

Intentional Faith Development
Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Part 3

Acts 2:41-47; John 15:1-8

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

The principal at a Catholic high school received a call from an inmate at a nearby prison.

The man was known to be wealthy, but he had acquired his wealth by fraudulent means.

Now the man was offering to make a significant donation to the high school.

In return, he wanted the school to make it possible for his adult son,
a high school drop-out,
to receive a high school diploma.

As the principal inquired further, it became apparent that the inmate did not want the son to have to **do** anything to earn the diploma—
he simply wanted the son to be sent a diploma.

Why, the principal asked, did he care so much that his son, now in business for himself, receives his diploma?

The inmate replied, “Because education is important,”

II

The story is illuminating because we all agree that education is important,
but we also know it is a life-long process,

not a just a diploma printed on a piece of paper.

Education is not something to be checked off the list as accomplished.

A diploma, especially one received fraudulently, does not mean you are educated, anymore than a few speeding tickets makes you a NASCAR driver.

Faith is similar.

Faith is not simply something inherited from our ancestors, like the family silver service.

Nor can faith be purchased in a one-time transaction.

Faith is developing a relationship of trust with the living God.

Like all relationships, faith needs to be cultivated with time, attention, and effort.

Yet, many folks expect that their faith will pop full-blown out of a box with no real effort on their part.

We are focusing this morning on the third of the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:

Intentional Faith Development.

This is a spiritual practice.

It is the way by which we appropriate God's grace,
fully receive God's gifts...
in order to enter fully into the life God intends for us.

Intentional Faith Development is—

- **Intentional**, in that we are on a journey toward a specific destination;

- **Faith**, because it is not obvious—it is something we cannot see, but we know is real.
- **Development**, in that we need to take the gift we have been given and exercise it,
sharpen it,
make it stronger.

Intentional Faith Development means deliberately and purposefully growing our faith in Jesus Christ.

It's what faithful disciples do.

It's what fruitful congregations do.

Bishop Robert Schnase says that Intentional Faith Development means “deliberate effort, purposeful action toward an end, and high prioritization.” (68)

He draws a contrast between those congregations that take Intentional Faith Development seriously and those that offer it haphazardly and inconsistently, without initiative, plan, or purpose.

And he says that even small churches like ours...

“...can offer robust ministries of growing, learning, and maturing in faith by creating new opportunities for long-term members and newcomers to learn in community. It only takes ‘two or three gathered in [Jesus’] name’ to experience the presence of Christ and to grow together in faith.”

Why is this important?

Why do excellent churches pursue Intentional Faith Development?

Several things come to mind.

III

First, **Intentional Faith Development builds community.**

This is one of the greatest blessings God gives to God's children—
to live in community.

Now there is no doubt you can be a Christian by yourself.

You can spend this hour hiking in the woods, praying and communing with God and nature.

Many people view faith that way.

But being part of a community of faith means you have chosen to undertake the journey of faith in fellowship with others.

You realize that living as a follower of Jesus is not a solo venture.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, theologian, and martyr for the faith, said,

“Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we participate.”

Jesus saw the value in small groups.

How many disciples did he choose?

12,000?

1,200?

No, just 12!

Jesus wanted to begin with a small group of people who would put roots down in his teachings and make them the center of their lives.

He knew that people grow best in community—
especially small, intentional groups devoted to spiritual growth.

Jesus plainly said to his disciples:

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

And he gave them, and us, a clear picture of what is expected of his followers:

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples (John 15:8).

Later in John 15:16 Jesus says:

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

IV

The early church excelled in building community.

Acts 2 give us a picture of the church as it was being formed on the Day of Pentecost when God's Spirit was poured out upon the gathering of believers.

In response to Peter's Pentecost Day sermon, a large number of folks—
3000 according to Luke—

professed faith in Christ and were baptized into this new community of faith.

Acts 2:42 says, "*They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*"

Luke goes on to describe how those early followers of Jesus shared their goods with those in need,

gathered daily in the temple for worship,
broke bread together in their homes,
and shared their food “with glad and generous hearts, praising
God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

Some are quick to dismiss this as an idealized portrait of the early church,
or as a temporary state due to its small size at the time.

Some write this off as an undesirable attempt at a socialist utopia.

But the fact remains that the earliest description we have of the early church called for celebrating God’s generous outpouring of love and grace by being generous ourselves and by showing practical concern for one another.

So we cannot escape Luke’s point:

Christian community is all about relationships.

The church needs to focus its energies on helping people build relationships—
first with God,
then with each other.

Living in community, we find that the church is our spiritual home from which we can face the world.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott shares an incident from the childhood of her pastor that illustrates our need for community.

As a child of about seven, Veronica got lost one day. She ran up and down the streets of the town where she lived, but didn’t recognize a single landmark. She was very frightened.

Finally a police officer stopped to help her. He put her in his squad car, and they drove around until finally, she saw her church. She pointed it out to the officer and told him, “You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can find my way home.”

Anne Lamott writes:

“That is why I have stayed close to my church—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their comforting voices, I can always find my way home.”

As we intentionally deepen our faith in Jesus Christ,
we also grow in community so that this place will always be here
to help God’s children find their way home.

V

Second, **Intentional Faith Development also communicates content.**

While relationships are very important, there are also things you need to know to be a strong, vibrant, fruitful Christian.

You need to have a basic understanding of the Bible.

You need to know something about Presbyterian theology and church polity.

You need to be able to deal with life’s tough issues on a deeper level.

You need to have some idea of your spiritual gifts and you need to engage your mind and energy in some form of mission and ministry.

It’s important to be intentional about how you develop the content of your faith.

Robert Schnase writes:

“Intentional faith development describes the practice of churches that view the ministries of Christian education and formation, small group work, and Bible study as absolutely critical to their mission and consistently offers opportunities for people of all ages, interests, and faith experience, to learn in community. They consciously and deliberately cover the whole age spectrum, fostering faith development outside of worship during the course of the year for children, youth, young adults, singles, couples, middle-aged adults, and older adults. They support and maintain existing Sunday school classes, studies, choirs, and women’s and men’s organizations, but they also continually fill the gaps with short-term, long-term, and topical small group ministries and start new classes especially designed for visitors and new members.”

Haphazard religion is weak and unfocused.

But when we intentionally exercise our spirits as well as our minds,
then we approach the journey of faith from a much deeper perspective.

Learning the content of our faith gives us a healthy spiritual perspective—
eyes to see God at work in the world;
ears to hear the Holy Spirit’s message to us;
a mouth to speak a word of Good News;
arms to reach out in love to others;
legs to walk the walk of a disciple of Jesus;
and a heart to be in communion with God and God’s people.

VI

Third, Intentional Faith Development means sharing our faith with others.

Has anyone ever given you a jar of starter for sourdough bread?

If you’ve ever received such a gift, you know how this works.

The starter consists of the yeast culture that makes the bread, and you have to feed it for a number of days with flour and sugar.

At the right time, when it's bubbling up, you add the other ingredients, mix it up.

Then you knead it, let it rise, bake it, and the result is a couple of loaves of fresh delicious, sourdough bread.

Oh, and you always reserve a cup of the starter for the next batch.

Sourdough starter can be kept for generations,
and the more you give it away,
the more it makes.

I suppose if everyone gave and received sourdough starter to its full capacity,
eventually everyone in the world would have a loaf of bread.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is like the sourdough starter.

For it to work, it has to be fed.

We have to nourish our faith,
or it will die,
just like the starter.

But when our faith is fully developed,
just like the starter that is made into bread,
it is really, really good.

And our faith is like sourdough starter because it is meant to be shared—
shared in how we treat the people we encounter,
showing kindness, love, respect, and encouragement,
especially to the downtrodden;

how we invite those without a church home to visit our congregation;
 how we welcome newcomers, first-time visitors, into our community
 of faith;
 how we seek to passionately worship God
 and serve God in creative, risk-taking ways
 every day of our lives.

VII

Fourth, **Intentional Faith Development supports the outworking of God’s plan of salvation in our lives.**

In Acts 2:47 we read, “*And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*”

Some Christians think of salvation as a onetime event—
 the moment in their lives when they accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Perhaps at baptism or confirmation,
 or at church camp or at an evangelistic meeting,
 or in some other moment of dramatic spiritual experience.

But the gift of salvation through Christ is not a onetime event, but a process,
 a day-by-day walk with God,
 learning and growing intentionally along the way.

It’s expressed best in the song from the musical *Godspell*:

*Day by day, day by day,
 O dear Lord, three things I pray:
 To see thee more clearly,
 Love thee more dearly,
 Follow thee more nearly,
 Day by day.*

Our mission is not merely to “get people saved”—
to have an initial experience with Christ—
but to support them in becoming fully formed disciples of Christ.

As Jesus told his followers in Matthew 28:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

The first command of Jesus to his church was to *make disciples*.

The primary task of the church is to *make disciples*.

When a church adopts an intentional process of faith development that seeks to meet the needs of all ages,
then those who are involved in the church’s ministries can deepen their faith.

They can discover and begin to use their spiritual gifts in Christ’s mission.

They can be active in the various ministries of Christ’s church both within the congregation and in the wider community.

One of God’s children who entered into the process of Intentional Faith Development is Irish rock singer Bono.

Famous for his music with his band U2, Bono has also been quite public about his Christian faith and his activism on behalf of social issues, including the AIDS crisis in Africa.

Bono has been knighted by the Queen of England,
nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize,
and he, along with Bill and Melinda Gates, was *Time Magazine’s*
Person of the Year in 2009.

He talks about the process of faith development in his life:

Your nature is a hard thing to change; it take time...I have heard of people who have a life-changing, miraculous turnaround, people set free from addiction after a single prayer, relationships saved where both parties “let go, and let God.” But it was not like that for me. For all that “I was lost, I am found,” it is probably more accurate to say, “I was really lost. I’m a little less lost at the moment.” And then a little less and a little less again. That to me is the spiritual life. The slow reworking and rebooting the computer at regular intervals, reading the small print of the service manual. It has slowly rebuilt me in a better image. It has taken years, though, and it is not over yet.

VIII

Friends, Bono is right: It is not over yet for any of us.

God is not through with you or with me.

Jesus invites us into the ongoing process of spiritual transformation.

He welcomes us with Radical Hospitality.

He touches our spirits through Passionate Worship

We engage with him in Intentional Faith Development.

Next week we will talk about how that transformation propels us into Risk-Taking Mission and Service.

Today we celebrate God’s call upon each of our lives—
 the call to build community,
 to share our faith with others,

and to support the process of spiritual growth in every person in this congregation.

As you abide in Christ, may your faith deepen and mature through all the years God gives you on this earth.

And, as Paul wrote in Philippians 2...

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Amen.

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