

*Big Ideas, Vibrant Faith Communities, and the Future of Religious Practices:  
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The Emory Practical Matters Conference was a culminating event following 15 years of intellectual and practical community engagement through the Emory Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology. Thanks to a grant from the Lilly Foundation and the faithful and creative shepherding of Emory faculty, it made the study of practices an intrinsic part of the programs of formation for PhD students in the Graduate Division of Religion and ministry students at the Candler School of Theology. The initiative also sparked new lines of scholarly research and programmatic initiatives. The conference brought together scholars across disciplinary lines, many of whom had participated in the program at each of its stages, to gather insights on the state of religious practice and to nurture creative conversations with an eye toward opportunities for research and practice in the academy and church over the years ahead.

Asking the provocative question: “What’s your big idea?” the initial session set the tone for the conference’s focus on the broader cultural landscape and compelling approaches to complicated problems. Brendan Ozawa-de Silva, Jennifer Ayres, Gregory Ellison, and Amy Levad each offered brief TED-style talks, putting forward their “Big Idea” for practical theology and religious practices. Ed Phillips, the program director, framed the project well as an exploration of the kinds of practices that will build up vibrant communities of faith amidst the shifting norms and challenges of American culture. These practices, we learned, will demand a focus on constructive and often non-traditional imagination of the future.

Jennifer Ayres, of Emory, made the case for a beginning to the project rooted in a sense of personal identity and location. She convincingly argued that only through the experience of “love, profoundly located” could meaningful religious practices authentically arise. And that through these practices it becomes possible to live deeply and well. Worldview, affection, and commitment are all part and parcel of participating in practices. Cultivating a desire to live well is at the root of humanly re-inhabiting our places and engaging them through practice. Her use of personal narrative, with real locations and relationships evocatively conveyed the sense and purpose of passion in the process of personal and communal formation.

Brendan Ozawa-de Silva, of Emory and Drepung Loseling Monastery, asked from a primary and secondary educator’s viewpoint: “Can we teach human values?” He observed that through the repetition of practices we shape who we are, even alter our very brain structures. In this light, he stressed the importance of social and emotional learning throughout childhood, giving children access to sources and resources for wellbeing, and cultivating the moral emotions necessary for a good life. We are shaped, he taught, by the

experience of moral emotions, as much as other practices.

Amy Levad, of the University of St. Thomas, brought her study of incarcerated persons and the profound collateral effects on their families. Leveraging her personal experience, she gained particular insight on a widespread yet often hidden problem in an era of mass incarceration. Shame and embarrassment in families degrade family life. Churches ought to be in a place to perform a reconciling function, but they do not always succeed in this way. In prison settings, Levad studied practices including ministry, education, and community organizing, assessing how each practice had the potential to reinforce the others. Traditional forms of prison outreach often got the relationships among these practices wrong. A new generation of practices must start with self-transformation (changing congregational culture around “mercy, forgiveness, and restoration”). Such regrounded approaches offer the chance for reconciliation and relationship rather than reinforced isolation. Offering a hopeful note, Levad argues that the church needs to re-center and transform itself to engage in necessary practices by building coalitions that disregard historical boundaries.

Greg Ellison, a former post-doctoral fellow, invoked the words of William James in the sensation of being “cut dead by non-recognition.” The sense of belonging is fundamental. As he states, “The unacknowledged are all around us,” which brings light to the painful and common experience of feeling invisible, unseen, and excluded. Practices of recognition are needed to weave communities together. Powerful common themes emerging from these theologians included the idea that good practices begin with a new awareness of who we are, where we come from, what we love, and who is beside us that we have not seen sufficiently before. This new awareness is the ground of the formation of practices. And practices are the root and road to a good common life.

The “Practices of Vibrant Faith Communities” were explored in a panel including Abdullah Antepli, Diana Butler Bass, and Brian McLaren, with Robert Franklin moderating the conversation. The senescence of traditional religious communities was a common diagnosis among the panel that simultaneously entailed ambitious ideas for the future of renewed forms of religious practice. It is noteworthy that none of the panelists speaking of the future of faith communities are themselves currently leading faith communities in congregational setting, so perhaps it is expected that the future they envisioned is outside the traditional church setting.

Brian McLaren delivered a keynote by declaring that religion plays the part of either destroying or saving the world. The difference depends on our collective capacity to engage constructively in new practices of resistance. He challenged us to accept radical discontinuity, to turn toward the common good, and to “judge religion by the benefits it brings its non-adherents.” He reinforced a call for a new awareness of mutual interdependence and a necessary concern for the most vulnerable. We need to look for opportunities to reframe our faith to become more expansive and generative of the transformative liturgies of daily life. We have the power and imagination, urged McLaren, to create new liturgies that speak to the stages of spiritual development throughout life. We can regain a necessary capacity for storytelling. In these projects, curiosity is a root virtue in the world ahead.

Diana Butler Bass leaned into the theological consciousness of the community through the metaphor of a religious community facing literal rising waters and the way practices of reflection and hospitality can be key in achieving a greater collective “spiritual buoyancy,” which refers to living more connected and more grateful. She counseled us to focus on the Earth because it sustains everything else. Her words resonated with a core theme of the conference—the need to return to that which is real and fundamental, in order to go forward in developing new ways of being together. She took up the work of McLaren, joining him with the sense of breadth and critical importance of the renewal of religious life right now.

Against this backdrop of global urgency, Abdullah Antepli challenged the group by declaring that the Sunday morning model is not working any more, reminding us of “God telling David, sing me some new songs.” We need to get unstuck and learn new practices as the old ones are in evident decline. There has been a generational shift such that younger generations have far less appetite for membership and are not looking to be held captive. We need to extend the tradition ambitiously and reach into secular spaces; traditions must confront a new pluralistic reality. An important takeaway is the necessity for re-grounding in the commonplace activities of daily life and reorienting to an interfaith context as a new cultural given. He called for expanding the scope of religious concern beyond the church into secular spaces of everyday life and stretching beyond the tight confines of ritual time to pervade ordinary time.

Imagining religious practices and the formation of practical theology in the University setting is helpful in that it creates a coherent and cohesive yet pluralistic community of people engaged in certain common practices with a range of common resources. It does not, in those regards, reflect the backdrop of American society as a whole, and it is therefore a compelling but perhaps occasionally misleading laboratory for the study of practices. A key question lingering in the background of many of these conversations, and perhaps the basis for another conference, is whether vibrant and innovative faith communities also need durable institutions. What do the institutional structures of the church, including its economic models and its learned clergy, need to look like in order to support the faith communities of the future? Can the community-based religious institutions as we know them take a form that meets the call of these bold and boundary-dissolving visions of the beloved community?

Moving from ideas and ideals to concrete practice, the conference turned in its latter half to case studies of formation in religious practice and approaches to the pedagogy of practice. Good examples of these conversations could be seen in projects at Emory on the formation of future scholars in the GDR’s PhD program and the advancement of theological education of high school students and incarcerated women. Ted Smith explored how teaching practices is about the formation of habits. Returning to the difficult question that Ozawa-de Silva explored with regard to the education of young people, Smith asked whether a *habitus*, in Bourdieu’s sense of the term, can actually be taught. Smith offered perspectives on the innovative pedagogies at work in the Emory GDR practices class, with the central example of doing close readings as a pedagogical method and collaborative practice of habit formation. In the business of ensuring that practices are shared, Smith prescribed taking advantage of every chance for mimesis, learning through imitation, arguing that “Practices are better caught than taught.”

In a separate session, Elizabeth Bounds picked up on themes presented earlier by Levad in sharing about the Theological Studies program and its evolution at the Arrendale State Prison. She reinforced the power even within captivity through religious learning and practice to open space for a very different and liberated kind of life. A pedagogy of respect and care is a central touchstone to practices within the Arrendale program, this pedagogy counteracts the systemic exclusion and degradation that are often the baseline for these state institutions. This transgressive attitude of universal dignity is a core feature of the program's success in building relationships and offering transformational opportunities in the incarcerated learners' lives.

In the main sessions and break-out conversations among scholars, the conference succeeded in creating an unusual kind of space, resting at the intersection of the church and the academy, scholars and practitioners, tradition and possibility. Values and themes that resonated through many of these sessions included cognizance of location, groundedness in place, and experience that equips one (and the many) to engage in and develop authentic and creative religious practices. This sort of grounding is necessary for achieving a second major theme of relationality, which is tied to principles of interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity that must be part of creating communities of practice.

The work within the Emory initiative and by the scholars present particularly showed how generative and durable communities of practice can be formed across old lines of division. With the benefit of new forms of religious practice and the adaptability needed to shape them, religious life can render denominational divides obsolete, penetrate into secular spaces, and bridge differences in education, wealth, class, and race in novel ways. The development of such ambitious forms of religious practice will depend on our capacity to create ongoing spaces for the gathering of diverse community and our willingness to enter into the conversation and experimentation that this conference so well modeled.

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