

Deeper **DISCIPLESHIP**



**Bremer - Brisbane Presbytery
Downs Presbytery**

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Practices of Faith

In the late 1990s, Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra each wrote books on the importance of Christian practices for educating Christians in discipleship. Bass' work is part of an ongoing project at Valparaiso University (www.practicingourfaith.org). As the research director for the Lily Foundation, Dykstra went on to help shape the work undertaken by Diana Butler Bass. Dykstra's work is grounded in Aladair MacIntyre's notion of the nature of virtue and how we come to lead virtuous lives. The particular analogy is that learning to be a disciple is like learning to play baseball.

- Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world.
- Practices address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts. However, they are not treasured only for their outcomes... [People] understand what they do as part of the practice of God. They are doing it not just because it works (although they hope it does), but because it is good.
- Practices are done together and over time... a practice has a certain internal feel and momentum.
- Practices possess standards of excellence.
- When we see some of our ordinary activities as Christian practices, we come to perceive how our daily lives are all tangled up with the things God is doing in the world.
- Practices are all interrelated.

Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997

Dykstra claims that people today are hungry for a faith that makes a difference to the way we live. He suggests that we are yearning for a life of faith, not just a knowledge of faith. Discipleship is life in community, and it is as we live out faith in community that we experience the means of grace. So practices of faith are the arena of grace, where we both express our faith and grow in faith.

What would it mean to be a church which defined itself not by our institutional structures, but by our communal faith practices?

Dykstra suggests that education in the practices of faith is multi-faceted. It includes

- exploring the biblical and theological foundations of each practice
- hearing stories about the practice from history and the present
- discussing the ethical implications of the practice
- engaging in the practice alongside 'experts'
- finding the internal rhythm in the practice and where that sits in our daily life
- exploring the practice in our household settings, with those with whom we live

Christly Gestures

Brett Webb-Mitchell, Eerdmans, 2003.

"According to a dictionary, a gesture is a manner of carrying the body; bearing, carriage, deportment; manner of placing the body; position, posture, or attitude, especially in acts of prayer or worship; in early use: the employment of bodily movements, attitudes, expressions of countenance as a means of giving effect to oratory; a movement expressive of thought or feeling. p94

"Because we are part of the body of Christ - physically, intellectually, and spiritually - we are called to perform certain gestures that embody the gospel in our daily lives." p23

"...anywhere Christ's Spirit chooses is a "teaching moment;" a time and place to be taught about being a disciple of the "Jesus-life." p33

"In the body of Christ, our bodies, minds, and spirits are shaped and nurtured, both for our own good as individual members and the common good of the congregation of which we are members. For we see Christ in each person in this body." p89

"... gestures are corporate - learned, practiced, and performed by members of Christ's body. The community of Christ is re-created by the gestures that embody the story of God's gospel. Some gestures are particular for an individual's grace-given gift and service in Christ's body; others are performed in common and in coordination with other members of Christ's body; and there are some gestures that are performed within the context of worshipping God." p90

Because there is a story in the performance of a gesture, this question emerges: Can one separate the story from what is being enacted? The structuralist answer is negative: when one performs something to communicate with others, there is a unity of the cultural story and its enactment that cannot be reduced to one or the other. The story is embodied in the gesture. Performance of the story in gestures is key to remembering whose we are as a people.

Taking part in a communicative or performative act requires a narrative setting, a group of people where the speaker and hearer must be in appropriate relationship with one another for the words to be understood.

The church is God's gesture to the world. Christians do not merely have practices of gestures; rather, our very beings are a gesture of God's doing: we exist because we are God's creative gesture, created to praise and worship him. In a larger sense, gestures are our minds, bodies, and spirits in Christ's mind, body, and spirit

All gestures practiced by Christians are of the church, which is Christ's body. Many gestures are ancient in origin, gestures first performed in the early church as recorded in Scripture, such as the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11) or the singing of psalms (Col. 3); some are no longer commonly practiced among all Christians, for example, the holy kiss. Other gestures are born of the tradition of the church's heritages, such as bowing or genuflecting before the cross of Christ, or the gesture of kneeling as an act of confession and prayer. Other gestures are shaped by a single parish's tradition, which may employ its own theologically laden gestures.

God has a bias toward the poor. Any acts of compassion toward those who are suffering, of healing and comforting the wounded, and of rejoicing with those in celebration are gestures that make an indelible mark on us. Such marks are a combination of a practice and a sign, or what Michel de Certeau regards as a "crossing point between the language of society and the enunciation of faith... surmounting the rupture between the two." The mark can be a gesture or a miracle, a sanctuary or a charismatic priest, or a devotional relic. The gesture as a mark helps focus religious expression on a particular action in which everything is concentrated on the practice itself.

Finally, what are some of the gestures that we practice as servants of Christ? Consider the "charge" given by the minister at the end of the worship service: Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak, and help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit⁴⁸ Each one of the lines in this charge is a Christian community practice; it calls forth a certain gesture that, as it is performed, becomes a distinctive habit marking us as Christians in this world. As in all the other parts of worship, our bodies, minds, and spirits become habituated to a certain posture and to responding in a certain way to the circumstance before us. For example, going out into the world "in peace" means performing a certain gesture of peace.

As Hauerwas says repeatedly, "We practice the peace of Christ which is different than the peace understood in the world." Courage is a virtue learned in the performance of courageous gestures. Holding on to what is good involves both knowing what is good according to the gospel of God and practicing that gesture. "Return no one evil for evil" is clearly a distinctive Christian practice of specific gestures in a world that more often "returns evil for evil." In the end, "to honor all people" and "love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;" are habits that must be performed over time amid the pattern of gestures that boldly remind Christians whose we are: Christ's body.

In performing gestures that are outlined and articulated in the "Charge;" we give flesh to the story of the gospel of God not only in the church but also among the peoples of a disbelieving world. Clearly, we need to hear and see the words of Scripture made visible in the Christian community every week, as we learn and perform the faith-filled, grace-lined gestures that are becoming the habits of our lives. In exercising the gestures of faith over a period of time, in various settings and among different people, we will become more astute about knowing which gestures to perform when, and perhaps witness the unleashing of the Holy Spirit in the world through the power of the simplest but most meaningful gestures. It will often be the simplest gesture, well rehearsed, that may embolden us to be the body of Christ when we feel most insecure about our actions

The gestures we practice as Christ's body embody God's story, giving it a certain kind of flesh and blood, muscle and sinew, that involve a movement of mind, body, and spirit in the world today. The implication is that, when the body of Christ tells the story of God, it may be heard either in the small voice of a child in the name of the church or in the action of an entire congregation the church tells its story by first comprehending that it is the story of Christ incarnate, and then by embodying Christ's story in the human circumstances of everyday life.

The gestures of Christ's people help us understand that people, not texts, can mean things. Scripture is alive in the gestures performed by a community.

Growing in the Life of Faith Craig Dykstra	The Godbearing Life Kenda Creasy Dean & Ron Foster	Christianity for the Rest of Us Diana Butler Bass	Practicing Our Faith Dorothy Bass	Dissident Discipleship David Augsburger
suffering with and for our neighbours	community: bread breaking	beauty	shaping communities	radical attachment (core Christology)
carrying out specific acts of faithful service and witness	compassion: pain taking	justice	household economics	stubborn loyalty (solidarity in community)
interpreting together the Scriptures and the history of the church's experience	teaching and nurturing: wave making	healing	healing	tenacious serenity (willing obedience)
telling the Christian story to one another	witness: claim staking	testimony	testimony	habitual humility (unpretentious personhood)
confessing, forgiving and becoming reconciled	dehabituating: rhythm breaking	contemplation	keeping sabbath	resolute nonviolence (the way of the Cross)
worshipping God together	worship: praise making	worship	singing our lives	concrete service (concern for others)
tolerating failures and encouraging one another's vocations	Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations Robert Schnase	discernment	discernment	authentic witness (faithful presence)
giving generously and receiving gratefully	extravagant generosity	diversity	honouring the body	subversive spirituality (dissident discipleship)
praying – together and by ourselves	risk-taking mission and service	reflection	forgiveness	
providing hospitality and care to others, strangers, enemies	radical hospitality	hospitality	hospitality	
listening and talking attentively	passionate worship		dying well	
struggling together to understand the context in which we live	intentional faith development		saying yes and saying no	
criticising and resisting the powers that destroy humanity and creation				
working together to maintain and create life-sustaining social structures that accord with God's will				

Marks of Faith Maturity

Eugene Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.

- Trusting and believing in God
- Experiencing the fruits of faith
- Integrating faith and life
- Seeking spiritual growth
- Nurturing faith in community
- Holding life-affirming values
- Advocating social change
- Acting and serving

From "Effective Christian Education", Search Institute, 1990 - a national US study across 6 mainline denominations - Disciples of Christ, ELCA, PCUSA, UCC, UM.

UCA Assembly Christian Education Reference Committee, 2010

Christian education involves intentional nurture, teaching and learning individually and in community for lifelong Christian discipleship in local and global contexts.

Priority needs in Christian education for our church:

- Learning to live faithfully as Christian disciples in a multi-cultural and multi-faith world.
- Learning how to reflect theologically and act in response to the big issues of the day.
- Understanding core Christian beliefs and practices including those central to the Uniting Church.
- Recruiting and equipping teachers/leaders to nurture children and young people in the Christian faith.
- Creating appropriate learning opportunities, particularly for children and young people, to grow in faith.
- Assisting leaders to develop inclusive learning communities able to share faith stories, insights and challenges on their Christian journey.
- Developing and maintaining a Christian ethos within UCA Schools and Agencies.
- Expanding our understanding of the Bible and our capacity to interpret it for our lives.
- Developing our capacity to articulate our faith with others.
- Fostering leadership for fresh expressions of being church.
- Helping people discern their gifts and be equipped to offer them in service, leadership or ministry.
- Exploring the spiritual dimension of life and ways to enhance our Christian spirituality.

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN PRACTICES

	Practice #1	Practice #2
Worship or Seasonal		
Bible		
Group Life		
Home Life		
Online Life		
Wider Community		
Other (eg. Mentoring)		