

## **“Intentional Faith Development”**

**Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

**Ephesians 3:14-4:16**

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Thursday nights at Stan and Emily’s house were the highlight of our week. We were a young couple living hundreds of miles from home in the early years of our marriage. Besides Stan and Emily and Dan and me there was Terri and Steve and Toni and Randy.

It was like going home when we went to Stan and Emily’s. One night when we asked how Stan and Em’s brand new dog Barney was doing with houstraining, Barney (as if on cue) ran into the room with a roll of toilet paper in his mouth! We were always laughing at Stan and Emily’s house.

Sometimes we got together at other places. Once, our group went camping together. We also all showed up at the hospital when Terri and Steve had baby Luke. Then all the women fought over holding the baby at our Thursday night meetings.

Every Thursday night we had Bible study, shared our lives with one another and prayed for each other. This was our first small group.

It was Wednesday night in far away California. We were at David and Caroline’s place mostly. One person from each couple was in school at Fuller Theological Seminary. And yes, we still were interested in small group Bible study and fellowship! Going to David and Caroline’s was like going home. We laughed a lot. We went to the hospital when David and Caroline had Courtney Jane. On Wednesday nights we fought over who would hold baby Courtney. We had Bible study, we shared our lives and we prayed for each other. We got to know Scott and Genie through this group and remain close friends with them to this day. This was our second small group.

When I look back on those groups, I realize that my faith was really growing during those times of study, fellowship and prayer. I realize how much those groups helped our marriage during those years of two very strong-willed people adjusting to life together.

It's Monday night. Eight or nine of us gather in the library here at Denbigh Presbyterian Church. We study, enjoy one another's fellowship and pray for each other. We are singles, widows, couples who come to the group together and parts of couples whose spouses do not attend. We "weep with those who weep" and "rejoice with those who rejoice."

Through these small group Bible studies, Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 has been answered in our lives. We were strengthened through the Holy Spirit so that Christ dwelled in our hearts through faith. We were being rooted and grounded in love and were growing in our understanding and experience of the "breadth and length and height and depth and the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge."

We are in the midst of a sermon series called "The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations." I hope you are reading the devotional books that accompany this series. Two weeks ago we talked about Radical Hospitality. Last week was Passionate Worship. Today's practice is Intentional Faith Development. This series suggests that churches which practice Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission & Service and Extravagant Generosity will be fruitful in their ministries. According to the author of this series, "The presence and strength of these five practices demonstrate congregational health, vitality, and fruitfulness. Churches, by repeating and improving these practices, fulfill their mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schnase, p. 7).

Schnase also notes: "Paul sprinkles his instruction to the followers of Christ with encouragements to learn, grow, teach and mature. He presents faith not as something static, a possession, or an all or nothing proposition, but rather as something we grow into and strive toward, a putting away of one's 'former way of life, the old self' to clothe oneself 'with the new self'. We seek to have in us the mind that was in Christ Jesus, allowing God's Spirit to shape our thoughts, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Growing in Christ-likeness is the goal and end of the life of faith.

"The change God works in us through the Spirit results in a deeper awareness of God's presence and will and an increasing desire to serve God and neighbor. By God's grace, we become new persons. This growth spans a lifetime. Faith moves, grows, changes, matures" (Schnase, pp. 63-64).

But can't this all happen through coming to worship? Can't all this happen through my personal Bible reading at home? Perhaps, but it is not as likely, at least for most of us.

I love what Schnase says: "God uses faith-to-faith relationships to change us" (Schnase, p. 65). In other words, this type of growth takes place best for most of us as we interact with other people of faith on a regular basis. We grow best in the context of community. "Churches that practice intentional faith development know that maturation in Christ is always about content AND relationship. Ideas change people and people change people; and God uses both together to work on our behalf and to shape our lives in the image of Christ. Transformation comes through learning in community" (Schnase, p. 77).

For me, this is a lot like exercising. When I exercise by myself, I might do 10 crunches or use 5 pound weights or leave out entirely the exercises that hurt me too much (that would be a lot of them!). When I'm in a group class, I'm challenged and encouraged by those around me. I push myself more. I have an instructor (a.k.a. drill sergeant) who is counting the reps and pushing us to do a few more. I show up to exercise more often when I know my friend Brenda is meeting me there and we are counting on each other.

When I read the Bible alone, I may skim over the parts that challenge a long-held behavior or prejudice. I may miss parts of the scriptural text that are very important. I may give up on an issue in my life without others to pray for me and speak wisdom to me. I may have a stagnant faith without others to challenge and support me. Within the context of community study, prayer and fellowship, I am more likely to "no longer be a child, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine . . ." I am more likely to mature in faith, rather than remain childish.

In Deuteronomy, we see how intentional the practices of faith development were for the Israelites. They are commanded to teach God's words to their sons and daughters, to talk of them when they sit in the house and when they walk by the way and when they lie down and when they get up." The words were to be worn on their bodies and written on their doorposts and gates. God knows we need constant reminders of His words to maintain our faith and to grow in our faith.

But how do we find time for personal study, much less a weekly time of study, prayer and fellowship with other Christians? Shouldn't we just be spending

our time serving – that risk-taking mission and service we’re going to talk about next week?

Finding time is difficult for almost all of us. Making time is difficult for almost all of us. It is a decision. It is a matter of seeing intentional faith development as a priority.

Service is our calling. We are a very mission-oriented church. We are very service-oriented individuals in this church (home, community, church, school). Praise God! But, how can we effectively, wisely, and lovingly serve over the long haul without being fed, nourished and guided by God on a regular basis? Often we serve from our own strength, our own knowledge and our own pre-conceived notions. We burn out, we become resentful, we become empty.

“Bible study changes churches. When church leaders 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 differently. Peter Drucker has said ‘that the purpose of the leadership in the church is not to make the church more business-like, but make the church more church-like.’ While church leaders should apply their knowledge of business, accounting, real estate, the law, and banking to enhance the church’s effectiveness and accountability, they cannot lose sight of the purpose of the church, which is derived from the life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How can church leaders make good faith decisions for the congregation without proper grounding in the faith? The decision on whether or not the church should make its facilities available to Alcoholics Anonymous cannot be reduced to lease contracts; it’s a ministry decision. Whether the church should build a new youth center, fund an overseas mission trip, or support a local soup kitchen is a decision not reducible to a mere cost-benefit analysis. These decisions require hearts of faith that explore the will of God as well as minds that review the financial reports. Vibrant, fruitful, growing churches are led by lay people and pastors who intentionally work to grow in the grace of Jesus Christ and in the knowledge and love God and who understand the need for intimate Christian fellowship and intentional instruction in the faith” (Schnase, p. 73).

This year we are seeking to offer more opportunities for adults to study the Bible with others. We have five or six of our church elders working on ways we can offer more opportunities for spiritual growth. Pray about your involvement in a weekly Bible study and a Sunday school class. Pray about attending retreats. Pray

about your own personal devotional life. Adults, if we do not model this for our children and youth, how can we expect them to value Bible study now or in the future? If we do not attend Sunday school or another Bible study how can we expect our children and youth to make LOGOS Bible study on Wednesdays and Sunday School Bible Study a priority now or in the future?

I echo Paul's prayer in Ephesians as I pray for myself and for all of us: "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner person; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."