

Session 6: Faith Practices That Transform

GUIDING QUESTION	In light of what we've learned about our region and faith community, which faith practices might be most useful for our congregation to claim?
BACKGROUND READING	<i>Christianity for the Rest of Us</i> by Diana Butler Bass (HarperOne, 2006). See also "Intentionality, Practice, and Vitality" by Diana Butler Bass at www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=5280 . For more on Christian faith practices visit: www.lifelongfaith.com or www.practicingourfaith.org .
PREPARATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Handout: "Faith Practices that Transform" (2 sides)• Bonus handout: "Reflections on Faith Practices from Salmon Nation Participants" (2 sides) -- use as background and/or distribute to participants• Refreshments• Whiteboard or newsprint and markers• Paper and pencils• Items for altar/worship area• If you've created lists of the gifts, yearnings and needs of the people in this region over the course of the class, post these on the walls.
GATHERING 10 minutes	As people enter, serve them refreshments. As your group enjoys their doughnut holes and sparkling cider (or whatever you decide to serve) engage them in a discussion about the Christian faith practice of hospitality. According to www.practicingourfaith.org , hospitality "is the practice of providing a space to take in a stranger. It also encompasses the skills of welcoming friends and family to our tables, to claim the joy of homecoming." Here are some discussion questions taken from this website: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How are strangers welcomed to your faith community?• Can you identify individuals in your midst who seem to practice hospitality especially well?• How are strangers invited to share their gifts within your congregation?• What architectural features of your building -- doors, furniture, accessibility ramps, gathering spaces -- speak welcome, or don't?

WELCOMING ACTIVITY 5 minutes	Share the guiding question (above) for today's session, then have participants share their name and one aspect or activity of your congregation which is especially meaningful to them.
OPENING WORSHIP 10 minutes	Reflect on the following passage using a form of <i>lectio divina</i> (sacred reading) as described below. This is an ancient faith practice being rediscovered in many Christian communities. If your group is very large, divide into smaller groups of 5 or 6 for this process. (For more on <i>lectio divina</i> , visit www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html .)
Isaiah 43:19-21	
<p>I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?</p> <p>I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.</p> <p>²⁰The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,</p> <p>²¹the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.</p>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Begin with a time of silence b. Prayerfully, read the passage aloud, as listeners are attentive to a word or phrase that is especially meaningful to them. c. Silence for 1-2 minutes. Each person silently repeats the word or phrase that attracts them. d. Each person is invited to share aloud their word or phrase without crosstalk or elaboration. e. Have a different person read the same passage aloud, asking the group to reflect on “where does this passage touch my life today?” f. Silence for 2-3 minutes as the group reflects on the above question . g. Each person is invited to share their response to the question without crosstalk or elaboration. h. Read the passage a third time, while asking the group to reflect on: “From what I have heard and shared, what is God calling me to do or be this week? How does God invite me to change?” i. Silence for 2 to 3 minutes, while inviting the group to reflect on the above questions. j. Each person is invited to share their response to the question without crosstalk. k. End with a prayer l. If you desire, give people a few minutes to share their reactions to this method of reflecting on the Bible. 	

LARGE GROUP ACTIVITY 10 minutes	Hand out “Faith Practices that Transform” and read the opening paragraph. Discuss the definition and value of faith practices using information from the bonus handout “Reflections on Faith Practices” as well. Briefly go through the practices. Ask participants which practices are a part of your congregation, and give examples of these. Are some of the practices done especially well?
SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION 10 minutes	Split into groups of 4 to 5 and assign a recorder. Ask groups to respond to the following and record their responses: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What are the faith practices of your church that speak to the yearnings and needs of people in this place? (This may include faith practices that aren't listed on the handout.) Based on what you've discovered in this class about spirituality in the NW and your congregation, what two or three faith practices would you like to see emphasized or added?
SHARE RESPONSES IN THE LARGE GROUP 10 minutes	See if one or two items rise to the top of the list. Explore how/if to implement these changes such as talking to pastor, presentation to council, forming a new small group, etc.
CLOSING 5 minutes	If time, have participants share one faith practice they are most drawn to that they would like to further explore or participate in. End by reading Isaiah 43:19-21 again.

Faith Practices That Transform

Diana Butler Bass defines congregational faith practices as “the things people do together in community for the sake of God and the world.” In her book, Christianity for the Rest of Us (Harper 2006), she tells the story of moderate and progressive mainline Protestant congregations who found new vitality through such practices. Through her research, certain consistent congregational faith practices emerged as central to congregations seeking to rediscover authentic Christian faith and witness today. These practices, listed below, seem to speak to the spiritual longings of many in the Northwest – whether affiliated or not with congregational life.

- **Hospitality** – not a religious cocktail party, not a program, not just a smile and a name tag, but truly welcoming the stranger; openly risking change and welcoming it; creating ‘free space’ where change can take place.
- **Discernment** – open to the work of the Spirit; listening for God’s call; relying on the human capacity to hear, see, touch and feel God; a waiting exercise of the whole community; opening us to redirection.
- **Healing** – what will make us whole? what will put all things in harmony? how does God want to express shalom here? “Longing for healing is not flaky, idiosyncratic, or New Age – it is an inchoate human desire to experience shalom, God’s dream of created wholeness” (p. 111).
- **Contemplation** – open for prayer; unmediated access to the divine spirit in communion with others. If the 21st century is marked by noise, where’s the silence? Surprisingly, silence connects in ways that surround-sound 24/7 can’t.
- **Testimony** – talking the walk; bearing witness in words to the presence of the living Lord; God is still speaking (through the people).
- **Diversity** – not political correctness but people forming community; losing homogeneity and gaining complex wisdom; church as “a place where people of many backgrounds and ages encounter a God that is alive, personal, powerful and full of love for all people” (p. 147)
- **Justice** – the hands and feet that embody the virtues of the servant community in the world; the Christian calling in everyday life; washed in baptism to serve the world (p. 163); not charity.
- **Worship** – not reflecting on God but experiencing God; lost in wonder, love and praise; ritual symbols, words and actions that have power to transform.
- **Reflection** – thinking theologically; exegeting life and faith; asking questions; linking the life of the mind and heart together; intellectual curiosity with humility.
- **Beauty** – knowing God through art, music, drama, poetry, icons, textiles, vestments, windows; “...for those created in the image of God, a sign of their faithfulness, a sign of their engagement with the Spirit, will be creativity” (Bass, p. 214).

— Based on a handout compiled by James Norlie for Luther House Month 2008

Faith Practices that Transform Additional Quotes

Craig Dykstra's definition of Christian faith practices:

"Christian practices are not activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather, they 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."

— From www.practicingourfaith.org

"Practices heal the division between thinking and doing (which many modern people have thought are separate) and show how much each is related to the other. On the one hand, practices are forms of doing: A child or adult can participate in a practice such as hospitality through warm acts of welcome, even without comprehending the biblical stories and theological convictions that encourage and undergird this practice. Most of our practicing takes place at this unreflective level, as we go about our daily living. At the same time, practices are not only behaviors. They are meaning-full. Within a practice, thinking and doing are inextricably knit together. Those who offer hospitality come to know themselves, others, and God in a different way, and they develop virtues and dispositions that are consistent with this practice. When people participate in a practice, they are embodying a specific kind of wisdom about what it means to be a human being under God, even if they could not readily articulate this wisdom in words."

— From www.practicingourfaith.org

Reporting on her research on vital mainline churches, Diana Butler Bass writes:

Since Alban's publication of *The Practicing Congregation* in 2004, when I first wrote about my research on vital mainline churches, hundreds of clergy groups and church leadership gatherings have invited me to share with them insights on what makes for a good congregation. At every gathering, I include the project's key finding: "Congregations that intentionally engage Christian practices are congregations that experience new vitality." The sentence combines three components: intentionality, practice, and vitality. Further defining them, I point out that intentionality involves choice and taking responsibility for individual and communal spirituality; that practice is not a program, rather it is a meaningful way of life; and that vitality cannot be measured in terms of numbers as it means spiritual health and maturity. A vital congregation is one where all people—including the pastor—are growing members of an organic community of spiritual practice.

— From "Intentionality, Practice, and Vitality" by Diana Butler Bass,
<http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=5280>

Reflections on Faith Practices From Salmon Nation Participants

Reflecting on our conversation with sociologist Mark Shibley, Melinda Wagner writes about the role of faith practices (rituals) in her congregation:

I appreciated the sociological definition of religion: “A means for people to make life meaningful. Its purpose is to connect people with God and with one another (to make meaning and make community). Sociologically speaking, religion is about the cultural systems, beliefs, and ritual practices organized around what people find to be sacred.”

It leads me to ask, how do we do these things, as Lutherans? How do we connect people with God? With one another? What would change if a pastor focused on these two essential elements and let some other things go?

The definition also causes me to reconsider the value of rituals in congregational life. In our congregation, rituals include the Sunday gathering of worship, sacraments, coffee hour with Happy Birthday in Swedish... There are also rituals of study groups, women's circle, Council meetings, serving together at Loaves & Fishes, etc. There are life passage rituals of baptism, Sunday School, acolyting, confirmation, marriage, funeral... These rituals are probably more powerful and necessary for my people than I realize. Something that could be seen as simple or even boring routine could also be seen as a ritual that makes meaning.

— from Melinda Wagner, “Reflections on our time with Mark Shibley,” Feb. 12, 2007

Reflecting on our conversation with religious sociologist Diana Butler Bass, Aaron Couch writes about the need in our region to be intentional about faith practices:

One thing that Diana Butler Bass said that jumped out at me (because it is so consistent with everything I've experienced) was describing Trinity Episcopal Church as an “intentional community of Christian practice.” My experience with First Immanuel Lutheran Church in Portland (which is different from my experience elsewhere in the country) has been that the factors that could be assumed to support Christian identity and church participation in other places, and here in the past (belonging to a Swedish community, for which Lutheran identity was part of the mix; belonging to a network of extended family relationships, for which church membership was expected; supporting and attending a congregation out of a sense of duty, or what is right) are no longer significant at this time in the Pacific Northwest. What does matter is Christian faith that is upfront about itself, that doesn't apologize or try to be something other than it is; specifically, a Christian faith that is joyfully owned and believed. In this setting, the change-over is underway, as we shift from being a community that could make assumptions about the bonds of family and faith identity that brought people to church, to become a community made up of many individuals with little or no previous experience of Christian faith, who are finding something of great value. In the church's worship and fellowship, they experience joyful belonging to the people of God. In the church's proclamation, they receive the gift of God's Word that offers hope and a sense of purpose. In the church's serving, they discover an experience

that adds depth and meaning and richness to their lives. All of it, though, needs to be *intentional*. I found Diana's writing to be helpful in directing my vision toward a variety of aspects of congregational life that can be a source of faith-shaping vitality.

— from Aaron Couch, "What I learned from Diana Butler Bass"

Reflecting our conversation with religion professor Sam Torvend, Martha Maier writes about some faith practices that might be particularly meaningful to those in the Northwest:

Increasing numbers of people are drawn to apophatic* prayer forms such as Centering Prayer where the focus is on "letting go and letting God," instead of word-laden approaches. The increasing use of the labyrinth for prayer reflects this focus as well – one is often counseled to "let go of the details of one's life" while walking to the center of the path.

I can see where an apophatic faith may bode well for the environment. If our focus was on "letting go," this might extend to our material life and accumulation of possessions. If our faith is more about letting go of our conceptions of God and less on accumulating all the answers, maybe we will see the benefit as well of letting go of our need to accumulate so much stuff. This could help reduce our carbon footprint, which is of concern to us green types in the Northwest.

Sam Torvend encouraged us to look to our history to see what gems are present for our future. I'm sure there is much apophatic theology which can be claimed from our Lutheran and Christian past – the theology of the cross is one example. Another example is claiming/reclaiming icons which could help us understand and reverence more of the deep symbols we need for a healthy and compassionate society. More focus on the mystical/apophatic could re-enchant our worldview.

*Apophatic: of or relating to the belief that God can be known to humans only in terms of what God is not

— from Martha Maier, Samuel Torvend Reflections, January 2008

In his reflections on our conversation with Shibley, John Rosenberg writes about the limitations of our current ways of practicing the faith:

I don't believe that our current practice of church life speaks very meaningfully to most Pacific Northwestern "non-affiliates" especially younger ones in the 18-30 year-old range – people like our neighbors and our kids. [Question from my 24 year-old daughter who is passionate about justice: "Dad, why is the ELCA STILL arguing about welcoming gay and lesbian people?"] We seem to be the prisoners of an institutional structure that is designed to preserve and conserve tradition and stability in an era that calls for flexibility and imagination. Something will have to give and I think it will be our structures. "Membership" in a corporately structured institution and "discipleship" in a community of pilgrims and followers of Jesus are not the same things, as our children are among the first to tell us. Something will need to give if we are to adapt to this brave new world and I sincerely believe (and hope) that it will be our structures. I don't know what the shape of church-life will be but the "present form" is surely dying before our eyes and I'm not sure it's good stewardship for our best and most highly trained leaders to continue trying to prop it up.

— from John Rosenberg, "Reflections on our Conversation with Mark Shibley," May 5, 2007