

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

Risk-Taking Mission and Service

Frankton – 7/27/14/

Scripture: Matthew 25.34-40 to the least of these

Proposition: Christ's life was spent showing us that we need to care for the least, the last, the lost, the lonely, and the left-out

[SLIDE] I need to have the ushers come forward and help me for a minute. We are finishing up this series of sermons based on the Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Five Principles of Fruitful Congregations*. To remind you that we are to be fruitful, every week we've given different fruits to you. For Radical Hospitality it was a raspberry. For intentional Faith Development it was muffin (we kind of cheated a little on that one. Then came Passionate Worship and we gave you dark chocolate covered pomegranates. (You really liked that one.) Then last week we talked about Extravagant Generosity and we gave out maraschino cherries. Today we're giving out grapes. So if the ushers will come forward we'll get those out to you. So as the ushers distribute these pink lady apples, you don't have to wait for everyone to get theirs, once you get yours, you can mow down on it or you can wait and savor it at your leisure.

In his book, Schnase outlines five specific areas that he has seen be effective in growing congregations: **[SLIDE]** **Radical** Hospitality, Intentional Faith Development, Passionate Worship, We talked about Radical Hospitality and how churches that practice Radical Hospitality go above and beyond what is expected because the church folks love those who do not have a relationship with Christ, so they go out of their way to show them Christ. For Intentional faith Development, Christians understand that in order for them to have a good relationship with Christ, they must work on that relationship through Bible study, prayer, small group participation, etc. We talked about Passionate Worship and how we all need to prepare through week by being close to God so that our worship of him on Sunday is more passionate. **[SLIDE]** In Extravagant Generosity we learned our giving reflects God's nature within us. Today: the last one, Risk –Taking Mission and Service.

[SLIDE] Risk-Taking Mission and Service includes efforts to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ... **[SLIDE]** (And here's a key) ...whether or not these people will ever be a part of the community of faith. Risk-taking mission and service is one of the fundamental activities of church life that is so critical that failure to practice it in some form results in a deterioration of the church's vitality and ability to make disciples. When a church turns inward, using all its resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then its spiritual vitality dies. Risk-taking mission and service is where we put our work boots on and GO out into God's world to show God's love for them and our love for them. In Matthew, Jesus calls us to GO and make disciples, not sit and wait on them to come to us. Go: our action on God's part for his people.

There is a difference between mission and service. **[SLIDE]** Service is works intended to build up the body of Christ, the community of the church. The responsibility for doing that falls to all those who love the church to use their talents and energy. Making ourselves useful for the purpose of building the Body of Christ instills our lives with purpose and connects us to others. Genuine

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and generous service makes a positive difference in God's world for God's people. Ordinary Christian service takes many forms. Keeping the church alive and fulfilling its purpose require the active and regular service of regular attendees. The volunteer impulse, animated by the spirit of God in Christ, causes people to give time generously to help with ushering, assisting in the kitchen, singing in the praise team, serving on church teams, visiting the homebound or hospitalized, and teaching Sunday school. Service is to the Body of Christ, the church. It has an inward focus.

While service is inward focused, [SLIDE] mission turns churches focus outward. Mission reminds the congregation that Christ's compassion, grace, mercy and love extend to the entire world, and these fruits are cultivated not only within the walls of the church or among the people of the Body of Christ who are regularly seen and already known. Mission refers to the positive difference made in the lives of folks beyond the four walls of the church. Mission spreads faith by exemplifying the compassion, mercy and justice of Christ in the world. The stories, teachings, and parables of Jesus consistently point toward God's love for the poor, the sick, the outcast, the least, the last, the lost, the lonely, and the left-out - those most vulnerable to the oppressions of society. God's way includes demonstrations of love to the least likely folks. That's mission.

[SLIDE] Risk-Taking Mission and Service absolutely changes lives, and it does so in at least three ways. Number 1: Folks who receive the help of mission teams have their lives changed. Folks whose homes have been destroyed or those who live in abject poverty have their lives somehow changed by people who come and make their homes or churches or communities better. They see the mission workers there helping them into a better situation. Even if it just the physical work a team does, that alone changes people's lives. But it can also change their live spiritually and certainly emotionally. Number 2: Mission also change the lives of volunteers. Nobody returns from such a trip and looks at his or her own life in the same way again. Experiences and engagements with those who have traumatically suffered or those who are genuinely poor have the effect of shining a light back on one's own culture, and it extravagance, consumerism, materialism and waste. My guess is that if you ask anyone who has ever gone on a mission trip, they will tell you it changed them. And number 3: Hands on mission initiatives also change churches. Even when just a small percentage of those attending worship immerse themselves in significant mission and service, the texture of church life changes. The language of service and outreach begins to form conversation and priorities. Ministries of mercy and justice begin to take root. Tolerance increases, youth programs evolve into something more than just parties, videos, and games.

This church is a great example of what I just spoke about. Many of you know the story. Back in August, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf coast – and hit it well. In November of 2006, we sent a team of folks down to the Biloxi, Mississippi to help clean up and rebuild. We sent about 15 -17 people from this church, and at the time our average attendance was about 75-80 people on Sunday. That's a pretty high percentage of people going – especially this was really the first mission trip the church had taken in an extremely long time. We went down to Biloxi and spent a week clean and rebuilding. The group members grew closer together – you can't help but build relationships with folks when you spend a week with them. The group grew spiritually as well. And when we came back, the group set this church on fire for mission. And we have stayed that way ever since. Because of that mission trip, our church changed. We now have mission as a part of the DNA of this church. And that is really important.

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The life of mission and service flows naturally and inescapably from the teachings of Jesus Christ, and no congregation or disciple can avoid the direct gift and demand of God's call to love and serve others. A disciple who does not perform service and mission is really not much of a disciple at all. A church without service and mission dies like a tree with neither roots nor fruit, without nourishment or purpose.

Why use the phrase "Risk-Taking" when we talk about mission and service. Risk-Taking steps into greater uncertainty, a higher possibility of discomfort, resistance or sacrifice. [SLIDE] Risk-Taking Mission and Service takes people into ministries that push them out of their comfort zone. It stretches them beyond the circle of relationships and practices that routinely define their faith communities. God uses such ministries to expose church folks to people, situations, and needs that they would never ordinarily encounter and that reveal to them spiritual qualities and practical talents that they would never discover. The most poignant of Jesus' teachings and practices were costly demonstrations of unexpected love that transformed lives, families, communities, and the world.

You see, the hard part of Christian discipleship is to love those for whom it is not automatic, easy, common, or accepted. To love those who do not think like us, look like us, or live like us and to express respect, compassion and mercy to those we do not know and who may never be able to repay us – this is the love Christ pulls out of us. Risk-Taking Mission and Service involves work that stretches people, causing them to do something for the good of others that they would never have considered doing if it were not for their relationship with Christ and their desire to serve him. Risk-Taking draws our attention to the truth that many of our most urgent ministries have an uncertain, unpredictable quality. We don't know how they will turn out how effective they will be, or how they will affect us.

I want to go at this from a different perspective for just a minute. The United Methodist Church in rural Saint James, Missouri, had a couple who continued to attend church for several months. When the pastor invited them into membership, they said they were not ready to join. They preferred simply to attend – and they still kept attending. In the fall one year, a tornado swept through the community, destroying several houses and businesses. St. James UMC immediately mobilized in response to the disaster. They became the headquarters for the Red Cross, helping find shelter for those who had lost their homes, providing food and shelter for volunteers and first responders, and channeling resources from other UM churches in the area, and in the greater region.

On the Sunday following the tornado, the couple who had been attending stepped up to the pastor and asked about how to become members saying, [SLIDE] "When we saw how this church responded to the victims of the tornado, we knew this is the kind of church we want to belong to." The goal of Risk-Taking Mission and Service is not to increase the church's membership, but increased membership is often the fruit of the practice of Risk-Taking Mission and Service. People want to belong to churches that make a real difference in their lives and in the lives of others.

God places congregations in a world troubled by many challenges. Some areas have rampant poverty. Some areas have natural disasters hit them. Some areas have other things that cause human suffering, such as high crime rates or lots of drug use or armed conflicts. As followers of Christ, we cannot live as if these things had nothing to do with us – no matter where they occur.

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Whether it's the high crime rate in Indianapolis or the Israel-Gaza conflict or the whole Ukraine thing. If anything, being a follower of Christ moves us closer to the suffering of folks, not further away. We cannot walk around obvious suffering, ignoring it, and denying it like the two gentlemen who preceded the Good Samaritan down the road to Jericho. Rather, I remind you of what Jesus said in our scripture today when Jesus told us that when we give a glass of water, or a bite of food or a coat or a bit of our time, we are really giving it to him. And when we ignore the pleas of the folks who need water or food or a coat or some of our time, we are ignoring him. I don't want to ignore Jesus, and I certainly don't want this church to ignore Jesus.

And here's the last thing I want to mention. We can't whine about how somebody ought to do something and then not do something ourselves. And here's a really big one: we cannot merely lift up those who suffer in our prayers. When we just whine and don't do anything or just pray and don't follow up with something, we are asking God to do for us what God created us to do. There's a comic strip I have at my desk. **[SLIDE]** There are two people talking in the strip. In the first frame, one of them says, "Sometimes I'd like to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice when he could do something about it." His friend replies, "What's stopping you?" The next frame has the first person responding, "I'm afraid God might ask me the same question."

Don't let God ask you that question. Do something about it. Practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Make a positive difference in God's world for some of God's children.