

EDUCATION IN CHRISTIAN PRACTICES.

Unlock the educational potential of your congregation by taking a good look at resources on Christian Practices.

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Opportunities for Christian Education are readily available on our doorsteps daily, and easily accessible, if only we are aware and intentional. The genius of the Christian Practice approach to faith education is that leaders do not have to establish these practices. Christian Practices exist in Church life anyhow, ready for planned and systemic education – the practice, the learning, the repeated participation and reflection.

In recent years in the Anglican Parish of Glen Osmond four young adults have been licensed to be Lay Assistants at the Holy Communion Service. Each person was prepared by practice, study of the biblical origins and meaning of the Eucharist, reflection and prayer. There was a discussion on the significance of assisting in the giving of Holy Communion, by administering the chalice to other members of the congregation. The person leading the preparation was like a mentor and coach. The young person was like an apprentice learning. Lay Assisting is a practice or activity within the Anglican Church Community. It is ongoing, involves certain attitudes and skills, and brings a sense of the presence of God.

What is a Christian Practice?

A Christian Practice is a human activity which collectively expresses meanings in the Christian Community and helps people live life in the name of Christ, aware of God's love. In the book *Practicing Our Faith* a definition is given. "Christian Practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in light of God's active presence for the life of the world".ⁱ

Craig Dykstra writes, "Practices are those co-operative human activities through which we, as individuals and as communities, grow and develop in moral character and substance. By learning them- through long, slow, steady participation in them- individuals and communities learn Christian faith, become Christian".ⁱⁱ Dean and Foster write, "Practices are the constitutive acts of a community that both identify us as, and form us into, people who belong to that community. Christian practices mark us as and make us into Jesus' followers. They are means of grace by which God strengthens individuals and the Church to live faithfully".ⁱⁱⁱ

Sacraments are Christian practices- Baptism and Holy Communion. Christian practices are like sacraments, outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual meaning or grace. Sacraments are also described as symbolic expressions of personal and common faith.

Lists of Christian Practices.

Craig Dykstra in his book *Growing in the Life of Faith- Education and Christian Practices* lists fourteen (14) ordinary practices that appear consistently throughout the tradition and that are particularly significant for Christians today. This list of practices includes: worshipping God together, interpreting the scriptures together, praying together, confessing our sin and being forgiven, participating in acts of service, providing hospitality and care, and working for justice.^{iv}

In the book *Practicing Our Faith-A Way of Life for a Searching People* Christian practices are listed including, Hospitality, Keeping Sabbath, Forgiveness, and Saying Yes and No. ^vThe book *Practicing Our Faith* along with a website (www.practicingourfaith.com) is part of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith. The book and the website “explore twelve time-honoured practices shaped by the Christian community over the centuries, yet richly relevant to contemporary experience. These Christian practices are shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, when woven together, form a way of life that is faithful and has integrity”.^{vi} This Valparaiso University Project in USA. is Lutheran based but relates to other mainline denominations, Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian. ^{vii}Theological perspectives implicit in each practice are presented in the book *Practicing Theology-Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*.^{viii}

In the book *The Godbearing Life-the art of soul tending for Youth Ministry*, a family of Christian Practices is outlined. The authors Dean and Foster have very usefully grouped various practices into six families of Christian Practices: Communion, Compassion, Teaching and Nurturing, Witness, Sacred Spacemaking, and Worship. These practices form a curriculum “that is already in place in every Church, in every community of Christians in every region in the world”.^{ix}

A Useful Resource

As a result of these listings each congregation may need to make their own list as is appropriate to their circumstances and then educate in those Christian practices. The National educational body of the Uniting Church in Australia, Uniting Education has published a useful workbook on Christian practices. The workbook is called *The Godbearing Life-Faithful Everyday living- Discipleship in Action*. Chapter four is entitled “Practices of Christian Faith and Educational Ministry”.^x

Educational Methods.

In Christian Education to date we have usually referred to teacher and learner. The Christian Practices approach to learning is like good coaching. ^{xi}With a planned and systematic education in Christian practices we need coaches and friends who are companions and mentors. As Dykstra writes, “To learn these practices and learn in the context of them, we need others who are competent in these practices to help us: to be our models, mentors, teachers, and partners in practice. We need people who will include us in these practices as they themselves are engaged in them, and who will show us how to do what the practices require. We also need them to explain to us what these practices mean, what the reasons, understandings, insights, and values embedded in them are. And we need them to lure us and press us beyond our current understandings of and competencies in these practices, to the point where we together may extend and deepen the practices themselves.”^{xii} John Emmett and Ted Endacott in writing about their recent overseas study tour report that in the practices approach, “ Intentional coaching relationships are being advocated and methodologies developed”, and that “ Some seminaries are offering coaching assistance to Ministers and congregation’s leadership”; stating that “ Coaches seek to assist the other person to be the best they can in a particular skill or competence or practice.”^{xiii}

Growing in the Practice of Faith.

Education in faith is achieved by participation in Christian Practices. This experience brings a sense of God's presence and mystery which in turn encourages the learner to grow. “Growing in the Practices of Faith” is the final chapter in the book

Practicing Our Faith. In this chapter an educational approach is presented. The authors write that, “ Education in Christian practices is always going on within the life of Christian communities. But there is also a place for more deliberate efforts to help one another grow in understanding and doing the practices in the light of our faith”.^{xiv} Entering more deeply into a Christian practice leads to greater understanding, deeper meaning and renewal for individuals and communities of Christians.^{xv} There are two essential Christian practices always present in individual and group activities. These two essentials are prayer and Bible study.^{xvi} Christian practices are a way of life and help people grow to maturity in Christ.

A Look Forward- some reflections.

I discovered the Christian Practices approach to education in the faith when undertaking research for an article that I wrote in May 2001. That article is called “Many Windows of Access to Christian Education in Local Christian Communities.” This article is now part of a series of articles under the general title of *Being a Learning Community in the Parish*.^{xvii} I was intrigued. Could this be an easily accessible way to do Christian Education? After all, this approach is based on what is already happening in Parishes anyhow! Christian Education could not be made easier! The challenge would be to take what is there and go deeper.

To my surprise and delight the Christian Practice approach opened up a different way of tackling Christian Education. It unlocked potential learning opportunities in the Parish as well as providing new useful resources (already mentioned above). The Christian Practices approach is another very useful educational tool for a Parish to use.

The Christian practice approach sits well with Anglican ways and would be useful in small and large congregations. Ways of equipping people to be coaches and mentors would need to be considered, and resources to do this are available in Australia.^{xviii} Some very worthwhile resources are available to go deeper when considering Christian practices. For example, the chapter on ‘Keeping Sabbath’ by Dorothy Bass explores the biblical, historical and contemporary basis for the Christian practice of balancing worship, rest, work and family life in a sabbath rhythm for life, including a consideration of the place of Sunday worship. ‘Keeping Sabbath’ is the title of chapter six in *Practicing Our Faith*.^{xix}

I discovered this approach to Christian Education through discussions with John Emmett Director of the Uniting Church in Australia’s national education agency Uniting Education. He has provided very helpful resource ideas. I am concerned that, in the Anglican Church of Australia, to the best of my knowledge, we do not seem to be sharing the ideas and educational insights contained in the resources on Christian practices. I hope that this article may make a contribution towards changing that situation. In the Anglican Church we have these practices available in parish life, but have we used them enough for educational purposes? Over the years Anglican clergy and lay leaders will have been teaching about Baptism and the Holy Communion and other Christian practices during Confirmation preparation and at other times. The leaders of the Christian Practices movement are inviting us to be even more deliberate and intentional as well as systematic and reflective about education in Christian practices.

The leaders of the Practice approach Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass ‘encourage Christian educators to adopt a learning strategy that centres on reflective practice’, so write John Emmett and Ted Endacott in their 2004 overseas study report called *On Thin Ice*. Their comment continues, ‘For example, a minister might invest

time with a group of communion assistants, exploring new ways of preparing for, distributing and concluding the Eucharist. The social, relational, theological, historical and cultural meanings of this powerful ritual could be explored in depth. The lay communion assistants might be stimulated to craft a new liturgy, or to increase the involvement of the congregation. A wide range of practices are put forward for consideration, including Sabbath rest, economics, hospitality and reconciliation. Bass and Dykstra argue cogently that the practices approach to adult education is attractive, meaningful and effective.”^{xx}

Attractive, meaningful and effective Christian Education! What more could you want for a congregation? Here is a practical way to unlock the educational potential of your congregation. Enabling people to grow in their commitment to Christ and the Christian life is more than enough incentive to try the Christian Practices approach.

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ⁱ Bass D.C. Editor (1997) *Practicing Our Faith, A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco. p 5.

ⁱⁱ Dykstra C.(1999) *Growing in the Life of Faith, Education and Christian Practices*, Geneva Press, Kentucky USA. p69 and 70.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dean K.C. and Foster R. (1998) *The Godbearing Life, the Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, Upper Room Books, p 107.

^{iv} Dykstra C. *Growing in the Life of Faith*, p 42-43.

^v Bass D.C. *Practicing Our Faith*, Contents pages.

^{vi} See website www.practicingourfaith.com

^{vii} I gained this information from a conversation with John Emmett ,12/5/2004, just after he had returned from an overseas study tour of USA and UK researching Christian Education. This study tour is written up in the publication *On Thin Ice* (2004) Uniting Education.

^{viii} Volf M. and Bass D.C. editors (2002) *Practicing Theology, Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, W. Eerdmans Publishing.

^{ix} Dean and Foster (1998) *The Godbearing Life*, p 111.

^x Emmett J.A. (2002) *The Godbearing Life, Faithful Everyday Living Discipleship in Action- A Workbook for Leaders of Educational Ministries*. Uniting Education. Pages 31-44

^{xi} Dykstra C. *Growing in the Life of Faith*, p 72.

^{xii} Ibid. Pages 72-73.

^{xiii} Emmett J.A. and Endacott T.(2004) *On Thin Ice*, An investigation into Christian Education and Church health, 2004 study tour of the USA and UK., Uniting Education p 21.

^{xiv} Bass D. *Practicing Our Faith*, p198.

^{xv} Ibid. p 201.

^{xvi} Ibid. p 202.

^{xvii} See these websites, www.unitinged.org.au and www.stsavioursngo.net

^{xviii} Mallison J.(1998) *Mentoring, To Develop Disciples and Leaders*, Scripture Union and Openbook.

^{xix} Rolfe-Flett (2002) *Mentoring in Australia* , Prentice Hall.

^{xx} Bass D. *Practicing Our Faith*, Pages 75-89.

^{xxi} Emmett J.A. and Endacott T., *On Thin Ice*, Page 34.

Additional references:

Butler Bass D. (2006) *Christianity and the Rest of Us*, Harper One, USA.

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