

An Excited Church

Learning in Community

Frankton – 10/04/15

Scripture: Galatians 5.22-23 Fruit of the Spirit

Proposition: Intentional faith development yields the fruit of the Spirit

[SLIDE] Last week, we started a series of sermons that I'm calling "An Excited Church." It's based on Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Five Principles of Fruitful Congregations*. In his book, Schnase outlines five specific areas that he has seen be effective in growing congregations. These five practices are what this sermon series details: [SLIDE] Intentional Faith Development, Passionate Worship, and Radical Hospitality are the first three. [SLIDE] Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity are the last two. 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. That's how we live into making disciples. And we believe the five practices are how we are best going to accomplish our mission and vision.

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Intentional Faith Development. From the first generations of Christians to the youngest generations of faithful members today 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 passionate worship, and it is through intentional faith development that God's Spirit works in us.

Let me tell you a story. Carol joined a United Methodist Church, attended worship and Sunday school, and volunteered with some week-to-week projects and programs at the church. She and her husband had a turning point in their faith journey when they went with a mission team. Having come back from the mission trip with a renewed sense of spirit, she joined a Bible study. In that small supportive community of her class, she encountered truths she had been searching for. But more than that, she found God calling her to make a change in the direction and priorities of her life. [SLIDE] Her favorite saying about Bible study was, "Bible study messes with your life." It's her good natured and humorous way of telling others about her faith journey. The moral of the story: Learning in faith communities helps people explore possibilities that God may have for them that they never would have explored on their own.

Christian faith is not static, but rather Christian faith is dynamic. Growing to be "little Christs" is the goal 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 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* says that we

An Excited Church

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.”

As John Wesley and the early Methodists realized, growth in faith does not come easily or automatically. You don't just sit down in your chair one day and have a lightning bolt hit you giving you great faith. Growth in faith requires placing ourselves in community to learn the faith of others. We learn the life of Christ and the will of God by studying God's Word and through the experiences of other people sharing their faith journey with us. By joining a Bible study or a class or even a short term book study, we place ourselves in circumstances that help us grow our faith. Bible study isn't just about self-improvement, but about setting ourselves where God can shape us. It's intentionally putting us in a place where we are open to God's Word and his call for our lives. God uses faith-to-faith relationships to change us.

Learning in community also provides us accountability for our faith journeys. A seminary professor used to say, [SLIDE] “Everybody wants to want to study the Bible.” He was referring to the contrast between our good intentions and our actual practices. How many people each year on January 1 resolve to read the Bible daily and by the time February 1 rolls around, they've forgotten all about that resolution? Or maybe they actually get through Genesis and Exodus, but then they get to Leviticus – absolutely the most boring book in the Bible – and they stop dead in their tracks. Yet, reading and studying with friends over coffee and cookies works much better than trying it all on our own. In community there is natural accountability. There's someone there to which we feel accountable. And that helps spur us on even through Leviticus. That's why Jesus sent the disciples out two by two.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a mid-20th century theologian, reminds us that an incomparable joy results from the physical presence of other Christians. [SLIDE] He said, “We see in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the presence of Christ.” In community, the Christian no longer seeks his justification, his salvation, by the things he can do. But rather seeks his salvation through Christ alone. According to Bonhoeffer, every Christian needs another Christian when he or she becomes uncertain or discouraged. The Christ in one's own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of a brother or sister.

This growth in Christ spans a lifetime. Paul writes in Philippians that he hasn't obtained the goal of a being perfect Christian, but he says: *I press on* [4.12] because Christ has made him his own. Paul knew that faith moves, grows, changes and matures. As we mature in Christ, God cultivates in us the fruit of the spirit: [SLIDE] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. [Gal 5.22-23] These are the qualities to which the Christian aspires; these are the qualities God's Holy Spirit forms in us as we deepen our relationship with God through Christ. These qualities are all relational, and we only learn them in the presence of others through the practice of love.

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

An Excited Church

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. It's their loss.

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.

Intentional faith development changes churches. When church folks take their own spiritual growth seriously and immerse themselves in the study of scripture, in prayer, and in fellowship, they understand the purpose of the church and the point of ministry more clearly. Peter Drucker has said that "the purpose of leadership in the church is [SLIDE] not to make the church more business-like, but to make the church more church-like." While all of us can apply our own knowledge of business and how the world works so that our church can run better, we cannot lose sight of the purpose of the church which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

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.

[SLIDE] So how does this fit with my theme of "An Excited Church"? Here's how. 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. And as we let God sculpt us into the persons he wants us to be, he will be sculpting this church into the church he wants us to be. And that's exiting – to be what God wants us to be.

