

# *Joy Together*

Spiritual Practices  
for Your Congregation

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## DISCIPLINE? NO THANKS!

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—  
what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

—Romans 12:1–2

During the summer of 2005, I heard dozens of stories about fasting. I learned why and how Christians fast. Some people told me why they don't fast, and expressed their questions and concerns.

I sought out all the interviews because I was writing a book about fasting. I had fasted numerous times; I read books about fasting and heard stories from a few friends about their fasts, so I was confident I could write a good book. But I knew I needed more stories before I could start writing, so I sent out an e-mail to just about every

person I knew, asking for stories or referrals to friends of theirs who fasted.

The return e-mails poured in. Many more of my acquaintances fast than I had realized, and some fast quite frequently. Many of them do it secretly, seeking to obey the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:16–17 where he talks about fasting in such a way as to be seen only by God. This explains why I didn't know they fasted.

I was surprised by the number of people who fast, but what surprised me even more was the number of people who fast with others. Husbands and wives. Parents and grown children. Extended families who are praying for a family member in need. Small groups. Whole congregations. I was amazed, because I had always fasted alone.

Some of my friends gave me contact information for their friends in Africa, Asia, and South America, where communal fasting often plays a significant role in congregational life. Those Christians told me that they interpret Jesus' words in Matthew 6 to mean that the motive of fasting matters. We must not fast to impress people, they said, but to please God. Their congregations announce weekly or monthly fast days with lists of prayer requests for the fasts, and in times of special need they fast for a week at a time or longer. They experience God's presence in special ways when they fast communally, and the joy and power of communal fasting is so clear to them that they couldn't understand why many westerners fast all alone.

The communal nature of the fasts described by my interviewees got me thinking. For many years, my husband and I observed the Sabbath with our children. Our Sabbaths were communal in the sense that our nuclear family engaged in the Sabbath together, but we never considered connecting with other families who were doing the same thing. I experienced contemplative prayer in groups, and I loved the group experience of quiet prayer. However, when I reflected on "spiritual disciplines" or "spiritual practices" (terms that I will use interchangeably in this

book), I mostly thought about doing something that would help me as an individual to draw near to God in the privacy of my own metaphorical prayer closet.

The stories I heard about fasting helped me start paying attention to communal spiritual practices. This book is the outgrowth of the pondering and listening I have engaged in since I wrote my book on fasting. I want to give groups of people—small groups, whole congregations, and other groups of Christians—models of spiritual disciplines that are experienced communally. I want to convey some of the richness of our Christian heritage; throughout the ages, in diverse settings, many Christians have engaged in spiritual practices with others. I want to transmit my enthusiasm for the

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*We delude ourselves if we imagine that we can live the spiritual life in total isolation from Christian community, for it is impossible to be Christian in solitary splendor.*

—Marjorie J. Thompson,  
*Soul Feast*

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ways communal spiritual disciplines can enrich Christian life and shape us into people who are not conformed to this world but are transformed increasingly into the image and likeness of Jesus. I want to communicate the ways that spiritual practices are richer—and usually easier—when we engage in them with others.

## Individuals and Communities

Most books on spiritual practices begin with the individual, and many individual Christians have found great benefit by engaging in personal spiritual disciplines. They have overcome an innate distaste for the word “discipline” and have come to understand a spiritual discipline as any practice that clears away the clutter of daily life and helps a person make space for God.

A renewed emphasis on Christian history has helped make the word “discipline” more palatable. Throughout most of the past two millennia, the disciplined actions connected to the Christian life were viewed as significant and transformative. In the modern period, with its emphasis on objective truth and scientific research, being a Christian was often viewed as assenting to a series of propositions about God. Now we are coming back to a renewed understanding that the way we live our lives—the actions we engage in as a response to God’s love for us—matter as well. Spiritual disciplines give shape to our daily lives and help us experience God’s presence in all of life. They help us respond to God’s initiative. And they shape us.

In an age of consumerism, the word “discipline” has taken on additional significance. Decades of materialistic self-indulgence have vividly illustrated the Gospel reality that we “cannot serve God and wealth” and that life is “more than food, and the body more than clothing” (Matt. 6:24,

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*The word discipline means “the effort to create some space in which God can act.” Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up.*

—Henri Nouwen,  
“Moving from Solitude to  
Community to Ministry”

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25). Spiritual disciplines are one way to engage with Jesus’ admonition to seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

With the rise in engagement with spiritual disciplines by individuals, many are beginning to ask if spiritual practices can be experienced in commu-

nity as well. Doug, a Presbyterian minister who serves a large urban congregation, would answer “yes” with enthusiasm. “I have seen such value in people coming together to engage in spiritual practices,” he reflected. “When we do things with others, it makes up for our own shortcomings.

It helps us think outside the box. It's easier to dream when you're encouraged and even pushed by someone else."

Doug frequently leads his elders in corporate spiritual practices. At the monthly session (board) meetings, he sets up a variety of different prayer experiences for the elders and pastoral staff so that they can pray in creative ways for the needs of the congregation and the wider community and so that they can listen to God. He wants to give people practice engaging in new forms of prayer in order for them to learn how to do it themselves. He believes that the church elders are living out their faith commitment in front of other people, allowing the prayer they engage in together to be their most important form of leadership. "This helps shape the group into a tighter knit community, and it helps them model to the large community they are leading, which picks up what the leaders are doing, a bit like osmosis."

Doug's congregation offers numerous options for learning about and experiencing a variety of spiritual disciplines, and he has seen the fruit of those opportunities in various ways: deepening faith, ability to hear God's voice, and willingness to serve. Communal spiritual disciplines also bring authenticity to a congregation's life. When people are meeting God in new ways, they talk about it. They experience God's guidance in challenging situations, the Holy Spirit's presence and comfort in the midst of crisis, and Jesus' peace that passes understanding. They receive God's love, and they pass it on to others. After all, if God is real, if Jesus really did live and die and then live again, and if the Holy Spirit is truly present in us and with us, then any actions that reflect our commitment to follow Jesus will spill over into every sphere of life.

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*Taste and see that the LORD is good.*

—Psalm 34:8

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The practice of communal spiritual disciplines in congregations helps the leaders receive direction from God. In our time, with declining numbers in many congregations, congregations need to know exactly where God is calling them to serve in their wider community. In his prayer for believers on the night he was betrayed, Jesus says that we are sent into the world as he was sent into the world (John 17:18). Jesus modeled extended prayer times where he heard God's voice, directing him where to go and what to do (Mark 1:35–38). Christian spiritual disciplines help us make space in our lives so that we can pray and listen in a similar way.

## What Exactly Are Spiritual Disciplines?

Three authors have shaped my understanding of what constitutes a spiritual discipline or spiritual practice. Each of these authors also provides lists that can help expand the options we can consider.

Marjorie Thompson, in her 1995 book *Soul Feast*, describes seven spiritual disciplines: reading of Scripture, prayer, worship, fasting, confession/self-examination, spiri-

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*What is discipline? Look at the word; there is no hint of punishment in it. A disciple is a follower, and discipline is the state of the follower, learner, imitator.*

—Charlotte Mason,  
*Parents and Children*

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tual direction, and hospitality. She writes that her purpose is “to help people of faith understand and begin to practice some of the basic disciplines of the Christian spiritual life. Disciplines are simply practices that train us in faithfulness. . . . Such practices have consistently been experienced as vehicles of God's pres-

ence, guidance, and call in the lives of faithful seekers.”<sup>1</sup> Thompson's definition, that disciplines are simply *practices*



*that train us in faithfulness*, illustrates the overlap of the two words “discipline” and “practices.” To me, these two names mean the same thing.

But Thompson’s seven practices are not the only ones to consider. Tony Jones, a leader of the North American emergent church movement, describes sixteen spiritual disciplines in his 2005 book, *The Sacred Way*. Jones includes most of the spiritual disciplines mentioned by Marjorie Thompson, and adds others such as pilgrimage, meditation, and the Jesus Prayer. Jones uses the analogy of learning to play a musical instrument or growing competent in a sport. Proficiency requires practice, he reflects:

If there’s a common theme among the great Christian spiritual writers, it’s this: Seeking God will not be easy. The history of the church is the story of many faithful Christians admirably fighting back their own sins by these disciplines, only to be thwarted again and again. But, as with a sport, the more you practice, the better you get. You’ll get in better “spiritual shape” as you practice, and you’ll be able to run the race to completion.<sup>2</sup>

Jones’s comparison of the Christian life to learning a sport or learning to play a musical instrument illuminates a profound truth. God is in the business of transforming us into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18), and that transformation doesn’t begin and end on the day we acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Savior. That transformation continues over our entire lives, and we do indeed change as we “practice” living the Christian life.

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun describes more than sixty specific spiritual disciplines in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, also published in 2005. She includes many forms of prayer and Bible study, along with retreats, pilgrimages, and other actions that could be considered to be spiritual practices. Her list expands the possibilities for what exactly

constitutes a spiritual discipline, and her definition is also helpful: “From its beginning, the church linked the desire for more of God to intentional practices, relationships, and experiences that gave people space in their lives to ‘keep company’ with Jesus. These intentional practices, relationships and experiences we know as *spiritual disciplines*.”<sup>3</sup>

Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, by including so many different and specific spiritual disciplines, makes clear that many habits or practices in daily life can be considered spiritual disciplines. The mother who stands by the front door as her children leave in the morning and says a brief prayer for each child when the door closes is engaging in a practice that “trains her in faithfulness” and helps her “keep company with Jesus.” In the same way, the man who has a habit of glancing at a Scripture verse on his iPhone when he waits for the elevator at work is being trained in faithfulness and is keeping company with Jesus. No one can possibly engage in sixty spiritual practices. In fact, most people cannot engage in more than a few, but a long list helps provide an overview of the options and helps us notice—and think creatively—about the things we already do that help us keep company with Jesus or that train us in faithfulness.

Spiritual practices don’t need to be just for the individual. Sunday worship in congregations—with singing, prayers, the reading of Scripture, the preaching of the Word, the sacraments of baptism and Communion, and congregational fellowship afterward—enables worshipers to keep company with Jesus and provides training in faithfulness. So a practice of attending the worship service and engaging in the various components of worship can certainly be considered a spiritual discipline. Many congregational activities, such as prayer meetings, small-group Bible studies, and home prayer groups, can also be considered spiritual practices.

I view worship, small groups, and congregational fellowship as indispensable and essential to the Christian life,

but I would also like to see congregations engage further in spiritual practices because I believe they bring depth and vitality. This book describes six specific spiritual disciplines in detail, with illustrations from congregations to show how these practices can be experienced communally. The six disciplines are:

- Thankfulness
- Fasting
- Contemplative prayer
- Contemplative approaches to Scripture
- Hospitality
- Sabbath keeping

These six were chosen because of my deep concerns for the Church of Jesus Christ in the affluent West, which I will discuss in the next section. I believe these six spiritual disciplines go a long way toward addressing several significant concerns, acting as a positive corrective to some of the forces at work in our lives today.

## Some Challenges We Face

My first concern relates to consumerism and materialism. In North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, where I live, as well as in many other countries, we are steeped in the advertising culture. Even if we try as hard as we can to resist the lure of material possessions, we are profoundly influenced by a consumer outlook. We need all the help we can get to remember God's priorities. The spiritual disciplines I have chosen, particularly when practiced communally, help us resist the attractions of acquiring an ever-increasing number of possessions. They help us rest in love, grace, and peace, which come from God alone.

My second concern about the church today comes from my conviction that all of us need to grow in our ability

to experience God's guidance in our daily lives. The parents of a demanding teenager need help to know how to love and discipline their son or daughter in a way that will work best for that specific child. The project manager who feels overwhelmed by the task ahead needs help to know when to push the team and when to let up and celebrate the things that have been achieved. The apartment dweller who is losing sleep because of a noisy neighbor needs to know how best to approach the neighbor and the landlord. God, the source of all wisdom, surely knows the answers to these conundrums. But how do we tap God's wisdom? And how can we learn to do it with a pace of life that seems to accelerate every day?

Learning how to listen for God's voice in the midst of our challenges makes life richer and fuller, and it helps us understand that God cares about every aspect of our lives. God's voice comes to us in Scripture, giving us wisdom and guidance for daily life, rooted in the way we were created and the life we were made for. God's voice also comes to us from the nudging of the Holy Spirit within us, sometimes in response to a passage from the Bible, sometimes while engaging in various spiritual practices, and sometimes through our own conscience. We need to hear God's voice in all of these ways, and the spiritual practices described in this book help develop our ability to listen to God through Scripture and through the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

In addition to our concerns about our daily challenges and worries, we also need to hear God's voice about the contribution God wants us to make each day. For what purpose did God create me? What unique gifts, given to me by God, do I have to offer? Why am I here? We need God's guidance each day about how to become the people we were created to be and how to serve in this broken world. Spiritual disciplines, exercised individually and communally, help us receive answers from God to these big questions.

Congregations face similar vexing practical challenges and issues related to identity. Scenarios might include the following:

- Our congregation is having a shortfall in giving. Should we cut back on expenses or try to find other sources of money?
- We want to reach out to our neighborhood in some new ways. One group within the church is advocating for a project in the local school, while another group wants to host a food pantry. We can't do both. How do we know which one to do?
- And why are we here? What unique purpose does God have for us as a congregation? What gifts can we bring to the wider community?

All of the spiritual disciplines chosen for this book have a significant component of listening. These spiritual practices put us in a receptive place that trains us in listening to God and to others. Spiritual practices enable us to listen for God's answers to the specific issues we are facing, and they help us listen for God's voice leading us in entirely new directions.

Sometimes we will discern God leading us into paths we have never considered.

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*Where two or three are gathered  
in my name, I am there among  
them.*

—Matthew 18:20

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My third concern for the church in the affluent West relates to the fact that in many instances

we have lost our way as Christians called to be the church. This is closely connected to my first two concerns. Consumerism shuts down our ability to listen to God because we are so focused on the next possession or the next experience. When we do try to listen to God, we often find ourselves wrapped up primarily with our own concerns about

family, work, health, or other pressing issues. When we try to listen to God communally, again we often focus mostly on the pressing concerns of our church community. We tend to be consumers, even in the way we approach Christian life. We focus on unanswered prayers or we wonder what God has done for us lately. We forget the big picture as laid out in the Bible. We forget that we are called to engage with the mission of God. This wonderful God we worship created the beautiful world we live in, mourned when humans fell into sin, and sent Jesus Christ to be the redeemer of all the brokenness we can see so vividly and so painfully around us. The Sent One, Jesus, longs for us to understand that we have been sent into the world as he was (John 17:18), to act and speak in ways that reflect the love of God in every setting of life. When we live as if we have been sent into the world as Jesus was, we are participating in God's mission.

## What Is God Up To?

Emphasizing our call to embrace the mission of God is often described as being “missional.” A growing cluster of books and articles discusses this missional approach to congregational life and ministry, and throughout this book the word “missional” will be used to refer to an emphasis on engaging with the mission of God. Spiritual practices, individual and communal, help us embrace this mission of God because they enable us to hear and follow God's priorities. They open us to the voice of the Holy Spirit illuminating the truths in the Bible and guiding us specifically. They help us become more like Jesus, full of grace and truth. They help us to be available to God, whatever that looks like in our setting. Alan Roxburgh, in his book *Missional Mapmaking*, argues that one significant task of Christian leaders is to shape the culture in congregations and thus influence the wider culture. In the same way that the culture of a country has characteristics and trends, so also

a congregation has a culture, the shared values and beliefs that shape that congregation's actions and social behaviors. Roxburgh notes that spiritual disciplines go a long way toward influencing the culture of a congregation. He argues that through spiritual practices,

We are being reshaped in the imagination that our lives are gifts from and belong to God. We come to experience in a new way that none of us are self-made; we receive our life every day from God as a gift. Imagine what this new kind of character would do as witness to and transformation of our culture, with its focus on the individual as self-made. Imagine what might happen in our neighborhoods and communities when the people of a local church live for the others in their lives rather than for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Radically different habits, he believes, result in a different imagination that shapes our understanding of grace and gift, and helps us understand that we do not make our lives happen on our own. He continues, "Life is a gift to be embraced, a vocation to be lived in the presence of God and others."<sup>5</sup> The key questions of the missional church are, "What is God up to?" and "How can we join in?"<sup>6</sup> These questions require the very skills that are nurtured through spiritual disciplines, the ability to hear God and perceive how to respond. These questions also require the posture that is nurtured through spiritual practices, a posture of receptivity and willingness to follow. As Roxburgh has described, our lives are gifts that have been given to us by God. We belong to God and were created to walk in Jesus' path communally, not alone. Resisting consumerism can make space for more of God's voice in our lives. And as we learn to listen to God for guidance in many diverse areas, we will receive the wisdom we need in order to live wisely in our materialistic culture. The spiritual disciplines discussed in this book can help us profoundly as we

attempt to do these things as communities of faith. We are called not only to resist materialism and the values of the secular culture, but also to lean into the mission of God, to walk in the love revealed by Jesus Christ, and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to show that love in our families, workplaces, and communities. Spiritual practices play a role in enabling us to do that.

## Encouraging Spiritual Practices in Small Groups and Congregations

As I wrote this book, I collected stories from many people who have engaged in spiritual disciplines in their small groups or congregations. The chapters that follow will give many specific illustrations of what it looks like to lead groups of people into an experience of thankfulness, fasting, contemplative prayer, contemplative approaches to Scripture, hospitality, and Sabbath keeping. An appendix at the end of the book lists concrete ways that worship services, sermons, small groups, church newsletters, and Web sites can promote the notion of engaging in spiritual disciplines as a community.

Lent and Advent are wonderful times to introduce new spiritual practices or help people engage more deeply in

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*How we spend our days is, of  
course, how we spend our lives.*

—Annie Dillard,  
*The Writing Life*

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the practices that are already a part of their lives. One congregation used postcards and printed paintings of the Annunciation, Jesus' birth, the adoration of the Magi and

the flight into Egypt, one for each week of Advent. They put reflection questions on the back of the postcards, and encouraged members to spend time each day pondering the paintings and allowing God to speak to them in new



ways. For many in the congregation, looking at art in a meditative way was something new, but they were already motivated to do something different in Advent in order to keep Jesus at the center of the season. Many families already use Advent wreaths. Consider encouraging families and small groups in your congregation to add further practices to the lighting of the Advent wreath—perhaps prayers of thankfulness for the week or a breath prayer or the prayer of *examen* (see chapter 4). Consider ways the Advent wreath lighting in Sunday worship could be deepened and enriched with new practices.

Lent is another season of the church year when new spiritual disciplines, or the deepening of familiar ones, work well. One congregation suggested that its small groups explore Sabbath keeping during Lent by using a particular Bible study guide. Fasting has been a traditional way to focus on Jesus' journey to the cross in Lent, and congregations can invite members to fast in a variety of ways during Lent. Any of the spiritual disciplines described in this book would make an appropriate focus for Advent and Lent—times of year when people are perhaps more open than usual to guidance about how to keep God as a central focus for the season.

I am hoping that as you read this book, your thoughts as you read and reflect, and the practical plans that result from your pondering, will bear good fruit in the groups you belong to. May this book help you consider ways in which you might introduce new spiritual practices in your small group and congregation. May it give you language to help congregation members identify and celebrate the spiritual disciplines that they already engage in. May this book, and the reflection you engage in as you read it, bring an increased attitude of receptivity to all God is doing, and may your groups and congregations grow in experiencing the immensity of love that God poured out through Jesus Christ and made real through the Holy Spirit.

## Questions for Reflection, Discussion, or Journaling

1. When you think of the word “discipline,” what comes to mind first of all? In what ways can you see the concept of discipline as a positive corrective to some of the forces at work in our culture today?
2. If a spiritual discipline is a practice, relationship, or experience that helps you keep company with Jesus and that trains you in faithfulness, what spiritual disciplines do you engage in already? In what ways have they shaped you? In what ways would you like them to shape you further?
3. When you think of your congregation being sent into the world as Jesus was sent, what emotions do you feel? What are you grateful for? What challenges do you experience?
4. Which individual spiritual disciplines are encouraged by the leaders of your congregation? Which spiritual disciplines does your congregation engage in communally? What have been the benefits? What further benefits would you like to see?
5. If you could pray one thing for your congregation, what would it be? Can you see spiritual practices playing any part in the answer to that prayer?

## For Further Reading

Butler Bass, Diana. *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2005. In this encouraging book, Butler Bass describes practices she has observed in mainline congregations that are thriving.

Butler Bass, Diana. *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007. Another heartening book detailing Butler Bass’s research on thriving mainline

congregations, with further description of the pattern of congregational life and the practices congregations engage in.

Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988. When I have interviewed people about spiritual disciplines, more of them mention this book than any other. They say it is both helpful and challenging. I find it to be deep and rich.