

# 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

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## 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](http://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](http://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>