

Christian Practices

are things that the Christian faith community does together, repeatedly, over time, in the church and in public living, at home, in the household and in work and leisure settings – things that are passed from one generation to the next; things ancient and modern, things and actions which hold deep meaning and which help the community to make sense of its experiences and traditions – which when taken together form a whole way of life.

Christian Practices are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us. They are places where the power of God is experienced. In the end, these are not ultimately our practices but forms of participation in the practice of God. Craig Dykstra

Practices and the call to God's mission

Practicing congregations embody the faith of Christ in one or more distinctive practices. Practicing congregations have developed a reputation for expressing their call to God's mission through a particular practice or group of practices. *For example:* Hospitality has become the hallmark practice for some church communities, while peacemaking, attention to social justice or advocacy and resistance have are typical of other congregations. Other congregations have focused on worship and the sacramental life as the deep and abiding practice that typifies their life.

Christian practices and spiritual disciplines

The various practices of Christian faith are communal, not personal. They are to be taken together as the practices of a whole way of life. Personal practices are better considered as personal spiritual disciplines. The difference between a spiritual discipline and a practice is the shared communal meaning embodied in a practice, and the real connection to the community that is evoked by participation in a practice.

Disciplines can arise from practices. They might also contribute to a particular Christian practice. Central to the Christian practices are the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. However, there are many other practices that shape us into communities of faithful disciples.

Categories of Christian practice

Kenda Creasy Dean (*The Godbearing Life*, Abingdon, 1999) groups Christian practices into six categories.

These are:

Compassion – pain taking. We can share in the pain of others. We take on their suffering, loving through the pain, exercising extraordinary compassion. We share

others' joys, sorrows and distress. These practices assist us to take on an 'others-centered' life-style. They are not intended to 'fix problems' another person might experience. They will help us journey with the other person as a compassionate companion; to bear the other's life in our own lived experience.

Teaching and nurture – wave making. Reading, studying and discussing the scriptures, exploring Christian and biblical scholarship, listening to and telling stories of faith... We bring our life experiences and the biblical teaching, traditions and teaching of the church together to make meaning. These practices all help us to make sense of our experience and develop the meaning of following Jesus' Way.

Worship – praise making. Worship is the primary practice of Christian living. Worship and prayer are dispositions that orientate us towards God. They deliberately re-order the way things are. Worship claims order from chaos, engaging us in a mystical, restorative relationship with God.

Communion – bread breaking. True communities exist on practices that include intimacy, forgiveness, speaking the truth in love, trust, compassion, and deep, abiding friendships. The core sacramental practices of Baptism and Holy Communion unite us with Jesus Christ and each other.

Witness – claim staking. Struggling to understand and address the social and personal issues that impact the community. Truth telling. Taking a stand to resist policies, programs and behaviour that alienate, marginalize and oppress. Testifying to God's saving grace in our own lives. Working for restorative justice. Practices such as these give voice to the Christ-like hope that is within us.

Rhythm breaking – practices of habit breaking. Self-denial, living simply, reconciliation and restoration. These practices seek to confront and undo the destructive influences of contemporary living. Instead, we favour the values and commitments God calls us to as we take following Jesus Christ seriously.