

## Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

### Intentional Faith Development

Frankton - 6/22/14

Scripture: Acts 2.42-47 teaching and fellowship

Proposition: Intentional faith development is our way of putting ourselves in God's hands to be molded.

**[SLIDE]** I need to have the ushers come forward and help me for a minute. We are in a 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're going to give you a different fruit. Today we are going to talk about developing your faith and that requires some brain power. Naturally any fruit is considered good food for the brain so really any fruit would do for this morning. The NOW team helped me on this and we chose a fruit muffin. So as the ushers pass out these muffins, 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. He believes these five practices to be imperative for a church to perform in order to it to be successful in its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. These five practices are what this sermon series details: **[SLIDE]** Radical Hospitality, Intentional Faith Development, Passionate Worship, **[SLIDE]** Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity. We have adopted these practices. We have our church mission: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We have our vision: Building God's Community. And we believe the five practices are how we are best going to accomplish our mission and vision. Last week 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. This week we're going to tackle Intentional Faith Development.

**[SLIDE]** Long, long ago, in a remote village half-a-day's walk outside of Jerusalem, a woman fed dried branches into her fire as she prepared to make bread for the day. She sighed deeply at the prospect of another day of unending work just to scrape enough food together to feed her daughters and herself. Since her husband's death, she had felt abandoned and alone in ways she could barely fathom. She dipped her hands into the water of a small basin that sat beside the vase she had carried from the well long before sunrise. As she felt the cool water trickle through her fingers, she thought about the story she had heard the night before as she gathered with her neighbors for prayer and supper. It was a story about a women who met Jesus at a well, where he talked about "living water." She also remembered the story someone told about Jesus touching the man who had been paralyzed for so long. Then a stream of Jesus stories cascaded trough her mind, tumbling one into another.

She had heard about Jesus for the first time only a few months earlier, and now his stories were her stories. Word spread about his horrible death, and then, amazingly, his being alive and about his followers gathering first in Jerusalem and then here and there in other villages. She began to listen and what she heard amazed her. And the people who told the stories invited her into their

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homes. Her, into their homes. She could hardly believe it. Everyone knew that without a husband, she was a societal outcast, on her own, destitute. But these people treated her differently. She and her daughters ate with them, receiving more than they could ever repay. Her hosts prayed for her and with her for her daughters.

This unexpected love changed everything in her life. Suddenly she didn't feel abandoned and alone; she felt connected and loved, like her life counted for something. Now, she couldn't get enough of the stories or of her friends, these followers of Jesus. Whenever and wherever friends gathered to retell the stories, she was there, and she then retold them to her daughters and other neighbors. She loved learning more about Jesus, hearing about God, and building friendships with others. The stories carried her to the well and back each morning and sustained her through the daily task of feeding her family; and with the stories in her heart and friends at her side, the burdens felt lighter and the days more full.

**[SLIDE]** Seventeen hundred and fifty years later, in a small thatched-roof cottage in a hamlet an hour's carriage ride from London, a man held his small journal close to the lamp as he wrote his account of the evening's gathering. He was tired; it had been a long day. He began working the fields before sunrise and labored alongside other men from the hamlet until after sunset. But unlike many of the others, he did not end his day with work in the field. Instead, he washed up as best he could and ate a quick meal so he could prepare his home, re-read the scripture quietly to himself, and pray for the Spirit's guidance. As a Methodist Class Leader, before they began arriving, he had already prayed for each person he expected to come. One by one they began showing up until his home was filled with laughter and the blessings of the good-natured chatter of a dozen of his friends and brothers.

When everyone had arrived, he reminded them of Mr. Wesley's general rules for classes which were the basis of the covenant they had made with each other: to do good to everyone, to do no harm to anyone, and to love God by attending worship, receiving the Lord's Supper, praying and searching the scriptures. Leaning toward the lamp, he read to them their pledge to watch over the souls of one another, to practice diligence and frugality. Then he lead them in singing and prayer, and then began to describe how it was with his soul, his joys and sorrows, temptations and trials, and times when God had rescued him throughout the week. He asked the others about the state of their souls, and each in turn spoke about his life and God's grace during the past week.

He shared the scripture that he had prepared, and talked about the thoughts that had come to him about those verses. He led them in praying for one another and then collected coins from each to give to the steward for the work of God, carefully recording the amount beside the name of each giver. He offered the blessing of Christ, and they bid him farewell to return to their own homes, leaving him with his journal. He noted attendance and marked his appraisal of the spiritual state of each member. Then he snuffed the lamp and took his rest. It had been a long day, but he felt grateful beyond words for his life, his faith, and his friends. He felt renewed, strengthened and encouraged. By his work in the fields, he made a living. By the care of souls, he made a life.

**[SLIDE]** Two hundred and fifty years later, a young woman pulls into the church parking lot just before the session begins. She's running a little late. Like most Tuesday's she's still wearing her suit from work, going through her evening as a blur of movement from office to school to soccer practice to fast-food drive-thru and finally to church. Her son dumps his food wrappers in a trash

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bin beside the door as he carries his school books into the building. He'll work on homework while his mom does her "Bible thing." She slips into the room as the video begins. Her closest friend is there and welcomes her into the seat beside her. They had signed up together, deciding to "just do it" after years of wanting to study the Bible.

The class also includes two couples; two older women; a graduate student from the local university; and the leader, recently retired from the bank. She knew of but didn't really know most of these people before she signed up for the Bible study, but she's been amazed at how much she's learned from them as they've shared their thoughts about faith and God and Scripture. She's also amazed at how much she's come to care for them as they've shared their lives. The Tuesday evening study has become a time of refreshment for her each week, an oasis of encouragement, learning and support. For about ten minutes, they listen to a seminary professor on the video talk about the stories of Moses, his birth and marriage and encounter with God. Then they walk through the readings, sharing their observations and questions.

Every day for the past week, she has spent time reading scripture, sometimes lost in the archaic cultural practices and customs; sometimes confused by the stories and characters. She has so many questions about God. She wasn't sure she had the time for this kind of study, and sometimes even now she thinks she's wasting her time. Moses seems way back then and way over there. Then the leader talks about Moses' call – the bush, the fear, the humility, and the excuses given to avoid doing what God asks. Her stomach tightens as she hears her classmates tell about the times they've felt called by God to do something and have repeated the same excuses themselves. She looks at her own notes from her readings throughout the week, and sees the questions she wrote. "How does God call people? Sometimes I feel like I'm being called but I've never seen the burning bush. Am I being called?" She shares her questions with others and discovers they wrestle with the same thoughts.

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Intentional Faith Development. **[SLIDE]** From the first generations of Christians like the woman baking bread to the earliest Methodists like the class leader to the youngest generations of faithful members today like the soccer mom, the followers of Jesus Christ mature in their faith by learning together in community. Churches that practice Intentional Faith Development offer high quality learning experiences that help people understand scripture, faith, and life. Sunday school classes, Bible studies, short-term topical studies, support groups that apply faith to particular life challenges, Kid's Korner, Vacation Bible School, men's and women's groups, camps, retreats, and youth groups are some of the ways churches provide ways of Intentional Faith Development. Growing in Christ requires more than weekly worship, and it is through Intentional Faith Development that God's Spirit works in us.

Christian faith is not static, but rather Christian faith is dynamic. Growing to be "little Christs" is the goal and end of our faith. The change God works in us through the spirit results in a deeper awareness of God's presence in our lives and it also increases our desire to serve God and our neighbor. By God's grace we become new persons on our way to becoming "little Christs." This growth in Christ spans a lifetime. Wesley was passionate about Christians maturing toward a full faith. He called early Methodists to practices that fostered faith through a learning community. In other words, in our community of learning and faith development, we grow into "little Christs" not by leaps and bounds, but rather day by day. **[SLIDE]** Stephen Schwartz' play "Godspell"

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says that we should ask for three things as our faith matures, “To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.”

There is an analogy about our Intentional Faith Development and the church that I want to bring to your attention. **[SLIDE]** Some people equate our faith journey to someone entering the church through the front door; that’s the beginning of faith, coming through the front door. We all know that some people never really get any farther in their faith development than coming through the front door. We see them come to church and before long we don’t see them coming to church. They’ve stopped. Pastors like to say that these folks slipped out the back door. There are really only two reasons for this. The first reason is that these folks chose not to take part in what was happening behind the middle doors of the church, the places where intentional faith development happens. They chose not to get involved in Bible studies, Vacation Bible School, praise team, mission trips, taking food to shut-ins, etc. They never opened a middle door, so they just kept going out the back.

The other reason that people slip out the back door is that no one in the church helped to open any of the middle doors for them. Those new folks felt welcomed and supported when they first came to church, and continued to feel a sense of belonging in worship. But when they tried to open the door to a Sunday school class or the praise team or the Bible study, the group felt cliquish and uninterested in welcoming new people. In other words, the group was holding the middle door closed to any new folks who might venture to come in. So rather than stay, these folks chose to go out the back door never having the opportunity to develop their faith in that particular church setting. Shame on the middle door holders. We must make sure the middle doors of our church are open to new folks who join.

**[SLIDE]** Intentional Faith Development changes churches. You see, congregations that practice intentional faith development are not afraid of failure and are willing to initiate new ministries of learning in community knowing that some will take root and last for potentially generations and some will not take any root and last for only a few months or weeks and then fade away. We need to understand that those ‘failures’ are important steps to finding the right methods to succeed. Edison tried and failed a thousand times before he perfected the incandescent light bulb. And yet look what a difference that made. So, when we start a new venture in intentional faith development, or any of the five practices, we need to remember that failure is a step on the path to success.

The gracious welcome of Christ deepens our sense of belonging through the congregation’s practice of Radical Hospitality. The practice of Intentional Faith Development matures our understanding and experience of Christ. We were all created in the image of Christ, but we smashed that image. No matter how dedicated our efforts, the transformation of human hearts and minds is God’s work through the Holy Spirit, and intentionally learning in community is our way of placing ourselves in the hands of God so God can sculpt our souls and re-create us in the image of Christ. All of us need to intentionally place our bodies on God’s sculpting table so he can work us into the masterful piece of art that he wants us to be.

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### CHILDREN'S CHAT

Hold a large, round loaf of bread in front of the children. Guess what needs to be done to the loaf in order for it to feed people? Answer: It has to be broken. But you don't want to break the loaf because it is so round and beautiful with a nice brown crust. Can people be fed by just coming to church and looking at the beautiful, unbroken loaf. The children will say "No!" The early church knew all about feeding people, which is why they did teaching, fellowship, prayer and "the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42). The first Christians were not interested in holding on to their bread and looking at it, but instead they broke it and shared it with anybody who had any need. Do you think these Christians were sad about breaking their bread? They loved to break their bread and share, and the Bible says that "they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (v. 46). Break your bread into pieces so that every child gets one, but ask them to be sure to go into the congregation and share their bread with someone else before they take their very first bite. The best way to enjoy a piece of bread is to break it and share it with someone else.

### MEMORIZING NOTES

### SERMON NOTES INSERT

*Sermon Notes, 6/22/14*

Intentional Faith Development      Acts 2.41-47

How do you think the woman baking bread felt about the stories of Jesus?

Why are small groups important in our intentional faith development?

Have you ever felt like the woman at the Bible study: "What do you want me to do, God?"

What does it mean to intentionally develop our faith?

How do you intentionally develop your faith?

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What does our church offer for intentional faith development

What more should our church offer for intentional faith development?

Name one action you can do this week that you can take from this sermon?