Joy Together: Spiritual Practices for Your Congregation

By Lynne Baab

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

Lynne Baab points in helpful directions in Joy Together: Spiritual Practices for Your Congregation. An American Presbyterian minister who currently teaches practical theology at University of Otago in New Zealand, Baab has authored several books on church communication and spiritual practices. Spiritual practices are anything that clear space in everyday life to help us make space for God. They should be simple and accessible, but not necessarily easy and do take practice. Baab explores six that are particularly relevant for us in the affluent West. They will not be new to all readers, but Baab explains them drawing on interviews and stories of how churches use them. I am eager to explore with my church what each practice means, and in what ways we can practice them together. My aim is to foster a culture of being attentive to God, what God is doing, and how we can join in. It is ultimately a missional spirituality that we need.

1. Thankfulness
Thankfulness invites us to get over (Psalm 108:6) amnesia about what God has done. A local church can foster thankfulness by starting prayer times with prayers of gratitude and dependence, having space for fasting for God for people in our neighbourhoods or workplaces, or ending a service with an open-air “What my faith means to me” spot.

2. Fasting
Fasting is denying something for a time for a spiritual purpose: nurturing relationship with God or seeking answer to prayer or guidance (e.g., Isaiah 58:6-9; Acts 13:1-2). Fasting from food is not for people with an eating disorder, certain health conditions, children or older people, but fasting can focus on non-food items such as technology, TV or shopping. Some local churches find it helpful to set aside times for fasting, list what to pray for together, and journal what people hear.

3. Contemplative Prayer
Contemplative prayer makes our selves attentive to tune in with God. Some churches adopt the breath prayer: breathing out concerns and breathing in God’s care (cf. Acts 17:28). The examen prayer looks back on a period of time to consider where God has been present and to be thankful, and where we resisted God and to be content. Centering prayer involves extended silence and open-endedness for God. It’s reassuring to know we are likely to have other thoughts when praying contemplatively, but we can let them lead past while we grow deep with God.

4. Contemplative Approaches to Scripture
Contemplative approaches to reading can help us delight in Scripture (Psalm 1:1-3), and not so much take a passage apart as let it take us apart. Lectio divina is a contemplative way of setting with Scripture and letting it speak to us in four stages: lectio (read slowly), meditatio (meditate on a phrase), oratio (pray in response), and contemplatio (rest and wait for God). Ignatian Gospel Contemplation invites people to imagine themselves into the Gospel story. People may share what they hear, but this is not forced nor are points debated.

5. Hospitality
Hospitality extends the warm welcome and invitation we have experienced from a generous God. It can help us experience Jesus as we host and learn from strangers (Luke 24:32). This is especially true as we express hospitality with the marginalized and across cultures. His paradigm changing to invite church people to see themselves not as guests and consumers, but as hosts whose role is to welcome and include others.

6. Sabbath
Sabbath is resting from work to celebrate relationship with God and others. Along with “Do not covet” this is among the earliest of 10 commandments to ignore in our 24/7 culture, but promises permanence and flows from us from compactive activity. “Sabbath is a day to relax into the reality that God created an abundant universe, richly provided and beautifully intricate, full of people that we care about and good gifts to enjoy. Keeping a Sabbath, week after week and year after year helps us learn to rest in God’s goodness rather than think about what we imagine we are lacking,” (pp. 144-145)

Some churches host a “congregational Sabbath” weekend away with minimal planned activity to focus on rest, play and worship together. These practices also help congregational discernment processes about what God is calling us to do and what is our unique contribution. i.e. how we can cooperate with God’s mission. As we are thankful we notice what brings energy and passion. Fasting and contemplative prayer and reading put aside our agendas and priorities in a space to listen to God’s surprising voice — through young and old, member and newcomer. Hospitality creates space for listening to one another and the community. Sabbath beautifully slows us and opens up space for seeing new things. As individuals or as a church, spiritual practices are never about earning God’s approval, but creating the space-filled space and receptivity for God to shape and guide us.

Joy Together is a warm, practical and accessible manual for introducing and developing spiritual practices in congregations which can lead to surprising new missional directions.

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