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GROWING IN THE LIFE OF FAITH: EDUCATION AND CHRISTIAN PRACTICES, SECOND EDITION

CRAIG DYKSTRA
WESTMINSTER-JOHN KNOX PRESS, 2005
\$24.95, 224 PAGES

Reviewed by Dan Carroll

In the book, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, Dykstra examines the traditions and methods that help Christians explore their relationship with God and strengthen their faith. Dykstra grabs the reader's attention with the first chapter "The Hunger for Daily Bread," recognizing America's "cultural moral ambiguity" (p. 1) and how unsure we are of not only our faith practices during difficult times, but how our society grapples with the concept of right and wrong. In addition, Dykstra admits that we are no longer "scripturally literate" (p. 6), meaning that people who claim to be Christians are less religious now than in the past. By addressing America's struggles with religiosity, Dykstra gains immediate credibility with an audience of clergy, Catholic educators, and Christians attempting to establish a personal connection to God.

Dykstra outlines the chapters of the book in five different sections, making it easy to return to the section that is most meaningful. These five sections, which are titled "Hunger," "Life," "Practices," "Places," and "Signs," encompass a review of the important practices related to Christianity. In his most detailed section "Places," Dykstra conveys his most compelling arguments, addressing topics such as our Christian youth, the connection between faith and family, and congregations' tussle with religiosity. Dykstra explains, "congregations are not always all that faithful. Too often, they seem more of a reflection of the wider culture's values than an embodiment of the distinctive good news of the Christian gospel" (p. 83). Dykstra then explains methods to deal with the less faith-filled congregation and provides a theory of mutual self-destruction. Dykstra's argument behind mutual self-destruction is that we are so self-focused in our lives, we fail to see past our

own issues, making it difficult to be a faith-filled Christian congregation. Dykstra's model describing self-destruction is fascinating, revolving around Carl Phillips, a struggling business executive who is soon to be unemployed, finds out that an old friend, Tom Matthews, committed suicide due to depression from losing his job. Carl Phillips felt guilty because he might have been able to help Tom out, but Carl was so status-conscious that he did not reach out to Tom and finally came to the recognition that people have unspoken needs, realizing the sense of community we should feel when dealing with our faith.

Dykstra's aforementioned example deals with the issue that it is difficult to be one body of Christ when we are self-focused and worried about our perception in the community. Furthermore, Dykstra recognizes that society creates this mutual self-destruction. Dykstra notes, "The success-oriented society and culture gives birth to persons who do indeed produce and are purposeful. But they also tend to manipulate others for their own purposes" (p. 87). Surprisingly, Dykstra mentions that we find this mutual self-destruction in churches because model churches are congregations that are high achieving with driven people campaigning for success. Leaders in the Church can relate to this concept. While it is important to be successful in life, Dykstra makes the point that we need to be aware of others in order to be a congregation of Christ.

In addition to Dykstra's point of mutual self-destruction, he stresses the importance of community when dealing with the faith of today's youth. In chapter 8, "Youth and the Language of Faith," Dykstra states, "a religious faith is always communal and involves a distinctive way of living together" (p. 116). Moreover, Dykstra stresses the importance of conveying religious language to youth not for the sake of having our children be fluent in "church talk," but to make the Christian youth understand that faith is not only a language, but a way of life. Dykstra amplifies this point by stating that if the congregation helps adolescents "find a way to speak" (p. 120) during their time of self discovery, then the congregational education will help our youth understand the faith as a way of life. Lastly, Dykstra concludes the chapter acknowledging that environment influences our children's religious literacy and in order for our youth to have a firm grasp on Christian culture, they must not only hear the language of Christianity, but they must speak it with understanding. While this critic respectfully disagrees with Dykstra's notion that "groups that use religious language rigidly and in an authoritarian manner have a seeming advantage" (p. 126) of shaping our Christian youth, the point is well taken that we need to give our children a concrete foundation in our faith.

In concluding the book, Dykstra expounds on the theme of community faith by reviewing theological education. Dykstra highlights that religious community does not stop at our schools, but that faith community is carried out in our congregations as well. Dykstra explains, “Theological schools should not be—and, thankfully, are not—the only communities of faith and learning in our society. Every congregation should be, and every other religious institution” (p. 147). Dykstra’s idea points to the daily practice of our faith. It is easy to say an institution is Christian, but is it a Christian institution through actions and practice? Furthermore, what are the standards and outcomes that prove it is a faith-filled community?

Dykstra makes the point that our culture is not one that suits a Christian lifestyle, so Christians must practice their faith and thirst for a better understanding of our discipleship with Christ. With realistic views on society, Dykstra proves in theory that the practice of our faith is feasible in the 21st century. The point is well taken that even though there are mysteries within our great faith, it is up to the faith-filled congregation to satisfy our spiritual needs and evangelize not only through words, but through communal practice as well.

Dan Carroll currently serves as assistant principal at Sacred Heart High School in Waterbury, CT.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

FINOLA CUNNANE
 VERITAS HOUSE, 2005
 \$14.95, 208 PAGES

Reviewed by Christopher J. Beza

Is religious education a thing of the past, or has its time not yet arrived? In *New Directions in Religious Education*, Cunnane draws upon the wisdom and experience of Gabriel Moran, the renowned American Catholic who has written about religious education for nearly 40 years, to provide a new lens through which religious education can be perceived. Cunnane states, “the religious education learned in school frequently clashes with the lived experience of the young person outside of the school setting” (p. 19). This book