



Q&A ABOUT THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is one of the spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith. It is a time to focus on God while abstaining from food.

In the words of Richard J. Foster, in *Celebration of Discipline*, "in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from food as we are feasting on the word of God." (pg. 55, Foster, 1988)

Fasting involves avoiding eating and beverages (except water) for a period of time, in most cases, for 24 hours.

WHY ARE WE FASTING?

During our Season of Prayer we are fasting as we seek to discern the will of God for our church.

Fasting is always associated with prayer. In going without food for a period of time, we seek to remind ourselves of our dependence on God. The discipline of fasting is not an extreme diet nor to "force God to act on your behalf". During a fast, we seek to focus on God to discern the will of God

Are there different ways to fast?

Yes, you can have a) a **complete fast** or b) a **partial fast**.

A **complete fast** can last for a 24 hours' duration.

Intake

(a) Water only (add a teaspoon of lemon juice if the taste bothers you).

(b) Nothing- no food or drink.

Advice

If you have never fasted before it would be better to start at noon, i.e. Noon on the first day to noon on the day after.

Unless you feel called to an absolute fast it is advisable to drink water. If the weather is very cold heat the water.

A **partial fast** it is a fast with a duration of less than 24 hours.

Limitations

Miss one or more meals during the day.

Advice

The following are advised to choose a partial fast: heavy manual workers, young children and the elderly.

Those under doctor's care?

If you are under a doctor, you are advised *not* to fast; this includes pregnant mothers and heart patients.

For people with diabetes, it is important to keep your calorie intake at the level needed to balance your insulin dosage.

For those who deal with eating disorders, here is a prayerful suggestion from someone who has lived with eating issues: "Instead of fasting, meditate on Jesus' commandment to "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Take time to ponder the latter part of the verse. Meditate on loving yourself and the greatness of God's love for you. Meditate on how God desires your fullness of life. After resting as long as you need in God's great love for you, move into intercessory prayer for others.

IS FASTING CHRISTIAN?

Jesus did not invent fasting. But the Bible offers us examples of Jesus participating in a time of fasting (Mark 1 :9-13; Luke 4:1-13; Matthew 4:1-11). As well, in Matthew 6, Jesus teaches his disciples about fasting (Matthew 6) and in Acts 13, the early church participating in fasting.

Fasting continued in the early centuries of Christianity, For example, Peter Chrysologus in the fifth century writes:

'Prayer, acts of compassion, fasting- these three are one and give life to one another. For fasting is the soul of prayer, compassion is the life of fasting. Let no one separate them, for they will not allow themselves to be separated-... My friend; offer God your soul, and offer the oblation of fasting, so that your soul may be a pure offering, a holy sacrifice, a living victim that may both remain as yours and also be forever given to God... Only those who give themselves can truly call themselves their own.'

During the Reformation, the value of fasting was reasserted. The Protestant reformers insisted that fasting was not a meritorious work for compelling God's favor an apt way to respond to God's freely given mercy. They went back to the New Testament picture of the Christian life as dying to self (of which fasting is a natural expression) and rising with Christ. They also saw the need for cities, nations and churches to turn back to God in penitent fasting. Among the Catholic reformers, St Francis de Sales warned seekers against going in for extravagant fasts; what counted was the inner surrender to God.

BUT THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA DOES NOT PRACTICE FASTING?

While there has not been a general practice of fasting in The United Church of Canada and to many of its members the practice seems foreign, fasting continues to be recognized as a practice within the Christian faith.

The uniting denominations forming The United Church of Canada practiced fasting in one way or another.

In the Reformed tradition, John Calvin actually wrote extensively and eloquently on the virtues of fasting in *the Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He says that, "according to the need of the times, [pastors] should exhort the people either to fasting or to solemn supplications, or to other acts of humility, repentance, and faith" (4.12.14).

The early Methodists fasted regularly and in later Methodism persons were encouraged to fast from time to time.

Fasting is a part of the history of The United Church of Canada.

IS THERE ANY PRACTICAL GUIDANCE?

Here are some things to bear in mind.

1. Do not over eat before you begin a fast.
2. Break your fast with a light meal.
3. During your fast, sip on water with little lemon juice added.
4. While you fast refrain from drawing attention to the fact that you are fasting. Continue to perform your usual duties and activities.
5. Begin your time of fasting with a prayer
6. End your time of fasting with a prayer
7. While fasting take the opportunities that become available to pray