

FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS

INTENTIONAL FAITH DEVELOPMENT



GRACE
LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Today we continue our five part sermon series *called Faith Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. For those of you who are listening to a sermon in this series for the first time, it is based on a series of congregational discussion and planning resources written by a Methodist bishop, Robert Schnase. Thus far we have explored *Radical Hospitality* and *Passionate Worship*. In both cases there is a degree of intentionality in planning and practicing Christian worship so that both experiences are vibrant, inclusive and inviting.

Today we pair the word *Intentional* with *Faith Development*. The scriptural passages for this discussion are from the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, the eleven remaining disciples of Jesus go to Galilee and there they meet the resurrected Christ on a mountain. He says to them:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age. [Matthew 28:18b-20, NRSV]

This text is often called the great commission and is used by many to describe the essential purpose of the church. There are four distinct tasks:

1. Go and make disciples
2. Baptize in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit
3. Teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
4. Remember that I am with you always – even to the end of the age.

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And in the end of second chapter of the Book of Acts, following the story of Pentecost and a sermon by Peter, the author of Acts (Luke) writes these words:

So those who welcome his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. [Acts 2:41-42, NRSV]

So we can conclude from the reading of both of these passages that teaching and growing in faith was an important dynamic of the early Christian Church. From the very beginning they practiced *Intentional Faith Development*.

In the previously mentioned resource, the author writes:

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Intentional Faith Development. From the first generation of Christians to the youngest generations of faithful members today, the followers of Jesus mature in faith by learning together in community. Churches that practices Intentional Faith Development offer high quality learning experiences that help people understand Scripture, faith, and life in the supportive nurture of caring relationships. Christian disciples strive to develop faith and grow in Christ-likeness through study and learning, and God is best able to form disciples when people do this together and not by themselves. [Intentional Faith Development, p. 9]

So Intentional Faith Development involves:

- Offering high quality learning experiences in the midst of community that;
- Help people understand the scriptures, understand faith, and
- Grow in Christ-likeness to live as living boldly as Christians out in the world.

This practice of learning in community is the same way that Jesus taught his disciples. Everywhere he went he gathered people into community. He told stories and taught lessons that helped them to understand and interpret scriptures. He did this in homes, around dinner tables, on hillsides and mountains, in the Temple, and even along the

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sea shore. He went wherever the people were and then, having taught them, sent them out into the world.

So what kinds of things do we do as the church that fall under this category of faith development? Essentially it is everything that we do that helps people to grow in faith and in their understanding of and love for God.

This includes bible studies, Sunday school classes, spiritual retreats, youth programs, and other small group experiences.

Over the past nine months, I have been able to observe ways that this congregation has committed itself to intentional faith development for all ages:

- It begins with baptism and parents are instructed in the meaning of baptism and the ways that they can raise their children as Christian families and communities;
- There are the children's messages that are offered here in worship followed by the learning experiences for children Pre-K through 6th grade.
- There is the Growing in Grace Preschool that helps young children development basic learning skills in a Christian context.
- There is the confirmation program we offer for 7th and 8th graders on alternating Sunday nights to help them learn what Lutherans believe and how they can affirm their parents baptismal promises.
- There are the programs that are offered for our high school youth, who meet once a month at Bagels by the Book; and who are invited to participate in annual mission trips or Youth Gatherings
- There are the programs we offer for learning as adults, including our Tuesday afternoon bible study group.

These are learning activities done in community that are currently offered more. And there is a certain level of intentionality in what is planned and offered. But the question is, "Is there more this congregation could and should do to help people grow in faith as disciples of Jesus Christ?"

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- Grace offers a lot of instruction and activities for its children and youth; but what about adults?
- Are there adult programs that take into account the needs and schedules of men and women, young adults and seniors, those with considerable biblical learning experiences as well as those who are just beginning to explore scripture.
- Grace offers a lot of instruction that meets the needs of our members, but do the members of Grace intentionally let those outside of its membership know what Grace has to offer?
- As ministry teams and committees meet do they begin not only with prayer but also with experiences that help team members grow in faith?

These are questions that should be asked now as well as beyond this interim time.

Finally, I want to say a few words about the difference between church membership and discipleship. So often the goals and priorities of congregations are based on the need to increase membership. And there is nothing wrong with a congregation whose membership is growing. But in most congregations membership is the end game. Get them in and keep them in.

However, there is a more important goal that should be pursued. That is to grow disciples. Disciples are not only members of congregations. They are people of faith who practice their faith on a daily basis and who understand that discipleship means constantly exploring what the scriptures say, applying what they learn to their daily lives, and who reach out to others and invite them into community to learn and to grow. That is *Intentional Faith Development*.

Resources

Schnase, Robert. *Five Practices: Intentional Development*. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2008)

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