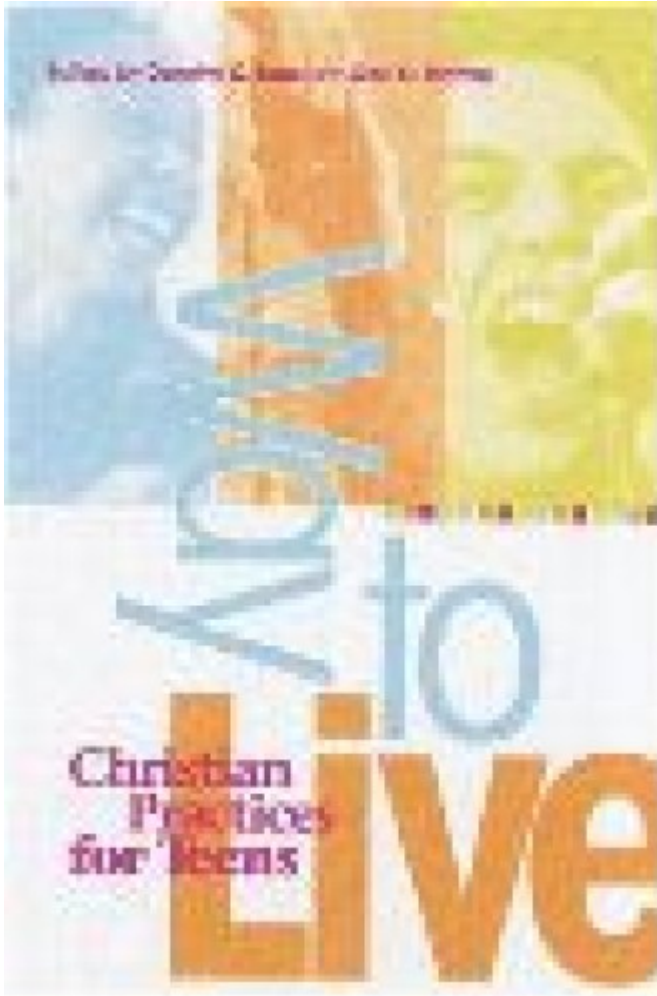


Habits for young hearts

By [Mark DeVries](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens

Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds.
Upper Room



Soul Shaper

Tony Jones
Zondervan

When I began working in youth ministry in the late 1970s, the word “discipleship” was everywhere. In fact, the noun “disciple” increasingly was used as a verb, as in “I am being disciplined.” It was understood that “discipling youth” referred to a process involving leaders meeting one-on-one or with groups of students to “disciple” them. For the vast majority of youth leaders, discipleship was essentially about getting kids to come to the right kinds of small-group meetings where they could be “discipled.”

Now, 25 years later, we are witnessing a subtle yet profound shift in the understanding of what it means to nurture youth toward maturity in Christ. *Soul Shaper* and *Way to Live* crystallize this shift. These books do not yet present a “model for youth ministry,” but they do invite both youth workers and students into

the imaginative process of exploring how an emphasis on spiritual practices might shape the entire enterprise.

The focus has moved toward training youth in specific “spiritual practices,” ordinarily experienced outside the context of the group. Many proponents of this approach rely heavily on classic spiritual disciplines, believing them to be the most effective means of helping students create a “space for God” where they can ask the most central questions about themselves and God and take seriously and personally the claims of the gospel. Each practice provides students with an access point, a way to create such a space. In an overwhelmingly busy, activity-driven culture, is it any wonder that many young people long for this?

Soul Shaper and *Way to Live* have grown out of a surprisingly convergent process which now has both evangelical and mainline churches singing the same song, often without knowing it. For many in the mainline church, the Youth Ministry Spirituality Project based at San Francisco Theological Seminary provided the first introduction to the idea of moving spiritual practices center stage in youth ministry. For evangelical youth workers, Doug Field’s *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry* offered a similar introduction. In both these resources, the focus began to shift away from discipleship *meetings* to discipleship *practices* (the word most frequently used by mainliners) or *habits* (the term more popular among evangelicals).

It’s not that these new approaches abandon youth meetings. Rather, the meetings have a different focus. Youth meetings become times for students to learn and experiment with particular practices and to be challenged to go on with them on their own. Together the students then process their own experiences (or nonexperiences) of God and develop a shared vocabulary of faith.

Weary of party-and-pizza-centered youth programs, lots of us had begun searching for alternative models by the mid-’90s. A number of books hinted at the power of spiritual practices, but with the arrival of *Soul Shaper* and *Way to Live*, the emphasis that had been bubbling beneath the surface became explicit.

From the moment you pick up *Soul Shaper* you can’t help realizing that this is a different kind of book. Even its unusual shape, which unfortunately sometimes makes the book hard to read or pack, seems designed to say “prepare for the unexpected.” But Tony Jones’s writing is seamless, personal, engaging and historically accurate. His book is an accessible introduction for neophytes like me

who know very little about things like Ignatian spiritual disciplines.

Jones unpacks and demystifies practices like the Jesus prayer, spiritual direction and *lectio divina*. His explanation of the use of icons provides a textured and sensitive introduction to this practice, particularly for Protestants. He makes the spiritual practices inviting, in addition to offering suggestions for how such exercises might be appropriately introduced to youth.

Jones is careful to caution his programming-ideas-hungry readers to avoid inflicting spiritual practices on young people without first making these exercises a part of the leaders' own lives. He repeatedly emphasizes that for these exercises to work with students, they must first be woven into the youth worker's life. At least for this reviewer, the book accomplished just what it set out to do. It got me experimenting with various approaches for giving attention to the rhythms of God in my life. I found myself fascinated with exploring a menu of practices for encountering God, for self-examination and for developing a vocabulary of faith.

Bass and Richter use a very different approach. Each of their chapters is coauthored by at least one adult and at least one youth. In fact, the book itself has grown out of an intentional process that involved bringing these authors together for extended getaways to experience and create a "way to live" as they discerned the book's content and makeup. The challenges of pulling together more than 30 authors had to be enormous, and the process itself bears witness to the vision and dogged faithfulness of its architects.

There are peaks in the book that absolutely soar. The chapter on "Stuff," by Mark Yaconelli and Alexx Campbell, is a youth-sensitive, engaging and challenging treatment of materialism that invites readers into the spiritual practices of simplicity and giving. The chapter on creativity by Carol Lakey Hess and her daughter, Marie, stands out as one of the places where the vision for this project worked beautifully. Their lighthearted interplay, storytelling and memorable images invite even the most curmudgeonly readers into discovering their creativity.

But at times the multiple-author format becomes disjointed and frustrating. In some chapters the stories are few, the reading laborious. And I did wonder how many teenagers would wade through a 300-page book that took me more than two months to read.

Way to Live voices a more “mainline” emphasis on “justice issues”—an emphasis often ignored in popular youth ministry books. Almost every chapter challenges readers to consider all their decisions—political, social or monetary—from a perspective that takes seriously the biblical priority of attention to the poor and oppressed. I was immensely grateful for this emphasis, but disappointed that so little was done to make it winsome and compelling. A sociopolitical homogeneity often was assumed. The writers did not seem aware that many readers might need a bit of convincing before they could embrace wholeheartedly the book’s justice concerns.

These two books launch a valuable new way of thinking about youth ministry for both youth leaders and students. Too often students have graduated from youth ministry with little or no foundation in how to maintain their own lives of faith. Jones, Bass and Richter are clearly taking us in the right direction.