

FAITH FORWARD

**5 WAYS TO INNOVATE YOUR PRACTICE
AND CRAFT A DEEPER FAITH**

DREW DOWNS

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Dedication

To my children, who keep pushing me to be a better Christian than the church ever could.

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Imagine you're stuck in a rut. You're tired every Sunday morning and the idea of sleeping in is far more tempting than it used to be. You steel yourself for the questions you're sure to be asked about your health or your kids or the latest news about your job search. Or you just don't want to hear one more stale sermon or hymn again.

Maybe you don't need to imagine. You're living it.

Or maybe your life is pretty good, you just think

Maybe there's more than this?

That was me. I never so much left the church, I just stopped caring.

What I needed was proof that being a person of faith meant doing something.

What I received instead was a wakeup call. It came where I didn't normally look. It was found in a different package, wrapped with new paper. The message wasn't sung by a full, talented choir, but croaked by the few who showed up.

I found my faith in all the places I was told I wouldn't.

Not in “success” and big crowds, but in a near-empty cathedral with other nomads who were drawn to be there.

We all need a boost, a faith wakeup call. We need to shake things up if we want the faith we’re seeking. We need to upgrade not only our faith, but our expectations.

We can do that by crafting a more innovative and deeper faith.

C Change the way you pray

I am an Episcopalian. Before you hold it against me or make some joke, take in this one idea that I grew up with. Put yourself in my shoes for a minute.

In my world, prayer comes from a page. We pray out of a book. When opening meetings, we often search for an incredibly poignant and powerful prayer, sometimes spending hours, reading ancient texts looking for the right words.

When you ask an Episcopalian to pray, give them a few days and you'll get some incredibly poetic prayer in response.

The first time I was asked to lead prayer off the cuff, I said no. I wasn't ready. It was at my friend's wedding, I was heading off to seminary and I actually tried to beg out of it. Another friend did it.

While I felt like I let my friend down in the moment, it no longer embarrasses me to think about it. Because it showed me a new way and encouraged me to see prayer differently.

What we mean when we talk about prayer is so heavily defined by our context.

So if you want to deepen your faith, do what I did. Mix up the way you approach your faith. Everything. Including prayer.

If you're like me and prayers come from a book, try praying *out loud* spontaneously.

If you're used to prayers coming from your heart, try praying from a book.

If you pray alone in your car, pray with friends in a group.

Redefine prayer for you.

The disciples asked Jesus how to pray and instead he taught them what to pray.

R Read what you wouldn't

There's a reason people called Jesus 'rabbi'.

In the rabbinic tradition, a teacher (rabbi) would teach his students (disciples) by showing them the way to do what he does.

They would literally follow him.

Our teachers often tell us what to read, handing out a syllabus at the beginning of class. As a student, I learned that there was much more to the subject than what was outlined for our 14 weeks together; much more to read than the books I had to buy from the bookstore.

I was taught to read everything in the book; to not only read the footnotes and bibliography, but to read the texts mentioned in them. To be honest, I usually didn't. Though it often led me to see *how much more there is*.

Today, we have something else leading us.

Algorithms have replaced the syllabus.

Our Facebook and Twitter feeds reveal more about what we are learning than anything else. We are ingesting more "content" than ever; we're reading more than ever. But it isn't deep theology or spiritual memoirs. We're reading BuzzFeed and Huffpo.

That's not bad! In fact, if you aren't reading from those sites, I encourage you to.

The point isn't what we're reading. The point is what we're missing.

And for people of faith, we need to be reading a lot more kinds of material than we do.

1. If you don't read much religious stuff, then pick up a book by Brian McLaren.
2. If you only read Christian Inspiration, read a more weighty piece of theology of biblical criticism.
3. If you only read controversial texts, read some Chesterton or Barth.
4. If you only read *People* then try something else. Anything else.

The point is to not only shake up your routine, but expand your teachers. Get new guides who can get you to see new visions of GOD. Because I guarantee you that *someone* has raised your concerns and questioned your questions.

And when you click with a teacher, follow them for awhile.

A Ask more questions

Have you ever noticed how many times Jesus doesn't answer a question?

Or how often the gospels show him answering a question with one of his own?

How many stories does he tell?

How many of his teachings are parables and visual metaphors? And how few are "Hey, here's what I'm thinking..." or "Here's a forever and ever rule"?

If Jesus teaches in questions, why wouldn't we?

If Jesus wanted his followers to learn through questions, then how much more significant might it be to ask some of our own!

Faith doesn't come in memorization or in learning the party line. It isn't in adopting our denominational teachings or from accepting Scripture as a how-to guide to life.

Deep, lasting faith comes in the wrestling and the fighting. It comes in the messing about in the "What if?" and "Could it be?"

A Jewish rabbi asked a class to read the binding of Isaac story from Genesis and come to class with questions. The next day, the students came back with 4 or 5 and the rabbi chuckled and said

“Wow! You are lucky!”

“Because,”

he continued...

“I have so many questions about why a god would give a man a son and then expect the father to kill him.”

Faith isn't about certainty. It's about cultivating better questions.

F Find a new practice

Modern Christianity is at an intersection between two roads.

One road is the way of the body: a faith rooted in its traditions and practices and doing the right things. People who drive this road listen to the right people and hang with the right people.

The other road is the way of the mind which focuses on the content of one's belief and the source of their understanding. People who drive this road search for the right form of belief and right way to read the Bible.

My response?

Get out of your car.

Quick fixes and easy travel along well-paved roads of faith is dangerous. An excellent story about this danger is found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad," a short story about the trouble with easy routes to salvation: they may be easy, but you might not like their destination.

And once you're on your own feet or sitting in your chair, go off road. Chart a course that bisects these paths.

You'll find a path is already there. Through the tall grass and into the woods. A path worn by earlier travelers. A path beaten for centuries of people seeking a faith that isn't just settled in their brains or bodies, but resonate with the song in their hearts; like a tone, a frequency which matches, calls out.

Follow it. You're being called.

Step out of your car and take with you something physical to do as you walk or wheel your way. Some beads, a piece of wood, a pedometer.

Feel your body and center your mind.

Stop often. In the morning. At noon. In the evening. At night. Stop and praise GOD. Pray for those on their own journeys into the unknown.

Wake up in the morning and do it again.

T Teach what you've learned

The golden secret of learning is teaching.

If you want to learn something, teach it to someone else.

Before you feel ready.

Before you've got it down.

Mastery comes through teaching.

We all have to start somewhere, anyway. We can pretend that we never have to commit, we're never good enough. We aren't ready.

But it's the lie we tell ourselves. We're ready. If we're on the path, walking behind our rabbi, learning from them, then we're ready.

In the gospels, Jesus sends out his disciples really early. In Luke, Jesus does it *really* early. We don't know how much time passes, but in the text, he calls his disciples to follow him in one chapter and by the end of the next chapter, they're out doing what he does.

We must be lifelong learners and lifelong teachers.

The science backs this up. We learn better when we teach.

The Scripture backs it up. We become apostles by healing others and proclaiming the gospel.

Teach it! Preach it!

Learning about Jesus? Describe him to someone.

Learning about the Bible? Tell them the story.

Learning about Christian hope? Offer some to a stranger.

I have found far more weight from the Bible, not simply from preaching every week, but from telling the story, *the whole story* regularly in a Bible Study class. Not just little snippets or what's in the lectionary. Not what is the whim or the basis of a preaching series. The Bible, book-by-book, and the narrative arc of what God is doing in the world.

Here's the thing about teaching.

As I give myself permission to teach, another person receives permission to learn.

To learn what they wouldn't in a way they wouldn't.

They might learn new ways to pray or gain new teachers to read. You might be offering them new guides for their own paths, granting permission to ask questions, and help them see the path worn by centuries of seekers.

The faith you craft may be the permission someone else needs to craft their own.

Conclusion

We normally don't associate innovation and change with church. The joke is that we are the people least likely to change.

If you don't believe me, look up denominational lightbulb jokes. The ones about how many Methodists or Baptists it takes to change a lightbulb. For many, these jokes were as true 50 years ago as they are today.

But change is necessary and necessity isn't just the mother of invention, it is the fruit of health and growth.

When we lift weights, our muscles actually tear, they break. If we treated exercise the way we treat innovation in faith, we'd never work out. We'd never grow stronger.

But every tear leads, not to destruction, but growth. These small tears lead to growth in the muscle.

If we can approach our lives with intention: to organize our work to be productive, schedule our families so we can get our kids to school and soccer practice and dance: then we can approach our faith with intention.

We can craft a faith that breathes new life into our routines and hope into our struggles. We can find other homebrewers and quilters and weavers and artisans producing broad tapestries of faith and new patterns of love.

We can hear poets slamming about mercy and artists brushing hope into the canvas.

And we can make our very lives into masterpieces of clay, our very blood the life-ink, our skin the multi-hued palette of the true artist of creation.



The church I walked out of was the most successful church I'd ever attended.

I want to help you find meaning in church and in life.

[Come on the adventure with me.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drew Downs is an Episcopal presbyter (priest), father, emergence Christian, and a dreamer.

He lives in the Midwest where he tries to keep up with two kids and a spouse who have way more love in their hearts than he can even imagine.

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Make a New Normal