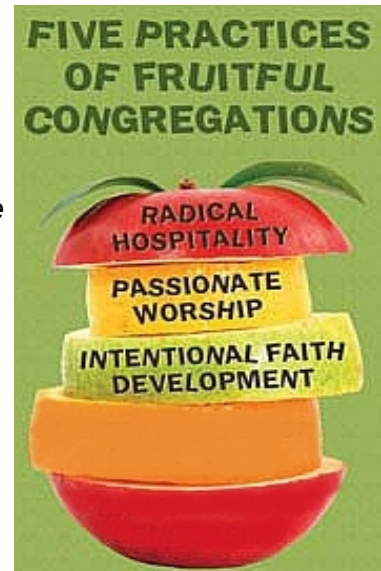


# FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS

Devotion Guide Week #3= July 26th-30th

*Intentional Faith Development* refers to all the ministries that help us grow in faith outside of weekly worship: Bible studies, Sunday school, small groups, and retreats where we learn in the community of other Christians. By these practices we mature in faith; we grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God. We pray that we are closer to Christ today than we were five years ago, and that by the grace of God, we may be closer to Christ five years from now than we are today.

*Intentional* refers to deliberate effort, purposeful action, and high priority. Growing in grace does not come without purposeful commitment to learning the faith and cultivating our love for God. (Schnase, *Cultivating Fruitfulness*, p.44)



## Day One

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” 2 Corinthians 5:17

Jesus loves you just as you are. Jesus loves you too much to let you stay just as you are. As followers of Christ, we desire to learn the ways of Christ, to grow in our faith. Therefore, we commit to regular Bible study, to devotional practices that will help us grow in grace – an active prayer life, regular worship attendance, and involvement with other Christians in small groups. You see, growth in faith does not come automatically or easily. It requires involvement in a supportive faith community.

How are you growing in faith? What spiritual practices do you regularly commit yourself to? What is one spiritual practice that you will add this week?

Prayer: *By your grace, O God, let every step I take bring me one step closer to you. amen*

## Day Two

“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Ephesians 4:14-16

A result of growing in our faith and in “putting on the mind of Christ” is that we are more able to recognize truth and more able to recognize falsehood cloaked in “truth”. Just as we expect infants to grow into children then adolescents then adulthood, our Christian life should be marked by a growth in spiritual maturity. As we join with fellow believers in small group settings – discussing Scripture, talking about how our faith interacts with and informs our daily

life, asking questions and hearing opposing points of views of other Christians – we grow into maturity.

Are you closer to Christ now than you were five years ago? Do you expect to be grow closer to Christ in the next 5 years?

Prayer: *Jesus, transform my mind so that I may understand more completely the faith that I profess. amen*

### **Day Three**

Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Matthew 18:20

The spiritual life is never a solitary affair. Jesus taught his followers in a community. We are formed into disciples best in a faith community. John Wesley organized followers of Christ “methodically” into small groups – chapels, classes, and bands – so that they would intermix with other people and with the Holy Spirit in their Christian journey. They met weekly to inquire after one another in love. Wesley wrote: “Christianity is essentially a social religion, and ... to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it...” The spiritual life originates in community and leads to community; we are hard-wired for relationship. In community we discover Christ. What is one learning experience in your faith life that has changed how you live in a significant way? How did you learn it? How have you shared it with others?

Prayer: *As I ready and study your Word, Lord, may I hear you speak to me. Make me eager to learn your wisdom and your will for my life. Amen*

### **Day Four**

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Acts 2:42

Learning in community replicates the way Jesus deliberately taught his disciples. In community there is a natural accountability. Covenanting together keeps us strong in our convictions and habits. That’s why Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to go “to every town and place where he himself intended to go” (Luke 10:1). In pairs, the disciples could build each other up for the task; pray for one another; and support one another through the inevitable resistances, difficulties, misjudgments, and false starts. We learn in community because others keep up faithful to the task of growth in Christ. And we cannot learn spiritual qualities such as forgiveness, grace, love, justice and humility by ourselves, but only by practicing our faith with others.

Outside of worship, how do you deepen your understanding of the Christian faith? How do you cultivate your relationship with Christ?

Prayer: *Help me, Lord, to delight in learning your Word so that like a tree planted by a stream of water, my life may bear your fruit. Amen*

### **Day Five**

“Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Romans 13:14

From the Native American faith tradition we receive the story of a grandfather telling his grandchild about spiritual struggle and growth. “Inside me there are two wolves who fight each other all the time. One is motivated by peace, gentleness, honesty, justice, and love. The other lives by resentment, bitterness, hate, anger, and violence.” “Which one wins?” asks the child. “The one I feed.” answers the elder. This resonates with Paul’s admonition to feed the new nature and starve the old. Intentional faith development feeds the new creation. What are you curious about in the spiritual life? What are you doing to explore faith more deeply?

Prayer: *When my life is crowded with daily cares and fears, Lord, help me make time to focus on your words so that by the power of your Spirit, I may walk forth in your light with confidence. Amen*