and meaning to daily life. Shaped by the Christian community over the centuries yet richly grounded in the experiences of living communities today, these practices show us how Christian spiritual disciplines can become an intergral part of how we live each day.

The Practices:

Discernment	Saying yes and saying no	Forgiveness
Honoring the body	Keeping Sabbath	Healing
Hospitality	Testimony	Dying well
Household economics	Shaping communities	Singing our lives

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