

## **Family Matters...Being the Family of God 5: “Practicing Intentional Faith-Development”**

*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. Acts 2:42*

I don't know much about running, (big secret there huh?) I vowed as a young man that I would stop running, the minute people stopped chasing me...and they quit chasing me long time ago. But I do know this...it's easier to run on a track. Imagine that a bus load of young high school cross country kids showed up at the Tom O'Leary Golf Course for the WDA CC match. They piled out of the busses, warmed up a bit, and all the kids from all the schools all set out in a different direction to run the course. Chaos would ensue, and the race would obviously be compromised. What makes CC successful, at least in part, is that the runners have a well-marked, closely monitored, familiar path on which to run.

This is not completely unlike the Practice of Intentional Faith-Development. Most of us do better at growing our spiritual lives when we have at least some direction and definition about what we should do, and where we should go. I'm not trying to say that each of us grows the same, but all of us grow better when we have a track.

This morning, I want to explore with you what the Practice of Intentional Faith-Development will look like at First UMC for the immediate future, and the long endurance race. Along with Radical Hospitality, Extravagant Generosity, Passionate Worship, and Authentic Faith-Sharing; we (if we honestly desire to always be becoming more like Jesus) must continually Practice Intentional Faith-Development. Here is what

### **INTENTIONAL FAITH DEVELOPMENT WILL INCLUDE:**

#### **1. AN EMPHASIS ON MATURITY**

*...This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. Eph. 4:13-14*

One of the things I really like about these 6 practices; is that they are wholistic; they are not one issue specific. It seems to me that they encompass the whole of the Christian life and faith. There are many churches that focus on one aspect of the faith while ignoring others. There are some churches that focus entirely inward while ignoring others, there are some churches that fail to present Jesus, in all his various fullness and priorities. I know we cannot always be all things to all people, all the time, but we can... and will, try, to the best of our ability, to practice a well rounded ministry here at FUMC. That will include a strong emphasis on maturity.

Jesus' great commission is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. He never said, *Go into all the world and make 'converts' of all people.* No he said, *Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations!* There is a difference. A disciple is defined as a follower of Jesus who seeks to become like Jesus...all his/her life.

For us, that simply means we will not be satisfied just seeing new people come in the front door. We will not be satisfied seeing people make decisions to accept Jesus. We will not be satisfied seeing people participating in church programs. We will only be satisfied as ALL people come to a mature faith, and become faithful 'disciples' of Jesus.

We will work to create an environment where each person; new seeker, or aging saint is equally afforded opportunities to grow and mature their faith. And some of us older saints need a kick-start here. When was the last time you attended a SS class? Our kids and our youth put most of us to shame. I know we need more than SS, but at the very least, we all could benefit from growing our faith in a SS class. More later.

## **2. LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND PERSONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

*All the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth. As a result, many Jews believed, as did many of the prominent Greek women and men. Acts 17:11-12*

Not everyone is called to be a leader, but everyone is called to be the best they can personally be. If we learn anything from this passage in Acts 17 it is, that, it is not my job to grow your spiritual life...it is your job. Notice that these open-minded believers in Berea, eagerly listened to their beloved itinerant pastor Paul; but after he left...they individually searched the scripture to see if what Paul and Silas were teaching was true. This is an important spiritual discipline.

I was once told following a particularly difficult Bible Study Class; “Just tell me what to believe and I’ll believe it...I just don’t want to have to figure it all out on my own!” I was shocked! Do you realize how dangerous that statement really is? It reveals where cults start, and how some people get off on the wrong track. I want you to know I try to do the best I can interpreting and applying the Bible to all our lives...but I’m not infallible; I’m very much human (big secret there, too, huh!) I want to do everything I can to assist you in this endeavor to grow your faith; but you cannot rely solely on me to be the only source of your spiritual growth. Each of us is responsible for your own spiritual growth, and we each must do our best to become the best we can be.

Soren Kierkegaard once said that Christians reminded him of schoolboys who want to look up the answers to their math problems in the back of the book rather than work them through. We yearn for shortcuts. But shortcuts usually lead away from growth, not toward it. I want us all to become the best we can be, whether leaders or followers...the best, most mature we can be. It’s OUR job!

### **3. SMALL GROUP EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

*All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer. Acts 2:42*

I want you to notice and pay attention. As important as our personal responsibility is to the development of our Spiritual lives; this fact seems apparent (from this scripture; and life), that: most of us grow better together, than we do alone.

I will not let any of us off the personal responsibility hook, but I will acknowledge how important it is for us to have other loving, caring, searching, growing, friends; spouses, even strangers; to help us along the journey. I vow to continue to encourage, support and work to provide multiple opportunities for all of us to experience the advantage of growing together, not JUST growing alone.

I think we have a great offering this fall. We have a nice mix of well established classes, like Warren's International Bible Series, and Marilyn Johnson's book study group. We have some new class offerings like the Sermon Chat-Back class, and others studying various subjects, during both hours of worship. I like the fact we have circles and classes and groups that meet during the week for those who can't attend on Sunday. I am well pleased with our offering...and frankly, a bit disappointed with our attendance!

Obviously most of you enjoy worship or you wouldn't be here, and we appreciate that. But, as important as worship is to our spiritual development, it cannot be your only spiritual input. If you want to learn how to do private devotions, check my blog on the web site, I've begun sharing how I've been trying to do Personal Devotions for the past 37 years. It's just one way.

Also, note how this text mentions a number of corporate experiences and how helpful teaching, preaching, prayer, communion, and even sharing meals together are to the development of a person's individual spiritual development. It seems rather... Intentional doesn't it? And you thought we were having all this food just because I like to eat. (Big secret there, huh?)

#### **4. GROWTH MINDED MINISTRY GROUPS**

*Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important. Gal. 6:2-3*

A few years ago I attended one of the many conferences advertising the New Secret to Growing your Church. This particular one was touting that Small Groups were the way to grow your church. I came home with the usual load of books, notes and guilt...that we weren't a "church of small groups". I began to pray and think...what is it we want small groups to be...to do? Well, I thought, they should encourage each other in a loving context, they should incorporate some Spiritual elements like Bible study or prayer or sharing our burdens with one another, and they should have a purpose beyond themselves...like meeting some other needs. So, I set out to try and instill those principles in the groups that already existed, rather than try and re-invent this church into a collection of small groups. I don't know how effective that effort has been, but it is still my desire.

We have many groups in this church already. We have circles and classes, and groups of various size, purpose and makeup. What each must share in common is that the ultimate purpose of any and all our groups, is not just the wonderful fellowship they provide, not just the friendships they foster, not just the help they render, but that each group has a larger purpose; to help people develop their faith to it's most mature level, all while conducting some form of Christ honoring – people serving ministry.

I'm excited that we have some invaluable people resources right here in our midst. We have a nationally recognized Small Groups Development Leader who is part of our family. We have some great small groups...and we have a great need for more people to be connected in a small group.

I believe two things rather firmly: 1) Every effective and faithful church must be growing larger and smaller...at the same time. We grow larger as we continue to reach new and more people with the Good News, as we welcome them with our Radical Hospitality.

2) It doesn't do any church any good to bring lots of people in the front door, while they are exiting out the back door. We must close this back door exodus by hooking, or connecting people along their journey from the front door to the back, by enlisting and engaging them in a small group. Where are you currently connected?

##### **5. LAITY LED OPPORTUNITIES**

*Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ. Eph. 4:11-12*

I'm so glad that those King James commas have gotten lost. In the KJV of the Bible, this verse read: *"Their responsibility is to equip God's people, to do God's work, and to build up the church, the body of Christ."* Do you notice the difference? The missing commas. I have sermon by that name somewhere. I'll not preach it all here, but remind you that it is not my job as your pastor to do the ministry...it is my job to equip you to do the ministry. (Are you wishing for the commas to be replaced?...to bad!)

It is my job to use my gifts to encourage you to use yours, and together we'll do this ministry together. I can't do it anyway, and neither can anyone of us, but together, we can accomplish for the kingdom what God desires. So, each of us utilizing our own gifts; and with a faithful willingness to learn and lead; must answer the call to assist one another along this maturing journey. I pledge to do my part.

Years ago there was a TV program called "The Merv Griffin Show". On one episode the guest was a famous body builder. (I think he's the governor of California now) During the interview, Merv asked, "Why do you develop those particular muscles?" The body builder simply stepped forward and flexed a series of well-defined muscles from his chest down to his calves. The audience applauded. "What do you use all those muscles for?" Merv asked again.

Again, the muscular specimen flexed, and bicep and triceps sprouted ripples and curves of impressive proportions. “But what do you USE those muscles for?” Merv persisted. The body builder was bewildered and befuddled. He didn’t have an answer other than to display his well-developed frame.

That dialogue reminded of our subject today...our Practice of Intentional Faith Development is not done to enable us to pose before an admiring audience, but to use our Bible Study, our Small Group participation, our leadership, our personal spiritual development; to grow ourselves to maturity, to grow the Kingdom of God, and to grow our church in ways that please God. Let’s stop being posers, and start...continue... finish the Practice of Intentionally, Developing our Faith.

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### **Action Plan:**

1. Define your own “track” for your Personal Spiritual growth. What are the things you are doing to help grow your spiritual life.
2. Determine what other experiences might benefit your spiritual growth, and make a plan to begin those.
3. Consider where/how your spiritual life has grown in the past year, 5 years, 10 years. With that in mind can you project where you will be next year, in 5 years, 10 years? What can you do to insure you reach your goal?

### **Study Guide:**

1. Please spend a few minutes defining these words: Spiritual Maturity. Intentional. Faith Development.
2. Share or write down your Personal Spiritual Growth exercises, experiences. Which are the most important to you? Which might need some attention?
3. Share or write about your corporate Spiritual Growth practices. Describe the groups you are part of. Why/how are they most helpful to you?
4. Discuss the principles/values mentioned that must define each small group (point #4). Which of those are included in your current small group. How might they be included if they are absent? What other values might be essential for a small group to be helpful?
5. What ministries are you engaged in right now? Do you feel a calling to any new ministries?