Growing in the Life of Faith, by Craig Dykstra

reviewed by Martin E. Marty in the October 13, 1999 issue

Sadly, astonishingly, suicidally—pick your adverb—mainstream Protestants, Roman Catholics and not a few evangelicals have for decades neglected Christian education and nurture. They have all but given up on trying to pass on knowledge of the faith, and they have neglected the spiritual health of children, the young and not a few of the adults who give lip service to the idea of growth in knowledge and discipleship.

Craig Dykstra does not make the points that would give depth to those sweeping generalizations, though it would not have been hard to do so. Many divinity schools and theological seminaries have let their departments of education atrophy. Denominations do maintain departments for youth work and they publish elaborate and often sophisticated materials for Sunday and parochial schools. They attract tens of thousands of youths to summer assemblies. But few back these endeavors with original research.

In that barren landscape, a few thinkers and doers are emerging to prevent further damage and to help churches again emphasize Christian nurture. A duo of Hoosiers, Dorothy Bass at Valparaiso University and Craig Dykstra at Indianapolis's Lilly Endowment, are engaged in a multiyear project on Christian practice. Bass's *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* has been used widely in church circles. The whole concept of "practice" is coming back, inspired by the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Robert Wuthnow advocated it as an element of spirituality in *After Heaven*. Dykstra defines it and sets forth some of the main ideas: "A practice is an ongoing, shared activity of a community of people that partly defines and partly makes them who they are."

Dykstra began sounding this theme in his years as a seminary professor. He now finds ways to develop it as vice-president for religion at the Lilly Endowment. This book is not the systematic work one hopes for from him—most chapters were born as lectures to ministers and other educators—but his thought is so consistent that one can get a clear sense of what he is after.

Dykstra seeks a culture that is hospitable to or comprehending of churches that want to equip and inform their members, to care for the nurture of their souls. And he does so by advocating a theme we associate with Aristotle: A good person habitually does good things through good means toward good ends. The word "habitually" is key here. It means gained through practice. Theory that does not get worked out in regular practice will fade into abstraction, and practice ungrounded in thought will become mechanical.

While Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler and others have traced or hypothesized stages of growth that derive from laboratory models, Dykstra believes that the development of Christian nurture, rather than following formal "stages," relates to themes integral to the Christian story itself.

Dykstra lives easily with the Calvinist tradition and can help those who have been influenced by Calvinism but have not been reflective about it. But Catholics and non-Calvinist Protestants will be enriched rather than alienated by these tracings back to Geneva.

The author groups his essays under several broad themes: Hunger, Life, Practices, Places and Signs. He could also have used a theme that appears on the first page, a borrowing from novelist Flannery O'Connor: the idea of trying "to embody mystery through manners." Here, mystery refers to the depth of Christian faith and manners to practices—ways of being and thinking and doing. Dykstra picks up on a favorite theologian, Horace Bushnell, who hoped for a kind of "organic unity of the family" bonded by "character, feelings, spirit, and principles [that] must propagate themselves." He carries this theme over to congregations and other communities.

Dykstra discerns a hunger for "daily bread"—spiritual food—even if most church members and individual seekers do not always recognize the hunger or know what to do about it. He has little use for "pop gnosticisms" such as "codependency" that serve as "proxy diction for telling the tale of redemption." That sentence goes about as far as Dykstra gets into polemics.

His does not simply talk about faith in general; this is God-centered discourse, as anything that lays claim to the name of Calvin should be. The book goes to deep resources for refreshment, but it never feels as if Dykstra is visiting antique shops or museums. His chapter on "Growing in Faith" may be the heart of the book. He lists 14 "practices that appear consistently throughout the tradition and that are

particularly significant for Christians today." They provide a good agenda for congregants and their leaders who want growth in something other than numbers or budgets. Dykstra refers to Eugene Peterson's judgment on pastors who become mere shopkeepers. They are concerned with "how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money."

Christian practice has a certain "strangeness," a "peculiarity" that is an asset, not a handicap. This strangeness gets practiced in congregations, favored locales for nurture in Dykstra's book. He accents the role of families, however defined, and youth, however attracted, in such settings. Other chapters deal with theological education and other forms of higher education—locales that may not seem decisive in congregational and family life but need attention.

We are told that Michelangelo's last written words, scribbled to his assistant, were, "Draw, Antonio, draw, draw, draw." From Dykstra, and many others who promote Christian growth the directive is "Practice, practice, practice."