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The practice of faith

The book “Practicing Our Faith” grew from an academic examination of Christian practices to passionate advocacy of them. Twelve years after publication, it’s still having an impact.

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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It was supposed to be a small book, one that would likely travel little further than the circle of contributors that produced it. But as scholars and theologians from different backgrounds began writing “Practicing Our Faith,” something happened.

Instead of just describing Christian practices -- hospitality, testimony, discernment, forgiveness and others -- the 13 contributors decided to advocate them. So what had been intended as a scholarly examination of Christian practices became an instruction book and a passionate call for their inclusion in people’s daily lives.

“That was the switch,” said Dorothy Bass, director of Valparaiso University’s Project on Education and Formation of People in Faith, and editor of the book. “And once that happened ...we were talking about the embodied substance of everyday life. Not interior things, but active, community things. And the book just took off.”

And it has traveled nonstop through church circles for the last 12 years, read and used by clergy, laypeople, denominational leaders, seminarians and others. Jossey-Bass, publisher of “Practicing Our Faith” and two spinoff books, has sold 100,000 copies, making it one of its most successful books. The Valparaiso Project also has a [website](#) with resources and information about Christian practices.

The book defines Christian practices as “things Christian people have done together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ.” Bass and her colleagues, who include Craig Dykstra of Lilly Endowment Inc. and L. Gregory Jones, dean of Duke Divinity School, believe Christian practices are done in community. This is true even when they are performed alone, as with prayer or devotion -- because the performer of the practice is aware that others in their family of faith are performing them, too. They also take place over time, both with regularity from day to day and in history. In this way, the contemporary performer is linked to the ancient people of the Bible.

Principles & Practices

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“The idea that practices address fundamental human needs encourages practitioners to consider what such needs truly are, in distinction from the needs the culture encourages us to have,” Bass said. “This grounds us and our practices in a basic sense of true selfhood, which includes not just our spirit, but also our body and our relationships with others.”

John Witvliet, director of Calvin College’s Institute for Christian Worship, said the book found a receptive audience.

“It sparked a small movement, a whole way of thinking,” he said. “That book really crystallized the insight that the Christian faith is not just a set of cognitive beliefs, but a way of life. A way of life that is communal, not just individualistic; not just beliefs but also practices, actions, attitudes, dispositions. It has been a stimulus to a holistic, communal way of thinking.”

Bass said the book was a reclaiming of tradition. In each chapter, the authors looked to Scripture and to the ways in which our ancestors in faith lived out these practices.

She knew she and her colleagues had tapped into something when the book’s chapter on managing one’s time to observe the Sabbath was excerpted in both *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* -- in the same month.

“We realized that we are the ones who now bear the tradition into our own time and we need to draw on our deepest roots while also being alert to what is going on in our world so we can help the faith live today,” Bass said.