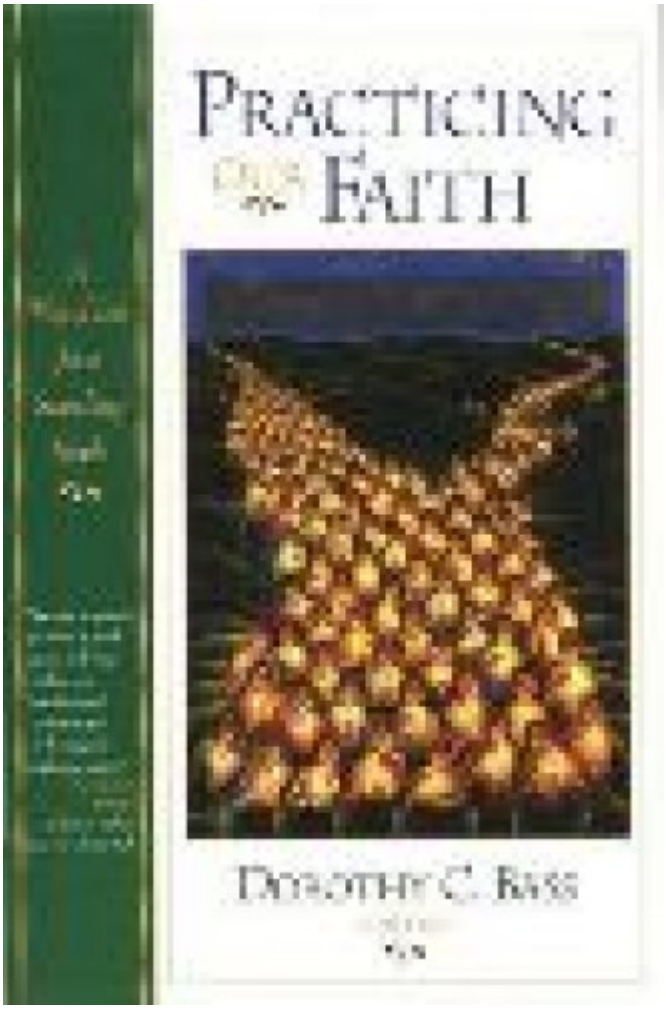
A way to live

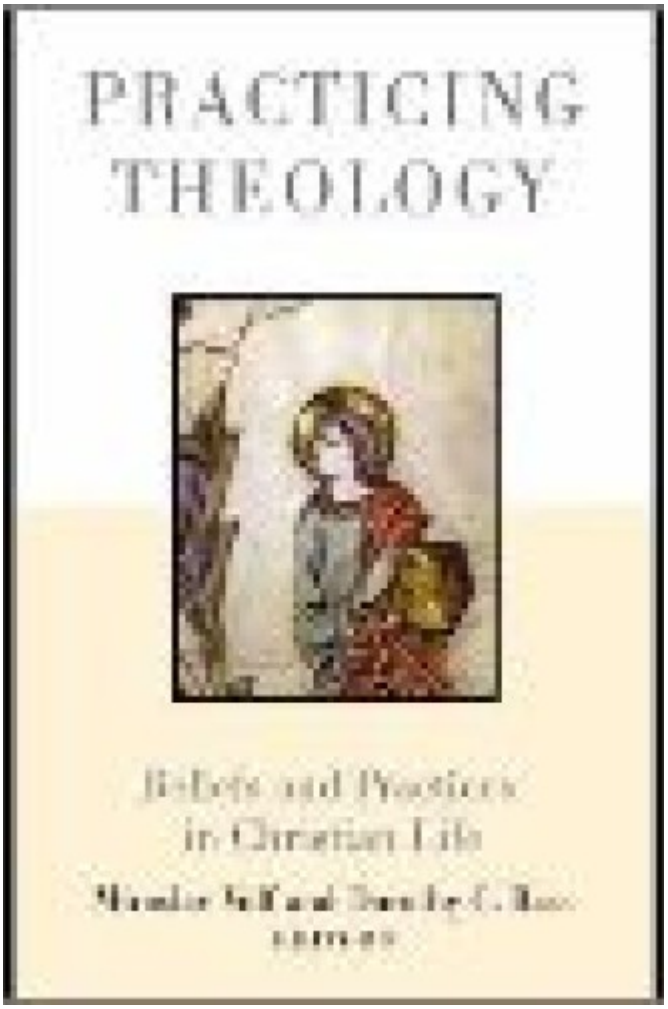
By Trudy Bush in the February 24, 2004 issue

In Review



Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People

Dorothy C. Bass, ed.
Jossey-Bass



Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life

Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds.
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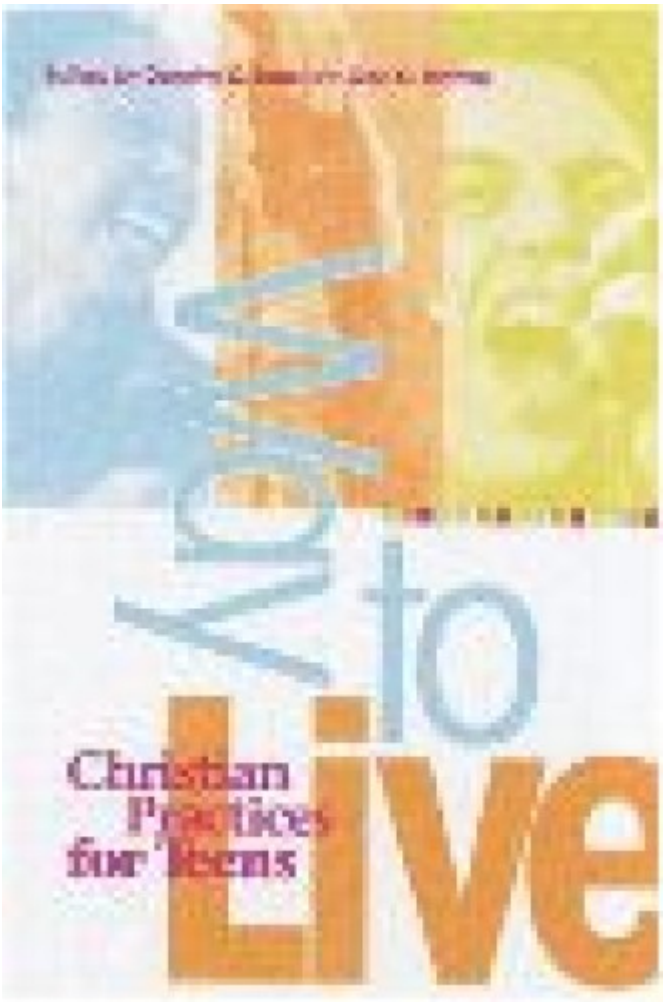

Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens

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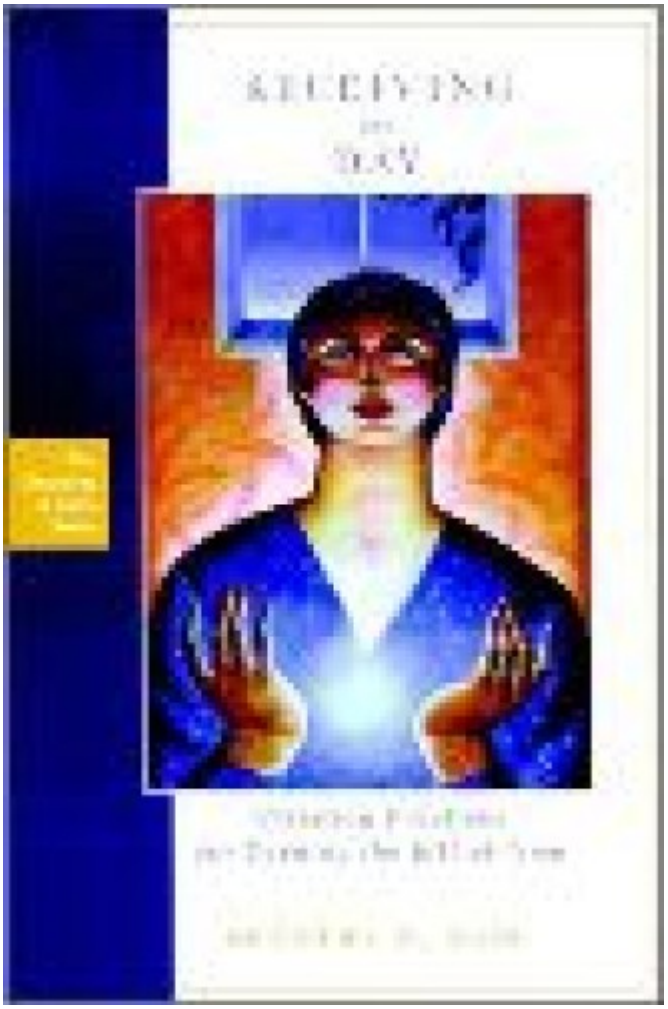
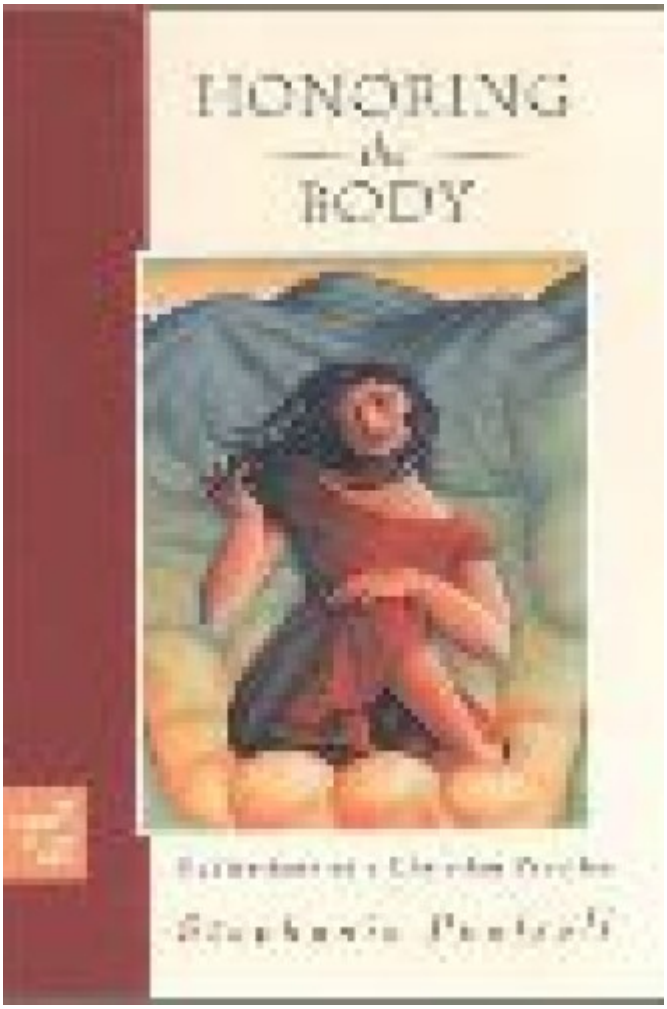
Upper Room



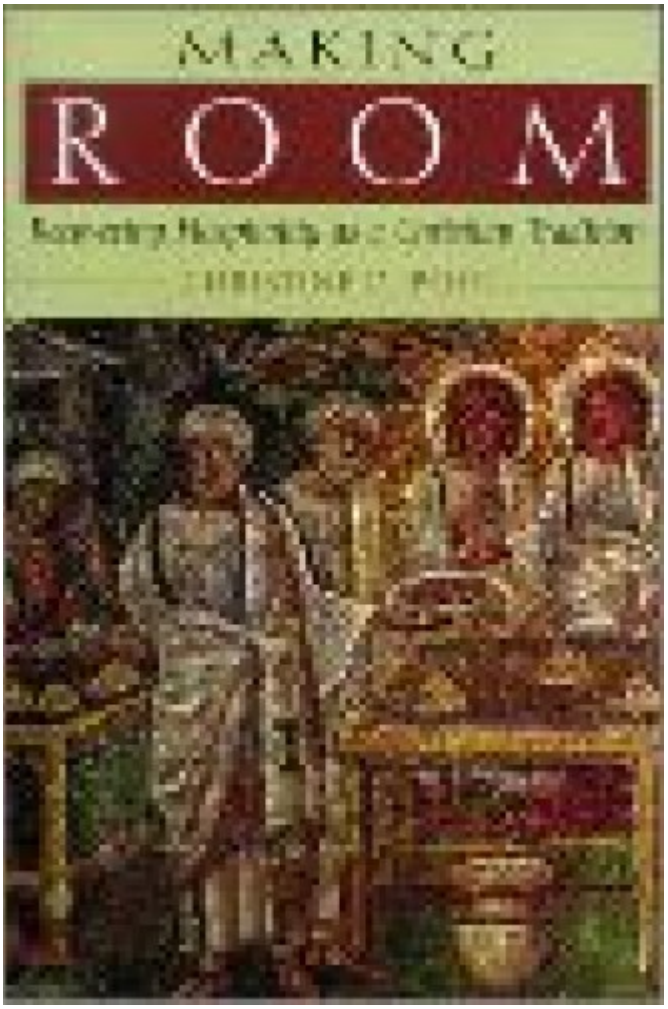
Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time

Dorothy C. Bass
Jossey-Bass



Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice

Stephanie Paulsell
Jossey-Bass



Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition

Christine D. Pohl
Eerdmans

The Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, based at Valparaiso University in Indiana, has been encouraging people to think about and live the communal practices that form Christian existence. The project, directed by Dorothy Bass, has produced a number of widely read books, including Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People *(see below for a complete list). In addition, it provides grants to support projects engaging people in Christian practices in congregations, theological schools and other institutions. I spoke with Bass about the project's focus on practices, and how they can orient us in Christian formation and education.*

What does the term "practices" mean? Why has it been so prominent in your work?

Practices are the things people do together over time that shape a way of life. One of the short definitions of practices is “embodied wisdom”: a certain knowledge of the world is embodied and engendered by the way we go through our daily lives. The Valparaiso Project is trying to develop an understanding of Christian practices that helps people reflect on the shape of Christian life today.

In *Practicing Our Faith* we talk about practices that address fundamental human needs: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well and singing our lives. Because these practices grow out of our basic needs, all human communities must engage in them in one way or another. The practices become Christian when they’re lived in light of and in response to God’s active presence for the world in Christ. Deep convictions about who we are in relation to God and others are woven into their texture.

There is an integral relationship between how we live and what we can know of God, other people and the world. What we believe is entangled with what we do. We can believe more fully as we act more boldly. And we can act more boldly as we believe more fully.

How do these practices relate to what might be termed more fundamental practices such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, worship and meditating on scripture?

We say in *Practicing Our Faith* that worship is the most formative practice, the activity in which all Christian practices are distilled. None of the practices we discuss can be done faithfully without constant prayer and Bible study, and we weave biblical material and links to prayer and worship into our treatment of every practice. But we wanted to show how worship and Bible study are not set apart from life. For example, passing the peace is a distillation of a Christian practice that also takes place in the world as we forgive and welcome one another.

I wish that *Practicing Our Faith* had included chapters on Bible study and prayer, and we did include these in *Way to Live*: *Christian Practices for Teens*. Wonderful chapters by Susan Briehl on the Bible and Mark Yaconelli on prayer, written with their teenage coauthors, begin and conclude that book. At the same time, there are

hundreds of retreat centers, study groups and books encouraging people to pray and teaching them to read the Bible in fresh ways. I think North American Christians are a little less comfortable with examining the actual material quality of our daily lives—how our time, possessions and talents are used.

The concept of practices we're developing in the project focuses on embodied life in the world. The spiritual practices are an important part of this in that they help us to notice God's presence in the activities of daily life. But our approach is to call attention to the concrete shape of our communal life and to encourage critical reflection on it. Each of the Christian practices we explore depends on and fosters our spirituality—for example, keeping Sabbath forms us in rest and gratitude but also draws us into thinking about social justice, family patterns and so on.

How did your own interest in the practices emerge?

I was a historian of Christianity when I came to this work, and I have always have been intrigued by the dynamics of continuity and change in the Christian church and in how we live as Christian people. So I had thought about the practices that have been passed down and also about how they've changed in new historical situations. We bear a living tradition—there is both continuity and change in the practices.

Can you give an example of how a particular practice has changed?

Consider the practice of hospitality, a topic that has been studied by Christine Pohl. In the early church, when people lived in households with many members, and in which the houses had courtyards, domestic space was more visible and less private, and there was a built-in capacity to welcome strangers. Later, monasteries took on the task of hospitality, and the monks were very reflective about it. They asked questions like "What are the limits of our hospitality?" and "How could we do damage to guests by offering our hospitality in the wrong way, and how might they damage us?" And they based their hospitality on the biblical stories that underlie this practice.

In the modern era Christian hospitality is more institutionalized—it takes the form of hospitals, charities, hostels, which means that people lose the face-to-face quality of hospitality. When people like Dorothy Day started to reclaim the tradition of hospitality in the 20th century, they had to create institutions that would be able to do the job. The small, isolated private household in many ways is not up to the hard work of hospitality to the poor and those in need, especially now when most homes

are empty all day.

Nevertheless, despite changing historical structures, ministering to strangers and welcoming those who are in need remains an irreducible aspect of the faith, embedded in scripture. The question is how to do that today. Pohl says that the congregation provides a nice mix of the intimacy and publicness needed for the doing of hospitality. But, as she emphasizes, this is hard work. Her book *Making Room* is an example of embracing a Christian practice while also thinking critically about it. That is what the Valparaiso Project has tried to do, and encourage theologians and other Christians to do.

You say in *Practicing Our Faith* that the practices are "in trouble." Is there something about our situation that calls for a renewed focus on practices?

We have been living in a time of very rapid social change. People are very mobile, and there are forces that fragment communities—communities that used to be responsible for passing on wisdom. There's a lot of very fine freedom and opportunity that comes with this, but it's also easy to just kind of go with the flow of the culture in the absence of deliberate and sustained attention to developing Christian habits of life.

Though it is increasingly difficult to form and sustain communities, I don't think that any one of us, or any one family or household, can or should do these practices alone. We need to discern the shape of the practices in conversation with others and through constant reencounters with the word of God, with worship and with opportunities for carefully studying and reflecting on what's going on in our society. We need this if we are to be thoughtful and deliberate about our lives.

For example, it's very hard to keep Sabbath without a community that supports that practice. Even churches may expect people to be busy all the time, so that Sunday can become the busiest day of the week. Communities, not just individuals, need to support each other in Christian practices. People in the community need to keep reminding each other that God intends us to rest one day a week. We need to encourage our pastors to take a day off, and to be a supportive network that makes it possible for them to do so.

We're not going to get far in living a life that's shaped by Christian practices without addressing the hold of consumerism on our lives and spirits. One of my favorite practices is what Don Saliers calls "singing our lives to God." There's an enormous

difference between music as a consumer item and as something into which we enter deeply—something about which we're knowledgeable, which engages us deeply in the world and draws out our gifts. Singing along in a congregation engages us in this way. We stop being consumers when we're attentive to this kind of practice and dig into what it means.

Are we less adept at the Christian practices than our parents or grandparents were?

Every generation is a mixed bag. The young people who helped us write *Way to Live* were very hungry for the practices and, on their own, had found some wonderful ways of living them out. They showed hospitality in their openness to people from different groups, for example, and were aware of the emptiness of some of the promises of mass culture.

I had a noteworthy encounter with a grandmotherly woman who told me that she and her friends had read *Practicing Our Faith* and had said to one another, "Well, I already do these things. I keep the Sabbath and visit the sick and sing hymns." I said, "OK, but what about your children and your grandchildren?" She paused and said, "Oh, you're right!"

Still, I don't want to be urging us to go back to our grandparents' time, since there was a closed-off quality to many of the churches of that time and people's lives were narrow in ways ours aren't.

Two generations ago, people probably were in closer touch with some specific practices than we are now, given the forces of consumer society. Making and sharing meals used to be a basic part of Christian life. It's much less so in our fast-food culture. We can get our nutrition by simply popping commercially prepared food into the microwave. But by doing so we miss opportunities for engagement with one another and with creation through what we put on our table and the words we say around that table. At the same time, I encounter a lot of young people who are interested in where their food comes from and what's happening to the animals and the workers who produce the food. We need to think about new ways to reclaim this time of nourishment as a time of blessing.

To follow up on the example of the grandmother: it seems that previously people lived out the practices unconsciously, and that now we need to be more conscious about them.

That’s correct. I’ve heard Jewish friends talk about how there used to be many more women in the community who just knew how to keep a kosher home and didn’t have to go to a book to figure it out. The knowledge was just passed down. Now it needs to be more deliberate. That’s true in Christian settings too. Even the most basic practices, like sharing a meal and saying grace, take some deliberation for people now.

Modern culture is perhaps more hostile to a Christian way of life?

I wouldn’t want to say that. The issue is not whether the culture is hostile but whether Christians can see what is going on around them and respond in appropriate ways. If we remain open, we might find examples of excellent practices among people and in places where we would never have expected to find them.

I prefer to talk about resisting certain aspects of the dominant culture rather than about opting out of it. We need to build patterns of resistance into our Christian communities, but also to stay part of the larger community. We share the world and time with all our neighbors. God loves us all. God loves the world. Christians shouldn’t try to step away into utopian, separate groups, but rather find communal patterns of resistance that stretch us all toward the future.

Given that the practices are so important to the church and the living out of the faith, does your work lead to any specific proposals about the shape of theological education? Do we need to rethink how ministers are trained and how theology is taught in light of the practices of faith?

I think that the question we are raising—how do Christian practices add up to a way of life?—is being raised in theological schools. The schools are asking, “How do we help students to integrate what happens in one class with what happens in another class?” “How does what happens in field education relate to what happens in people’s homes, in classrooms and in the library?” Reflection on practices can be one way of drawing the pieces of theological education into larger and more coherent wholes.

People are hungry for a more thoughtful, deliberate way of life, a way of life that’s engaged in community and care for creation, and responsive to God’s presence in the world. Theological schools can be places where this hunger becomes manifest, and where we explore what the tradition offers us as we try to live out such a life.

For our recent book *Practicing Theology* we gathered a group of theologians to reflect on what difference attention to practices would make to the study of theology. We're very interested in how the doctrines and beliefs of the church grow out of communities of practice and also have implications for those communities. Theological schools themselves can experiment and exemplify a way of life shaped by Christian practices.

Practical theology—theology that is addressed to the lives of communities and grows out of the lives of communities, theology that is done for the sake of a way of life—is a growing, exciting dimension of theological studies. We're realizing that it's impossible to separate the life of real communities from the theology that matters to those communities. The Valparaiso Project is now in the process of becoming much more explicit about how our work is situated within practical theology and what its implications are for ministry.

Let's take a specific kind of seminary course—on preaching. What does reflection on practices tell us about the task of preaching?

Well, one of the practices we have highlighted is testimony—truthful speech. We need to hear and speak the truth in our everyday lives. Preaching is one way in which the church tries to foster that practice. It's important to realize that the preaching happening this week belongs to a long practice of faithful speech that has taken somewhat different forms in different times and cultures. Today's preaching is part of an ongoing history and also contains the possibility of discovering new dimensions.

Like any practice, preaching is not the work of a single practitioner but is a shared task of the whole community. Though the preacher is the one in the pulpit, the purpose of the preacher's activity is to help the whole community to engage and proclaim the word. It's an opportunity for all the people to become more articulate about their lives and to be able to speak the truth to one another.

The question takes me back, in a way, to the opening question about defining a practice and why the practices are so important. Christian practices as I understand them are multifaceted. In each there's a spiritual, liturgical, biblical, doctrinal, historical and public policy dimension. Each has implications for personal, domestic, congregational and public life.

Does a focus on the practices suggest anything to help churches that are wrestling with a difficult issue such as homosexuality?

I hope this approach will help churches build up a more positive culture rather than being so intent on tearing each other down. One of the things we made explicit in *Way to Live* is that we as authors weren't primarily interested in giving readers a list of dos and don'ts. We wanted instead to help them see the positive life that is open to them—to see how satisfying a life lived with integrity, honesty and mutual care can be.

Practicing Our Faith took a similar approach. The authors wanted to encourage reflection on how Christians can help each other embrace a life-giving way of life. When we were deciding what practices to include, we suddenly realized that we were probably the first recent group of church types who had met for several days without discussing sex. We knew this was a significant gap, but we had to wrestle with how to identify the relevant Christian practice. We came up with "honoring the body."

It seems to me that the challenge for the church is to capture a larger vision of the goodness of human embodiment and of the brokenness and sin in which we all participate. In her lovely chapter on "honoring the body" in *Practicing Our Faith*, Stephanie Paulsell writes about the deepest Christian beliefs concerning the human body. She encourages us to practice these every day in caring for our own bodies and the bodies of one another with tenderness and respect. In her book of the same name she offers some powerful examples of how same-sex partners do this. This more positive approach may not settle the questions in many people's minds these days. But I do think that more attention to how we as church can better honor the body would provide a helpful context for present debates.

You've written a book on keeping the Sabbath. What has been your own experience with that practice?

I turned to it almost in desperation when I was a seminary professor and a new mother of twins. I was frantically busy and not very happy. It was a relief to realize that there is a commandment devoted to resting, to not working all the time. Attempting this unusual practice not only by worshiping but also by disengaging from the market economy one day a week gave me a respite and a weekly reminder of a more intentional way of living. But there are different stages of family life,

stages in which keeping Sabbath has been more or less possible for us. It’s an ongoing negotiation.

As my children have become teenagers I’ve realized that this practice is especially hard for young people. Schools are not very sensitive to their need for rest. Many teenagers work too hard, whether it’s because they’re taking demanding courses or are working at fast-food places. It’s very difficult for them to have any control over their time. We can encourage them to reflect on this and support them as they try to find a way to have some Sabbath time.

How does the focus on practice change the way we think about youth ministry?

What we model in *Way to Live* is very different from the entertainment model of youth ministry that’s so widespread today—where the basic idea is to get a young, charismatic person to keep the kids busy and make sure they have a good time. That model doesn’t invite young people into the shared life of Christian practices. We want to invite youth and adults to share life in Christ together. Since growing in the practices is a lifelong process, it makes sense to craft formation intergenerationally. Our approach also is different from the catechetical. We see catechesis as one of the ongoing practices of the church, and thus a part of youth formation, but only a part.
