

**LIVING INTO COMMUNITY:
CULTIVATING PRACTICES THAT SUSTAIN US**

BY: CHRISTINE D. POHL

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Christine Pohl has created a multifaceted jewel in *Living into Community*. Her purpose is to illumine four practices that sustain all types of human communities but are perhaps most crucial for communities of faith. The practices of gratitude, promise-making and keeping, truthfulness, and hospitality are each explored in detail in their own section, although she notes that the practices are intertwined and support each other. Each section opens with a chapter situating the practice within theology, scripture, Christian tradition, and other traditions. The second chapter in each section delineates how implementing each practice is more difficult and complicated than it appears. The final section chapter explores how each practice is deformed by sin and frailty. Pohl closes each section by offering ways of strengthening the practice individually and within congregations. She also includes questions for group reflection for each practice at the end of the book.

Pohl begins by exploring the practice of gratitude—a response to understanding that our lives are redeemed by grace. Gratitude is central to sustaining our communal lives and its absence kills. However, gratitude is complicated by obliviousness, feelings of obligation, and the expectations of others. Pohl is most adept in describing how gratitude is deformed, both individually and communally. She eloquently depicts the effects of envy and its destructive impact on the community as well as the results of grumbling and using gratitude to gain power and favor. It is obvious she has spent much time considering how these deformations are played out in congregations. To offset these deformations, Pohl suggests creating habits of grateful reflection, testimony, blessing, and Sabbath-keeping.

Pohl moves to promise-making and keeping in the second section. Promises and the related topics of fidelity and commitment are the internal framework that supports relationships. Yet, like gratitude, promises are complicated. Our culture no longer supports promise-keeping. Utilitarian attitudes and carelessness undermine our capacity to honor trust-filled commitments. Here again, Pohl does not hesitate to delve into the messiness of communal life. We often betray and abandon each other and fail to endure hard times patiently. We too-easily cast aside vows. As this section concludes, she suggests ways leaders and congregations can assist their members as they struggle to keep commitments large and small.

The third section examines the practice of living truthfully. Living truthfully involves much more than just conveying the facts, but instead consists of “truth-shaped living.” As such, it encompasses reliability, faithfulness, and the telling of many types of truth. Truth-telling is not easy and Pohl identifies every complication, especially how those complications play out in a congregation. She has a keen eye (and ear) for how deeply the various forms of lying are embedded in our lives and our communities. In the final chapter of this section she explores the many ways we deform the truth. Once again Pohl suggests practical methods for strengthening truth-shaped living, both individually and communally. One of the strengths of this section is that the question of whether it is ever proper to lie is explored from different viewpoints.

The final section explores the practice of hospitality. Pohl has written extensively on hospitality in *Making Room* and states that she does not wish to review that material here. Thus, the section on hospitality consists of one chapter, which succinctly explores the history and tradition of hospitality, its complications, and deformations. For complications and deformations she moves to a question and answer format to explore common difficulties in offering hospitality to those who need it most but are often unable to respond to it or openly abuse it. The chapter closes by offering the ways in which the four practices are intertwined.

This book is full of wisdom for individuals and communities. It underlines practices that are often overlooked as we focus on getting things done in our congregations. However, its real strength is in highlighting how difficult these seemingly easy practices are and how all of us fail in them. I highly recommend this book to communities wishing to deepen their life together.

Reviewed by

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