



THE “STRANGE PRACTICES” OF THE PRACTICE

HOW ONE CONTEMPORARY
COMMUNITY FOLLOWS CHRIST

AN INTERVIEW WITH AARON NIEQUIST

CONVERSATIONS JOURNAL: Aaron, we wanted to interview you for many reasons—your depth of character, your integrative musical talents, your delight in the work of spiritual formation. But for the purposes of this article, we want to focus on the ways you have been integrating the formation of community and the practice of the spiritual disciplines, or, as this section is called, the classical spiritual exercises. Could you tell our readers a little bit about how you’ve been integrating those things? I’m thinking specifically of the launching of *The Practice* at Willow Creek Community Church. What is it, how did it come about, how is it going? (I like to jam as many questions into my first question as I can.)

AARON NIEQUIST: Wow, first of all, thanks so much for those incredibly kind words. I’m honored to be a part of this conversation.

Over the last ten-plus years, I’ve been on a bit of a journey—both as a Christian and as a worship leader. And I’m coming to find that much of modern Christianity is wonderful and true and beautiful, but a little too thin. It is a profoundly helpful invitation into relationship with God, but doesn’t always address the deeper, more complex questions of life, doubt, and faith. And it doesn’t always help us move beyond beliefs into the “abundant life” that Jesus offers.

And so both in my personal walk with Christ, and as a worship leader in two different evangelical churches (Mars Hill in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Willow Creek in Chicago), some friends and I have been trying to learn from other Christian traditions and embrace a more formation-oriented, grounded, ecumenical, historical, robust way to follow Christ. Basically, instead of saying, “Our tradition has all we need,” we’ve been saying, “Our tradition is a wonderful part of the story, but we desperately need the wisdom and insight of our other brothers and sisters.”

In the summer of 2013, the Willow Creek leadership asked me if I’d want to explore what this might look like in a community. (Rather than just trying to force strange practices into our weekend worship sets! Ha.) And so after much prayer, conversation, and dreaming, we launched *The Practice* community on Sunday nights.

CJ: What do you mean by forcing strange practices into your weekend worship sets? I can guess, but I’m wondering how the classical spiritual exercises go from being “strange practices” in one context to an alluring draw to community and Christlikeness in another context? I’m guessing it’s not

just by changing the service time from Sunday morning to Sunday nights! How did the Willow Creek community begin to embrace what you were bringing?

AN: One of the biggest things I’ve been learning is this: *Whoever asks the question determines everything.* So if the driving question is “How do we get the room fired up in the first thirty minutes of the service?” then the answer is never “corporate confession.” Right? However, if the question is “How do we help form people into Christlikeness?” then corporate confession would definitely be one of the answers.

And so the key to the whole *Practice* experiment has been that Willow Creek gave us the freedom to ask new questions. And new questions can change everything.

One of the biggest things I’ve been learning is this: *Whoever asks the question determines everything.*

CJ: I’ve heard it said that if you want to be humbled, try starting a community. What have you learned so far in the time you’ve been leading *The Practice*? What did you wish you’d known when you began that you know now?

AN: Oh, yes! I’m learning that I am terrible at a great many things! Probably my biggest weakness is strategy. I can see a really beautiful vision of the future, and I love to flesh out the actual liturgy of each gathering. But I have no idea what the ten steps are between here and there. Fortunately, we have a wonderful team, and we’re still praying for a couple of strategic/builder-type people to join us.

CJ: So what is your vision for *The Practice*? What will your community look like next year and ten years from now?

AN: We have a hundred random ideas and dreams for the future, but we’re trying to live out a mentor’s powerful advice: “Don’t lose sleep about the future; simply do the next right thing and let it tell you what the future should be.” This is **so** hard for me, but it rings very true.

However, I’m getting more and more sure that the future must be holistic. Discipleship can’t be separated from mission, which can’t be disconnected from



evangelism, which happens best in community. It's all part of the big, messy, glorious kingdom life that God is inviting us into. So instead of trying to create a niche kind of gathering, we pray that it becomes more balanced and representative of a holistic Acts 2 community.

CJ: *What would you say are the greatest gifts of practicing the spiritual disciplines in community? Why not just do it alone on your couch with your cup of coffee and Jesus?*

AN: Practicing in community is absolutely crucial. None of us can live the Christian life alone. We need the encouragement of each other—to not give up. We need the example of each other—to realize there are so many different ways of walking with Christ. We need the

can't drink jet fuel all week and then try to light a couple candles on Sunday night. The invitation of Christ really does invite us to reconsider our entire lives, from the inside out. And in many ways, this involves dying to an old way of living and being born again into a new creation. By God's grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual disciplines can play a critical role in this journey.

CJ: *I love that! Jet fuel plus candles sounds like it could make for a big explosion.*

AN: Yes indeed. When you look at the invitation of Christ, he didn't say, "Just add a little of me to all the things you're already doing." Instead, Jesus invited (and still invites) us to leave our old way of being and join him in a brand-new kind of life. When Jesus said "Repent," he was inviting us to **rethink** and **reimagine** everything.

When a community isn't aligned with grace, it is usually marked by fear, control, and exhaustion.

challenge of each other—to live up into the full life we've been invited into. We need the strength of each other—to carry us when we fall. And we need the tangible presence of each other—to incarnate Jesus' teachings when words are not enough.

CJ: *You've gone through some amazing topics as a community of faith—things that I don't often hear preached on in a typical church service: lectio divina, centering prayer, silence, simplicity, spiritual listening, Sabbath, a rule of life, the prayer of examen. What practices have been embraced most readily by your community? What practices have been hardest for people to integrate into their lives?*

AN: I think that *lectio divina* has connected most deeply with our community. This "divine reading" of the Scriptures has become such a powerful supplement to a more analytical/study/expository approach to the Bible. Both are needed, of course.

The most challenging practice has been simplicity. Most of our lives are so complicated and overwhelming, but we rarely stop and consider an alternative. Mark Scandrette's invitation to simplicity—"spending your time and money on what matters most"—really rocked our community. We're still trying to figure out what to do with it.

But here's one of the biggest things we're learning: **You can't add spiritual formation onto an already overly busy Christian life.** It just doesn't work. You

CJ: *How do you, personally, find a way to practice these disciplines without them just becoming teaching exercises or Sunday's sermon topic? What are the ways that you as a leader participate in community, instead of leading it from a hierarchical perspective?*

AN: Those are spectacular questions.

First, it is a great challenge to keep my personal spiritual life appropriately separate from *The Practice*—and appropriately connected. This is a profoundly important balance that I rarely get perfectly right, but am committed to holding in tension.

Second, let me share a story. After our second Practice gathering in March 2014, I was already completely overwhelmed and quite stressed out. It was during a particularly difficult team meeting that I stopped and said: "Wait a second. Our theme verse at *The Practice* is from Matt 11: *learning the unforced rhythms of grace*. Yet, I am living forced rhythms of stress. This can't be! A bad tree can't produce good fruit. Or in Father Richard Rohr's words, "The way you do anything is the way you do everything." In that moment, our team committed to stopping anything that would require us to move into "forced rhythms of stress." We said that our job was to **live the unforced rhythms of grace**, both in our individual lives and as a team—and then we can invite the Practice team into that reality. It was a game-changing moment. We don't do it perfectly, of course, but it honestly changed everything.

CJ: *It takes quite a lot to stop and take stock after only two meetings—it takes humility and the willingness to say things might be going in the wrong direction. I'm really impressed. What would you say the unforced rhythms of grace look like in community?*

AN: In my experience, when a community isn't aligned with grace, it is usually marked by fear, control, and exhaustion. Since everyone is afraid to mess up, there is no risk, no honest vulnerability, and no space to choose health in the midst of all the pressure. I've experienced this firsthand, and it is a terrible way to live.

But a community learning the unforced rhythms of grace looks quite different. Being fundamentally



anchored in the abundant goodness of God frees us to risk and fail, frees us to admit our weakness and need, frees us to live without fear. Above all, it frees us from the burden that it's all up to us. So many pastors live under the constant weight that everything depends on their sermon, their leadership, and their abilities. This is crushing. And *not* the way of Christ. But the unforced rhythms of grace remind us otherwise. In Dallas Willard's prophetic words:

The easy yoke is to lay aside your projects and mine and to take up God's projects. I will say that again. Taking the easy yoke is to lay aside your projects or my projects, which are crushing . . . and this is where leaders come under intolerable pressure. It is because they are carrying their projects; they have presumed to take God's projects and make them their projects.¹

The great temptation is to try to make it happen, whatever it is. That's where we need to step out of our yoke and into Jesus' yoke and let him carry the burden. This is true as parents, this is true as pastors, and this is true in every way. We feel like we have to make it happen, and that's what we have to lay down. We don't make it happen. We turn it loose. Whatever we are doing

¹ Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), pp. 39–40.

for the Lord, we let him carry through with it. We do our best, but we don't trust our best.

CJ: *What would you say to someone, or to a community, wanting to model themselves off *The Practice*?*

AN: The biggest suggestion is to get really focused on asking the most important questions. Like I mentioned earlier, the questions we ask determine everything.

Our core question has been: "How do we become a community who doesn't just believe things about Jesus, but is willing to rearrange our lives to put his words into practice?" And this question guides and informs everything we do.

So what is the big question that God is calling you to ask with your community?

CJ: *Thanks for taking the time to share a little bit about *The Practice* and its practices with Conversations Journal readers, Aaron. Is there anything else you'd like to add, knowing that this article will appear in an issue about community in the section on classical spiritual exercises?*

AN: You're welcome! I love this conversation and am honored to get to share a few reflections. The last thing I'd say is this: I don't believe that every church should turn into a traditionally "liturgical church," whatever that means. We don't need to become stylistically Catholic or theologically Episcopalian or suddenly hang stained glass everywhere. This isn't about style, but about form. Do we have a plan in place to help form our community into Christlikeness?

Or to use a food analogy, the question is not, "What is the one perfect food to serve my family every day?" A better question may be "Am I serving a well-balanced meal, day after day, month after month, year after year?"

A Glimpse of the church's future:
<http://www.conversationsjournal.com/glimpse>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Niequist is a worship leader, song-writer, and pastor in the Chicago area. After leading worship at Mars Hill Church (Grand Rapids, MI) and Willow Creek Church (Barrington, IL), he created *A New Liturgy*—a collection of modern liturgical worship recordings. Currently, Aaron is curating a discipleship-focused, formational, practice-based community at Willow Creek called "The Practice."

But that's just job stuff. The best part of his life is Shauna (his wife), and their sons Henry, and Mac. Find him online: aaronniequist.com | anewliturgy.com | practicetribe.com