



Strategies for Faith Formation in Christian Practices

John Roberto

*In my view, an essential task of education in faith is to teach all the basic practices of the Christian faith. The fundamental aim of Christian education in all its forms, varieties, and settings should be that individuals—and indeed whole communities—learn these practices, be drawn into participation in them, learn to do them with increasingly deepened understanding and skill, learn to extend them more broadly and fully in their own lives and into their world, and learn to correct them, strengthen them, and improve them. (Craig Dykstra in *Growing in the Life of Faith*)*

How can congregations take seriously Craig Dykstra’s challenge to “teach all of the basic practices of the Christian faith?” How can congregations develop intentional strategies for a systematic faith formation in Christian practices? Craig Dykstra guides our thinking when he writes that children, youth, and adults best learn practices when the following conditions are present in a congregation or home:

- When we ourselves are active in them, actually doing what these practices involve, engaging in them personally in particular physical and material settings and in face-to-face interaction with other people
- When we participate in them jointly with others, especially with others who are skilled in them and are able to teach them to us;
- When the people involved in them with us are, or are becoming, personally significant to us—and we to them
- When we are involved in increasingly broader, more varied, and more complex dimensions of the practice, and when the activities we engage in become increasingly wide-ranging in their context and impact
- When we come more and more to connect articulations of the significance and meaning of these practices (as well as the ways in which the various practices are connected and related to one another) with our own activities in them and with the reasons we ourselves have for engaging in them
- When we come to take increasing personal responsibility for initiating, pursuing, and sustaining these practices and for including and guiding others in them. (Dykstra 71-72)

Guided by these insights, this article offers practical ideas that can stimulate your own thinking and creativity so that Christian practices can become central to all faith formation.

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Strategies & Ideas

Christian Practices in Your Church Community

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Diana Butler Bass tells the story of one of the churches in her study (as reported in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*) that calls itself an “urban abbey.” They have developed a congregational “rule of life” that is given to all members, including newcomers, and that members adopt at varying levels. It consists of things like reading Scripture, daily prayer, working with the poor. This church was in a state of decline in a rapidly urbanizing neighborhood and is now experiencing new life through this vision. She notes that intentional engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in faith practices fostered a renewed sense of identity and mission in congregations. “Engaging practices elevates the sense of intentionality through the congregation that leads to greater vitality and spiritual depth” (Bass, 306).

The church teaches in everything it is and does. It teaches about matters large and small by the way it lives and practices its faith. The church teaches the practice of hospitality by how we welcome, or do not welcome, the stranger. We teach about the place and significance of Scripture by how it is read in worship, by how it is treated in sermons, and by the place it holds in our communal and personal lives.

Use the following questions to identify how your church is teaching Christian practices through its communal life, and how you can utilize the church as an integral element of your curriculum.

1. What Christian practices do you see embodied in your church? What would an analysis of a week’s or month’s schedule disclose about how various church activities embody specific practices?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worship | <input type="checkbox"/> Theological Reflection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Justice | <input type="checkbox"/> Forming Community |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Service | <input type="checkbox"/> Beauty and the Arts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forgiveness | <input type="checkbox"/> Embracing Diversity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healing | <input type="checkbox"/> Honoring the Body |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dying Well | <input type="checkbox"/> Reading the Bible |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Discernment | <input type="checkbox"/> Testimony |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality | <input type="checkbox"/> Stewardship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Finding God
in Everyday
Life | <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer &
Contemplative
Devotional Practices |
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2. How is your congregation already participating in each Christian practice in its life together?
3. Are some of the practices done especially well? Does your congregation have a gift for certain practices?
4. Which practices are missing or broken in your congregation? With what practice does your congregation need help?
5. How are the practices related to one another in this congregation? How does participating in one of them lead people into the others? Or does it?
6. How does what happens in Sunday worship help the gathered people to understand and grow in Christian practices? Do the words, gestures, images, sounds and feel of the liturgy vividly manifest the active presence of God in and for the life of the world and warmly invite worshippers to offer response?

Connection to Faith Formation

1. How is your current faith formation curriculum and programming connecting with your church’s practices?
2. Are Christian practices being intentionally taught in your faith formation curriculum and programs? How well does your church prepare children, youth, adults, and families to participate meaningfully in the church’s practices?
3. Are children, youth, adults, and families engaged in the church’s practices as an integral element of your faith formation curriculum and programs?
4. How does people’s participation in the church’s practices prepare them to engage in the practices in their daily lives, at home and at work?
5. How can you strengthen the connection between faith formation and the church’s practices?

Strategies & Ideas

Christian Practices in Your Church's Curriculum

(This page may be reproduced for use in your church.)

One of the best ways to become intentional about faith formation in Christian practices is to make it a focus of your entire church curriculum. You can begin with practices already present in your faith community and prepare people to participate meaningfully in these practices and to live these practices in their daily lives—at home, work, school. Or you can use the articulation of the Christian practices in *Practicing Our Faith* or *Way to Live* (youth) as the basis of your curriculum plan.

In *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life*, our Lifelong Faith Associates team have developed a learning-living resource around sixteen Christian practices, drawn from *Practicing Our Faith*, which can serve as the basis of a curriculum plan:

- Appreciating Beauty
- Caring for the Body
- Celebrating Life
- Discernment
- Doing Justice
- Dying Well
- Eating Well
- Forgiving
- Hospitality
- Keeping Sabbath
- Managing Household Life
- Participating in Community
- Praying
- Reading the Bible
- Relating
- Serving Others

Make the Connections Intentional: Learning, Worship, Practice, Daily Life

It is important that the curriculum makes intentional connections for a holistic formation in Christian practices, i.e., what is learned in educational settings is reinforced and deepened through worship and engagement in the community's practice, and lived-out in daily life: home, work, and school. The four elements of an integrated curriculum model include: 1) learning, 2) worship, 3) engagement in community practice, and 4) living the practices in daily life.

Here are several ideas for developing a Christian practices curriculum in your church. When you are designing curriculum, educational programs, and learning sessions, use the four elements as a guide for keeping learning connected to worship, practice, and daily life.

1. Develop a Monthly Curriculum Focus

Many churches establish a theme for the month that is carried through all of the educational programs in the church—family, intergenerational and age group settings—as well at Sunday worship. There are lots of ways to do this: 1) you can take one or two practices and make them the focus for the whole year, e.g., Reading the Bible or Praying or Doing Justice and Serving. 2) you can identify several practices and focus on one practice each month, 3) you can research times during the year when the congregation is focused on particular practices (e.g., stewardship) and make them part of the curriculum.

2. Connect to the Lectionary Readings

The Sunday lectionary and church year feasts and seasons provide a framework for organizing a Christian practices curriculum. Discern the Christian practices that are embedded in the annual cycle of Scripture readings and church seasons and schedule educational programs in family, intergenerational and age group settings to prepare people for the Sunday or season. For example Lent can be an opportunity to teach about “Discernment” or “Praying” or “Doing Justice” or “Dying Well.”

3. Embed in Existing Curriculum Units

Analyze existing educational programs for all ages and sacramental preparation programs (Communion, Confirmation) to determine the Christian practices that are or could be taught as part of these units. For example: “Eating Well” and “Keeping Sabbath” at First Communion, “Praying” and “Serving” at Confirmation. A service program or mission trip is an opportunity to teach “Doing Justice,” “Serving,” and “Hospitality.”

4. Target Milestones and Life Transitions

Every milestone presents an opportunity to teach a Christian practice that directly connects to what is happening in the life of the individual or family. For example the many life decisions of the youth and young adult years provide an opportunity for teaching “Discernment.” The beginning of a new life together as a new couple is an opportunity for teaching “Managing Household Life.”

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Program Models for Christian Practices Education

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1. Christian Practice Apprenticeships

Every church has “Practice Mentors” who are living embodiments of a Christian practice, such as service or hospitality or prayer. Churches can structure learning programs around these teachers in individualized and small group settings where mentors can apprentice people who want to learn how to live the Christian practice. For example, if people wanted to learn how to serve people in need at the local homeless shelter, they can accompany the “practice mentor” when he or she works at the shelter, and learn about homelessness and the practice of hospitality and serving others. Each apprenticeship can include a study component with independent reading from the Bible and descriptions of service. This model of mentoring could be applied across the entire church and become integral to all learning programs in the curriculum.

2. Christian Practice Learning Groups

Small group learning provides a supportive setting for learning about a Christian practice, then moving into practice of what has been learned, and concluding with reflection on lived experience (see Teaching Strategies for a methodology to use). Small groups can be organized around a single practice or multiple practices. Practice learning groups can be offered on a variety of practices and at different lengths, times, and places that best fit their lives, such as homes, a local restaurant or coffee shops. A church can publish, in print and online, a whole menu of practice groups, times, and places.

Most of the resources created in *The Practices of Faith Series* have study guides that can be downloaded from the Practicing Our Faith web site: www.practicingourfaith.com.

Living the Good Life Together: A Study of Christian Character in Community (Abingdon Press) is a new series of five, 6-12 week video-and-book small group studies on Christian practices on the following practices:

- *Attentiveness: Being Present*
- *Forgiveness: Letting Go*
- *Intimacy: Pursuing Love*
- *Discernment: Acting Wisely*
- *Hospitality: Risking Welcome*

Each small group study includes:

- Planning Kit (with all of the components)
- Participant Study Guide
- Leader Guide
- DVD (one presentation for each session)

(See www.livingthegoodlifetogether.com for more information about the resources.)

3. Christian Practice Programs

Christian practices can be explored and experienced in a variety of program models. Here are just a few to consider as part of your curriculum.

- **Family and Intergenerational** programs provide an excellent format for exploring and learning Christian practices. The witness of the different age groups, especially older adults, makes for a rich learning environment.
- **Weeklong** extended programs such as “Vacation Bible School” and summer camps can focus on several practices, combining study and hands-on experience.
- **Multi-session courses, workshops, or speaker series** can focus on one or more Christian practices with opportunities for people to experience the practice between sessions.
- **Youth meetings**, weekly or monthly, provide a setting for teaching Christian practices. *Way to Live* includes 16 practices for youth and has session plans for each practice that can be downloaded from www.waytolive.com.
- **Retreats** provide an intensive setting for the development of practices such as “Prayer,” “Discernment,” and “Reading the Bible.”
- **Round table discussions** after Sunday worship provide a setting for exploring the implications of the Scripture readings for practicing faith.
- A **film festival** provides a unique setting to explore Christian practices through the lives and events portrayed in feature films, e.g., exploring “Doing Justice” in the film *Romero* or “Serving” through the film, *Entertaining Angels* (Dorothy Day).
- A **field trip** provides an opportunity to see and experience Christian practices in action, e.g., “Dying Well” at a hospice center, “Serving” at a soup kitchen, “Healing” at a clinic, “Appreciating Beauty” by hiking in a park.

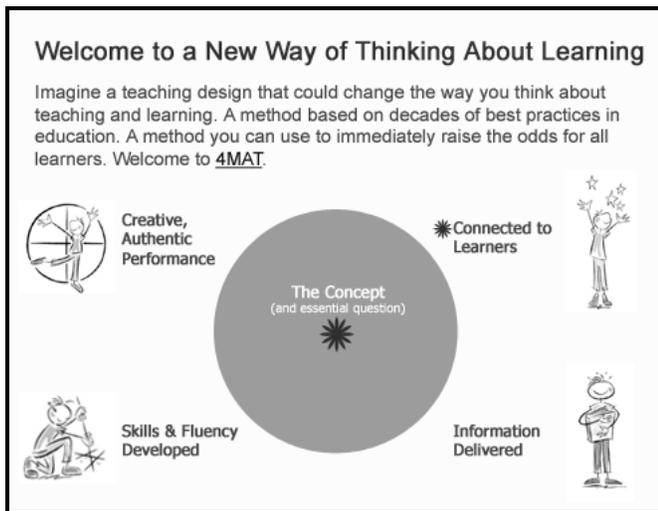
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Teaching for Christian Practice

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The 4MAT Learning Cycle developed by Bernice McCarthy builds upon the best research on learning and incorporates four movements essential to a transformational learning experience. With its emphasis on practice and performance, it is well suited to teaching Christian practices.

The 4MAT Learning Cycle



Each of the core elements of learning—feeling, reflecting, thinking, and doing—elicits a different and crucial question from the learner. All successful learning deals with these four elements and answers four questions: Why? What? How? and If? Real learning moves. . .

- from the personal, perceived connections of Quadrant 1
- to the conceptual knowing of Quadrant 2
- to the practice and tinkering of Quadrant 3
- and then to the creative integration of Quadrant 4

In Quadrant One (Connected to Learners) the union of elements creates personal meaning, the way we question the value of new learning by connecting it to ourselves. The question to be answered is “Why?” Why is this of value to me? Why do I sense the need to know this?

In Quadrant Two (Information Delivered) the union of elements creates conceptualized content, structuring knowledge into significant chunks that

form the essence, the coherence, and the wonder of new ideas. The question to be answered is “What?” What is out there to be known? What do the experts know about this? What is the nature of the knowledge I am pursuing?

In Quadrant Three (Skill and Fluency Developed) the union of elements creates usefulness (and the more immediate the better), the transferability into one’s life, problem solving with the learning. The question to be answered is “How?” How does this work? Will this streamline my tasks? How will this be of use in my life?

In Quadrant Four (Creative and Authentic Performance), the union of elements creates creative integration, the way we adapt the learning into something new and unique. The question to be answered is “What If?” If I use this in my own way, what will happen? What can I create and how will that creation expand, enhance, and maybe even transform the world I know?

McCarthy emphasizes that knowledge must be used. It must operate in one’s life. And because all human beings are unique, we use and then integrate learning in our own inimitable, incomparable ways. What we learn is transformed into a particular use, a distinct way of doing, a matchless refinement of a method, a unique understanding. It is transformed. It becomes for us. It is in the transformation that real understanding happens.

4MAT Resources

McCarthy, Bernice and Dennis McCarthy. *Teaching Around the 4MAT Cycle—Designing Instructive for Diverse Learners with Diverse Learning Styles*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006.

McCarthy, Bernice and Jeannine O’Neill-Blackwell. *Hold On You Lost Me—Using Learning Styles to Create Training that Sticks*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006.

Designing a Christian Practices Learning Program

Here is an application of the 4MAT learning cycle to teaching Christian practices.

1. The Hunger for the Practice

- Illustrating the hunger for the Christian practice in story, music, film, and/or current events.

2. Reflecting on the Hunger

- Guiding the individual or family in identifying how they see the hunger in their own lives and world.
- Helping people become aware of how they already engage in this practice, and the things that distort or hinder the practice.

3. The Christian Practice

- Grounding the Christian practice in the Bible by describing how the biblical story(s) deepen our understanding of the Christian practice.
- Describing what people today, and throughout history, actually do when they are engaged well in a particular practice—people or communities that live the practice with exceptional grace and skill.
- Connecting the Christian practice to human needs and hungers. Identifying how and why it is important to living a meaningful life. Describing the benefits of living the Christian practice—for the person, family, and for the community and world.

Part 4. Bringing it Home: Applying the Christian Practice to Daily Life

- Giving people tools—activities, ideas, resources—for living the Christian practice in their daily lives—at home, at work, at school, and in the world.
- Showing people how to make the Christian practice part of everyday life.
- Guiding people in performing the Christian practice and then reflecting on it.

Part 5. Prayer for the Practice

- Entering more deeply into the practice through prayer and reflection.
- Offering God thanks and praise, and asking for God’s help in living the practice.

Example: “Eating Well”

To illustrate how these five elements are incorporated in a learning resource we have included the “Eating Well” chapter from the upcoming book for households, *Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life* (Lifelong Faith Associates). The content of this chapter and the five elements are the basis for creating learning activities that churches can use to teach the practice.

1. The Hunger for the Practice

- Three stories focusing the hunger people have for eating well: 1) the loss of a family meal, and 2) recovering the meal family

2. Reflecting on the Hunger

- A summary of the research on the power of the family meal today
- A discussion of what makes a regular family meal so hard today
- An activity to reflect on family meals yesterday and today

3. The Christian Practice

- A presentation of Gospel teaching using the Last Supper and the Emmaus Story
- Aspects of eating well illustrated by Gospel stories and practice examples: 1) giving thanks to God for the gift of food, 2) storytelling, 3) sharing food and serving others, 4) celebrating, 5) listening to God’s Word

Part 4. Bringing it Home: Applying the Christian Practice to Daily Life

- A story of the countercultural practice of eating together as a family
- Ideas for getting ready to eat well
- Ideas for enriching the meal

Part 5. Prayer for the Practice

- Praying together

Living Well Resources

To learn more about the *Faith Formation in Christian Practices Project* and the *Living Well* resource go to www.lifelongfaith.com. We are developing learning activities for teaching each practice, as well as ideas and resources for helping people live the Christian practices.