

The 5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations

Bishop Robert Schnase

Extract

Overview:

Bishops, cabinets, pastors and lay leaders must do all they can to help congregations fulfill the church's mission. Robert Schnase, Bishop of the Missouri Conference of the UMC (and former senior pastor of FUMC McAllen, TX), offers that there are 5 fundamental processes that are critical to a congregation's mission that failure to perform them in an exemplary way results in congregational deterioration and decline. The 5 Practices....

- Radical Hospitality
- Passionate Worship
- Intentional Faith Development
- Risk-Taking Mission and Service
- Extravagant Generosity

...offer a practical framework and common language to help churches understand their mission and fit it into their lives in a practical way. In addition to their being critical, repeating and improving these practices lead congregations to health, vitality and fruitfulness.

What does it mean to have a 'fruitful' congregation? Fruitfulness for congregations means effectiveness in fulfilling the mission and purpose God has given them. The mission of the UMC is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. How fruitful are congregations - is Holy Covenant Church - in this task?

Fruitfulness takes many forms - the growing care for one another in a congregation, the deepening faith of a group that matures in Christ together, the increasing effectiveness of a mission initiative that changes lives. Even in these contexts, growth in love, faith and service does not justify neglecting the God-given task to invite and involve others and to share with them the good news that God has met our highest hopes and deepest needs in Christ.

To use the language of fruitfulness causes congregations to become clearer about desired outcomes. When congregations are unclear about outcomes and objectives, they resort to measuring inputs, efforts and resources in order to evaluate success in ministry. They can also find themselves placing a high priority on one type of ministry over another and rely too heavily on the strength of that ministry as the focus of the church's mission/purpose. Fruitfulness directs our focus to what we accomplish for God's purposes and corrects the tendency to congratulate ourselves for all the work, resources and people we apply to a task while ignoring or denying that our efforts may be making little difference. Focusing on fruitfulness keeps us faithful to purposes, and makes it more difficult to justify and defend ineffective or unproductive ministries.

The 5 Practices capture the core process by which God uses congregations to make disciples – congregations offer the gracious invitation, welcome, and hospitality of Christ so that people experience a sense of belonging; God shapes souls and changes minds through worship, creating a desire to grow closer to Christ; God’s Spirit nurtures people and matures faith through learning in community; with increased spiritual maturity, people discern God’s call to help others through mission and service; and God inspires people to give generously of themselves so that others can receive the grace they have known.

The 5 Practices of Fruitful Congregations is designed to assist congregational leaders in holding a mirror to their own ministries in order to ask the questions, “How are we doing in practicing these qualities of ministry in our congregation? In our classes, choirs, small group ministries, mission teams, and leadership circles? How are we practicing these in our own personal discipleship? And how might we do better? The task of repeating, deepening, extending, teaching, and improving these practices should fill church agendas, guide church boards and shape leadership training.

People of all ages hunger for congregations that embrace these qualities, churches that receive them graciously and invite them in, that connect them to God through authentic worship, that deepen their faith, and that stretch them so as to make a difference in the lives of others through service and generosity. Large or small, urban, suburban or rural; churches with these qualities form disciples and transform communities.

As a representative of Holy Covenant’s Administrative Council, you are being asked to consider these practices and to allow them to shape your own reflections about our church, your area of ministry, and your personal discipleship (as well as the discipleship of others in our church). Reflect on them, amend them, deepen them, pray about them, and extend them so that everyone may fulfill the greatest task ever entrusted to humankind, the work of sharing the good news we have seen and known in Jesus Christ.

The 5 Practices:

Radical Hospitality

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Radical Hospitality. Out of genuine love for Christ and for others, their laity and pastors take the initiative to invite, welcome, include, and support newcomers and help them grow in faith as they become part of the Body of Christ. Their members focus on those outside their congregation with as much passion as they attend to the nurture and growth of those who already belong to the family of faith, and they apply their utmost creativity, energy and effectiveness to the task, exceeding all expectations. Hospitality means we pray, plan, prepare and work toward the purpose of helping others receive what we have received in Christ. It’s more than common politeness to newcomers, name tags for greeters or a few visitor parking spaces, although these are important. When the spirit of Christ’s hospitality pervades a congregation, then every choir, youth ministry, Adult Sunday School class, mission team, Bible study, and outreach ministry

regularly asks itself, “How are we doing at inviting others and supporting newcomers into our part of the church family? And how can we improve?”

How does the “radical” part of Radical Hospitality fit into this scenario? *Radical* means “drastically different from ordinary practice, outside the normal” and describes practices that are rooted in the life of Christ, that radiate into the lives of others and ‘exceed expectations’ or ‘go the second mile’ that take welcoming the stranger to the max. Churches characterized by Radical Hospitality are not just friendly and courteous, passively receiving visitors warmly. Instead, they exhibit a restlessness because they realize so many people do not have a relationship to a faith community. They sense a calling and responsibility to pray, plan and work to invite others and to help them feel welcome and to support them in their faith journeys.

Examples of Radical Hospitality:

- Members are aware of the person not present – the neighbors, friends, co-workers who have no church home
- Vacation Bible School – not just for members’ children, but those outside church – how can communication about the event reach these folks?
- Hold church programs in a school, park or neighborhood apart from church
- Board of Trustees: view their work as ministry – ensuring that facilities communicate maximum hospitality, an unmistakable sense of welcome and complete accessibility
 - Our buildings tell the world what our church thinks about our children, seniors, persons with disabilities and visitors
- Ushers/greeters are trained, taught, prepared and make their service a vital ministry; they don’t just “point”, they escort; they don’t just hand out bulletins, they make people feel at ease

Questions to ponder:

- How do people hear about Holy Covenant?
- How is laity prepared for the work of invitation and hospitality?
- Is there a consistent plan for welcoming visitors who attend worship, children’s programs, studies, support groups and other ministries of the church?
- Which groups at Holy Covenant would you say are the easiest for new people to join? Why is that? What can we learn from these groups?
- What is the one activity your group or class could do, which, if done with excellence and consistency, would have the greatest impact on fostering a culture of Radical Hospitality at Holy Covenant?
- Reflecting back to how you first came to Holy Covenant, describe the services, activities and people who opened the doors for you – and made you feel welcome as a visitor and then a member.
- How do you feel about talking to other people about Holy Covenant?

Passionate Worship

Vibrant, fruitful, growing churches offer Passionate Worship that connects people to God and to one another. People gather consciously as the Body of Christ with eagerness and expectancy; encounter Christ through singing, prayer, Scripture, preaching and Holy Communion; and respond by allowing God's Spirit to shape their lives. Lives shaped by God's Spirit become the nucleus for congregations with extraordinary warmth, graciousness and belonging. People are searching for worship that is authentic, alive, creative and comprehensible, where they experience the life-changing presence of God in the presence of others. Through Radical Hospitality, congregations offer the gracious invitation of Christ, open doors to relationship and foster a sense of belonging. Through *Passionate Worship*, God draws people to Christ (many for the first time), deepens understanding and relationship with Christ, and over time, transforms lives as disciples grow in the image of Christ.

Worship is the most likely point of first contact the unchurched have with a congregation, and in some churches, many visitors do not find genuine warmth, a premium on excellence, or a message presented in a form that engages them. When a congregation loses touch with the purpose of worship, people come and go without receiving God. "Passionate" Worship describes an intense desire, an ardent spirit, strong feelings, and the sense of heightened importance and of an emotional connection that the participant feels that goes beyond intellectual consent. It is alive, authentic, engaging and fresh – and people so eagerly desire such worship that they will reorder their lives to attend. Passionate Worship includes the "aha" moments that change people and mold them, the touch of transcendence that pulls them out of themselves, deepens their understanding of life and their relationship to God, and makes them feel richer, stronger, and truer to what God has created them to be.

Examples of/Suggestions for Passionate Worship:

- People practice and experience resurrection in worship; every Sunday is a little Easter
- Practicing Passionate Worship – churches make this sacred time as free as possible from distractions, annoyances and inconveniences and people sense the deliberate care in preparation and intention
- Passionate spiritual communities not only worship and pray at Sunday services, they also make worship an essential element of every mission trip, youth program, adult retreat, capital funds campaign, and ministry initiative
- More than one or two of the 5 senses is addressed in Worship – both silence & music deepen unity and reverence; visual focal points on cross or communion table; bread tastes good or smells newly-baked; flowers are fresh & candles glow with real flames; sense of touch when people have time to greet one another with handshakes or embraces
- Pastors offer an invitation to further discipleship or membership and they encourage visitors to talk with staff or members to find out how they can get involved in church life
- Each ministry area/committee, each Sunday School and Bible study, each staff member and choir are asked to do something extra to strengthen community worship and deepen the practice of personal devotions

- Trustees reviewing with the pastor the functionality and effectiveness of microphones, sound systems, lighting and looking through the chancel, sanctuary, foyer and nursery to see that the church always looks inviting, fresh, clean, safe and well-lit
- Mission teams and work project leaders intentionally including periods of prayer, devotion, worship or Communion with their groups
- Staff-Parish Relations Committee discussing how to foster learning opportunities and adequate spiritual preparation for the pastor and staff to support excellence in worship
- Ushers, greeters, nursery personnel and other hosts meeting to pray and discuss how to deepen the quality of warmth and hospitality

The motivation for enhancing the quality of worship is not only about deepening our own faith but also about allowing God to use us and our congregations to offer hope and life and love to others. God works through us to change the world. Worship is God's gift and task, a sacred trust that requires our utmost and highest.

Intentional Faith Development

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Intentional Faith Development. Christ's gracious invitation through Radical Hospitality invites and welcomes us, and God's transforming presence in Passionate Worship opens our hearts to Christ's pardon, love and grace, creating in us a desire to follow. Growing in Christ requires more than weekly worship through, and it is through Intentional Faith Development that God's Spirit works in us, perfecting us in the practice of love as we grow in the knowledge and love of God.

Learning in community replicates the way Jesus deliberately taught his disciples. Jesus taught in community so that we would learn to discover his presence in others. The practice of learning in community gives disciples a network of support, encouragement and direction as we seek to grow in Christ. As we consciously appropriate the stories of faith with others, we discover that our questions, doubts, temptations and missteps are not unusual – but are part of the journey. Others help us interpret God's Word for our lives. The fruit of the spirit that we see in Christ cannot be learned apart from a network of relationships. In the intimacy of small groups, we learn not only from writers and thinkers and people of the past through Scripture and books, but also from mentors and models and fellow travelers in our congregation. We give and receive the care of Christ by praying for one another, supporting each other through periods of grief and difficulty, and celebrating one another's joys and hopes. The sanctifying grace of God bears the human face of our fellow disciples. Additionally, learning in community provides accountability for our faith journeys; by covenanting together, we stay stronger in our convictions and habits.

Story - "The Middle Doors"

The pastor and staff of a mid-sized congregation noticed that while the church received many new visitors and a high percentage of them were joining the church, nevertheless attendance remained steady month after month. For several years, the church had seen growth in attendance, and they couldn't figure out why it was leveling off now. The church practiced hospitality with excellence, with

visitors and new members feeling welcomed at worship and into membership. But then, after a few months, visitors and new members would drift away, become less consistent in attendance, and fall away altogether. To understand the situation better, the pastor visited with some members who had joined in the last several months.

He discovered that people felt welcomed and supported when they first visited the church, and continued to feel a sense of belonging in worship. But when they tried to become part of Sunday School classes, men's organizations, choirs, and Bible studies, the groups felt cliquish and uninterested in welcoming new people. Even after some months of trying, they felt at the margins in these small groups and ministries. One woman said, "Before I moved here, I was the kitchen chief in my old church for years. I didn't expect to do that again here, but I hoped to join the cooking team. When I showed up to help with dinner, they handed me napkins and told me put them on the tables, and then I just stood around by myself the rest of the evening. I felt like they didn't need me or want me."

The pastor and staff soon realized that the "front door" was working well as people felt welcomed and invited. But they were slipping out the "back door" because they were discovering that too many of the "middle doors" were closed tight.

They began a series of teaching events and lessons in the adult classes, mission teams, service organizations, choirs, and Bible studies to try to move the culture of hospitality deeper into the life of the church. After some months, they noticed that the small groups began to grow, and with them, the worship attendance began to trend up again. Most new members will not feel like they really belong to the church until they find meaningful connections in small groups beyond the worship experience. Are your church's "middle doors" open?

Intentional Faith Development uses the word "intentional" as it refers to deliberate effort, purposeful action toward an end, and high prioritization. It describes the practice that view the ministry of Christian education and formation, small group work, and Bible study as absolutely critical to their mission and that consistently offer opportunities for people of all ages, interests, and faith experiences to learn in community. The practices of the faith are too demanding without the support from others.

Insights into Intentional Faith Development:

- People desire fellowship and want to learn about the faith, but they have trouble squeezing it into their lives; the more the church can do – the better!
- Leaders need to consider breaking out of usual patterns and expectations of place, frequency and curriculum to reach people.
- Disciple Bible Study changes peoples' lives.
- Bible study changes churches. When church leaders take their own spiritual growth seriously and immerse themselves in Scriptural study, in prayer, and in fellowship, they understand the purpose of the church and the point of ministry differently.
- "The purpose of leadership in the church is not to make the church more 'business-like', but to make the church more *church-like*."- Peter Drucker
- Churches that practice Intentional Faith Development offer home groups, "brown bag" lunch Bible studies, and many other mid-week faith studies at a variety of times –

focusing on the schedules/interests of the people they seek to serve; not the church's schedule.

- Revisit current methods of communication about faith development studies; suggestions:
 - Blogs
 - Chat rooms
 - Listservs
 - Email Bible studies
 - Downloadable lessons, sermons, presentations so that anyone can listen at their own time while driving, running, or working out
 - Advertise/invite beyond walls of church
- Start new groups based on visitors, new members and people not yet attending the church
- Create classes/studies with special topics to attract the interest of unchurched people

Question to ponder:

- What kind of learning opportunity would you like to attend at Holy Covenant if it were offered?

Risk-Taking Mission & Service

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Risk-Taking Mission & Service. Risk-Taking Mission & Service includes the projects, the efforts and the work people do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they will ever be part of the community of faith. This Practice is one of the fundamental activities of church life that is so critical that failure to practice it in some form results in a deterioration of the church's vitality and ability to make disciples of Jesus Christ. A church without generous and willing service by its members can never practice Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development or Extravagant Generosity since these depend upon the time, leadership, effort, prayers, sweat and tears of members and friends of the church.

"Risk-Taking" refers to the service we offer that stretches us out of our comfort zone and has us engaging people and offering ourselves to ministries that we would never have done if not for our desire to follow Christ. Risk-Taking refers to the service Risk-taking steps into great uncertainty, a higher possibility of discomfort, resistance, or sacrifice. It pushes us beyond the circle of relationships that routinely define our church commitments. It changes the lives of the people who are served as well as the lives of those who serve.

Churches that cultivate the Practice of Risk-Taking Service & Mission...

...not only raise money to support overseas, international, and community work, they also organize teams, solicit and train volunteers, and send people to work directly in hands-on, face-to-face ministries.

- ...offer service/mission opportunities with gradations of involvement and differing levels of complexity appropriate to the talents, skills and interests of a variety of people.
- ...not only offer their own projects and programs organized by their own members, but also collaborate with other churches, other denominations, civic organizations, social agencies and non-profit groups; weaving the church's social concern into the networks of community service.
- ...actively invite and welcome newcomers, visitors, and the unchurched to help them in making a difference in the lives of others.
- ...have a responsibility to bear witness to wider social change by advocating for policies that improve the lives and conditions of those who struggle at the margins of society.

Questions to Ponder:

- What outreach ministries of Holy Covenant push people out of their comfort zones to make a real difference in the lives of people?
- How has a mission initiative or outreach ministry changed our church? Shaped your own life?
- What is the most unexpected place to which your faith in Christ has taken you in order to make a difference in someone's life?

Extravagant Generosity

Vibrant, fruitful, growing churches thrive because of the extraordinary sharing, willing sacrifice, and joyous giving of their members out of love for God and neighbor. Extravagant Generosity describes practices of sharing and giving that exceed all expectations and extend to unexpected measures. It describes lavish sharing, sacrifice, and giving in service to God and neighbor. Every scriptural example of giving is extravagant, and churches that practice Extravagant Generosity teach, preach, and practice the tithe. Such churches teach and preach giving that focuses on the abundance of God's grace and that emphasizes the Christian's need to give rather than on the church's need for money.

Tithing helps the followers of Jesus understand that all things belong to God and that, during their days on earth, followers are entrusted as stewards to use all they have and all they are in ways that glorify God. What Christians *earn* belongs to God. What Christians *spend* belongs to God. What they *save* belongs to God. What Christians give belongs to God and they need to give generously, extravagantly, and conscientiously in ways that strengthen the Body of Christ.

Did you know that?

...if your great-grandparents were active in the faith, they tithed? How were they able to do that and we have difficulty? We struggle with tithing because our hearts and minds are more powerfully shaped by our affluence. We find it harder to give extravagantly because our society's values shape our perceptions more than our faith's values do.

...those who are new to the faith may find the practice of tithing extremely challenging and should ease into it slowly.

...the keys to effective and spiritually strengthening campaigns are the same in all churches, large and small: an unapologetic but gracious emphasis on proportional giving and tithing, an emphasis on giving on the giver's walk of faith, an emphasis on the connection of money to a compelling and clear sense of mission, an emphasis on widespread participation in planning and leading, and a heavy reliance not just on the pastor, but lay leadership.

Ideas From Other Congregations Who Practice Extravagant Generosity:

- Pastors express appreciation to people who give by thanking members collectively and personally; give God thanks for increases in giving; send personal notes of appreciation for special gifts and for unexpected increases in giving/pledging.
- Address the challenge of growing in giving to long-term members as well as to adults who are new to the faith.
- Invite young adults into leadership and planning – allowing for a contrast of patterns in earning, spending and giving between the generations.
- Offer seminars, workshops and retreats that help people deal with excessive debt, financial/estate planning, or preparing wills as well as offer support groups for those struggling with bankruptcy, compulsive gambling or unemployment.
- Pastoral and lay leadership attend workshops, read the literature, use consultants, study Scripture, learn about social trends and patterns of giving, and collaborate with other churches so that they constantly learn and adapt and improve their communication about giving.

Questions to Ponder:

- What's the most fun you've ever had giving money? What made the experience meaningful, memorable and delightful? How do you feel about giving money to Holy Covenant?
- How do you feel about how Holy Covenant teaches about money? What values/themes guide our efforts to encourage giving and tithing?

Summary:

To fulfill the ministry of Christ, congregations must change and grow and adapt in ways that are purposeful, thoughtful and faithful. Schnase says that change isn't easy. Change for the sake of change or to preserve the institution is not sufficient. Change takes many forms and each congregation must find its own path.

By repeating, deepening, expanding and improving upon the 5 basic Practices of congregational ministry, churches change and grow and learn. Pervaded by the purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, they discover new life, readily giving up patterns that have limited ministry and eagerly taking up those that invite people into relationship with God.

Through ordinary practices done well over time, congregations make extraordinary differences in the lives of people. Through basic activities that express the prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace of God revealed in Christ, the church fulfills its mission. Making disciples involves a continuing cooperative effort on the part of the Holy Spirit and the church to bring people into relationship with God and neighbor and through faith in Jesus Christ. The principal way God draws people into relationship with one another and with God is through congregations and faith communities.

God changes lives through congregations and this places upon pastors and congregational leaders the awesome and joyful responsibility of cultivating strength, health, clarity of purpose, and faithfulness in practice in congregational life so that the mission of Christ thrives. The exemplary and repeated practices of Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity are the time-tested, theologically sound and effective means congregations use to fulfill their mission with excellence and fruitfulness to the glory of God. These practices stir the church to unexpected renewal and expanded vision, just as they have for centuries. Congregations are called to change the world, not just keep their doors open. God works through congregations to transform lives.

How could Holy Covenant become more fruitful if our congregation committed to performing these practices with excellence?