

**Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
INTENTIONAL FAITH DEVELOPMENT**

Acts 2:42-47

Excellent churches grow faithful disciples.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
September 23, 2018

I love a good loaf of sourdough bread. Have you ever tried to make sourdough from scratch? You can't really make it from scratch because somebody has to give you a bag or bowl of "starter." The starter has the yeast culture that makes the bread rise, and you have to feed it for a number of days with flour and sugar. Then, at the proper time, you add the other ingredients for the bread, mix it up, let it rise, knead it, bake it, and you have several delicious loaves of fresh, hot sourdough bread. Some starters last for years, if the bread-maker is really diligent. My experience has been to make sourdough for a while until I get tired of it and then throw the whole mess away.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is similar to sourdough starter. First, 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 starter that is made into bread, it is really, really good. You are probably having to swallow right now, just thinking about that hot bread, slathered with butter, warm in your mouth... OK, enough! And finally, our faith is like sourdough because it is meant to be shared. 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.

We're not really talking about bread-making today, although it does make me wish for communion! We are talking about **INTENTIONAL FAITH DEVELOPMENT**. We are talking about deliberately and purposefully growing our faith in Jesus Christ. It's what faithful disciples do. It's what excellent churches do. It's one of the five practices of fruitful congregations. In his book by that title, Bishop Robert Schnase talks about intentional faith development. See if this sounds like First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith:

Intentional faith development describes the practice of congregations that view the ministries of Christian education, small-group work, faith-forming relationships, and Bible study as absolutely critical to their mission, and so they consistently offer

opportunities for people of all ages, interests, and faith experiences, to learn in community. ...Churches that practice Intentional Faith Development know the secret of small groups. They build the foundations of radical hospitality and passionate worship, and from there they create multiple opportunities for intentional faith development, both inside and outside the congregation.¹

I think intentional faith development is one of the things we do best. It's part of our DNA. In the mission and vision statements that were crafted right before I came, the first phrase in the vision is to be "Biblically informed," and the first action in the mission is to "study the Scriptures." We have a tremendous array of opportunities for learning and growth in our church: Sunday School classes, Bible studies, Wednesday Night Life groups, children's ministries, youth ministries, you name it. Whether you are young or old, there is a program for your age group and station in life. Still, less than half our members are involved in a small group. So why is this important? Why do excellent churches pursue intentional faith development?

Intentional faith development builds community. In a large church, it is critical to develop lots of small-group ministries, because we are too big for us all to be one big happy family. Small groups for faith development let us get to know others in a deeper way, to share life together, to support one another in crisis, to have companions along the journey. Schnase points out that small groups perform a double function in the life of a disciple. On the one hand, they are a source of support, encouragement, and direction. When we are struggling, it is such a blessing to have a group that can rally around us and help us along the way.

On the other hand, small groups can also hold us accountable. We all have good intentions. We all want to study the Bible more, or be faithful in attendance, or be more like Jesus, right? Left to our own devices, we do a pretty poor job of achieving our good intentions. You remember which road is paved with good intentions. But if we know

others are paying attention, if we know someone is going to follow up if we miss, if we know someone is going to ask, “How has your walk with Christ gone this week?” we’re much more likely to step up, get our priorities straight, and do something about our intentions—that’s accountability.

This is one of the blessings God gives his children—to live in community. 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 may participate.”²

The early church excelled in building community. From the day of Pentecost, they ate together, prayed together, worshipped together, shared their goods with those who had needs. In the summary of early church life, the Book of Acts says, “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*”³ What was important to them? Teaching, building community, and worship.

John Wesley knew the power of small groups for the early Methodist movement. Once he had preached and won converts to faith, he organized them onto small groups called societies, classes, and bands. Each week they would get together and answer the question, “How is it with your soul?” Then they would receive support, instruction, or correction from the group.

Christian community is all about relationships. Small group ministries allow us to build relationships, and in those relationships, our faith is developed. Developing faith can take a thousand different forms, from educational to missional. The bottom line is, our small groups know us. They miss us when we’re gone. They know our struggles and our joys, and they are there to support us and to encourage our journey. Living in community, we find that we have a 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, she got lost one day. She ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she didn't recognize a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in his squad car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him, "You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

Anne Lamott comments: "That is why I have stayed so 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."⁴ Community like that develops our faith.

Intentional faith development also communicates content. Relationships are very important, but there are also things you need to know to be a strong Christian. You need to know the Bible. You need to know something about our doctrine. You need to deal with life's tough issues on a deeper level. It's good to know your spiritual gifts. It's good to experience the means of grace consistently. You need to engage your time and energy in mission and ministry. It's important to develop intentionally the content of your faith. Haphazard religion doesn't have much muscle to it.

I would not describe myself as either a fitness buff or an athlete, but I do believe in keeping myself physically fit. In order to do that, I practice two types of discipline. One is what I call preventative maintenance. I go to the gym three days a week and do a workout that includes cardio-vascular exercise and resistance training (weights). The purpose of that is not to be a weightlifter or a body-builder, but to keep bad stuff from happening: weight gain, heart attack, stroke, sagging parts. It's preventative maintenance on my body.

The only sport I play any more is golf. A large part of golf is about training muscle memory. I know how to hit a golf ball; I have played since I was a child. But I have to try constantly to train my muscles to do automatically what it takes. Keep your head down, shoulders square,

eye on the ball, grip strong, shift your weight, cock your wrist, trajectory of the club head, follow-through—there is too much to remember in the two seconds it takes to swing a golf club. So you have to go out on the course or on the driving range and hit shot after shot after shot to train your muscles to remember what they are supposed to do. It's that way with the mechanics of any sport.

Intentional faith development is the spiritual equivalent of physical fitness. Through reading, study, participation in a small group or class, you keep your spiritual muscles in shape. You prevent bad stuff from happening—*anxiety, bitterness, resentment, loneliness, feeling far away from God.* And you train your heart and soul in the skills needed to deal with life—*Bible knowledge, prayer, how to verbalize your faith, faith perspectives on the issues of the day—the content of faith.* And like an athlete who is intentional about his or her training, intentional faith development leads to victory. It puts you in the winner's circle. You develop more fully as the disciple God wants you to be.

Finally, intentional faith development transforms lives. One of my favorite verses of Scripture is Acts 2:47: *“and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”* Salvation is not an event; it is a process, a day by day walk with God, learning and growing intentionally along the way. Our mission is not merely to “get people saved”—to have an initial experience with Christ. Our mission is to initiate people into Christian discipleship. We want to transform lives. We want to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. John Wesley called this “*sanctification*”—being made holy. Disciple-making is a process.

We want to support the process of transformation with a system of intentional faith development. A seeker, who knows little about the faith, can come into our church and be welcomed and become a member. A member can continue the learning process to develop into a disciple. A disciple can deepen his or her faith, discover his or her spiritual gifts, and become a minister, engaging in meaningful action to support God's ministry in this church, this community or the world.

Our hope is that people will engage in this process of intentional faith development. New people or new members can start with something as simple as “Coffee with the Pastors” to get better acquainted with our church and our ministries. Acquaintance leads to involvement. Involvement leads to participation in a small group, which creates discipleship. Discipleship engages us in ministry. And ministry changes the world. It doesn’t happen overnight, and it doesn’t always happen in a straight line, but as it happens, it makes a difference.

One of God’s children who has lived into the process of intentional faith development is an Irish rock singer named Bono. Famous for his music and his band U2, Bono has always been up-front about his Christian faith, and he has been very involved in social issues, such as the AIDS crisis in Africa. He has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, knighted by the Queen, and was Time’s Man of the Year. He talks about the process of his faith development:

Your nature is a hard thing to change; it takes time.... I have heard of people who have life-changing, miraculous turnarounds, 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 so 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.⁵

God is not through with any of us yet. Jesus invites us into the process anew or for the first time. He welcomes us with radical hospitality. He touches our spirit through passionate worship. We engage with him in intentional faith development. We experience true Christian community. We learn the content of the faith. And in the

process, we are transformed. This is the bread of life. Taste it, and enjoy it!

¹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 84, 85.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperOne, 1978), p. 30.

³ Acts 2:42.

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (Anchor, 1999), 55.

⁵ Bono (with Neil McCormick), *U2 by U2* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 7.