

Intentional Faith Development I

Radical Hospitality brings people into the church, into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. **Passionate Worship** deepens that relationship as we gather to receive God's Word through praise and prayer, through the sermon and singing.

Intentional Faith Development is what a church does to encourage its members to "understand Scripture, faith and life in the supportive nurture of caring relationships." How would we do that? Bishop Schnase offers a list of possibilities that should sound pretty familiar: "Sunday school classes, Bible studies, short-term topical studies, support groups that apply to particular life challenges, children's church, VBS, UMW, camps, retreats, and youth fellowship groups are only a few of the countless ways by which churches help people probe God's will for their lives and the world."

The important thing about **Intentional Faith Development** is the word "Intentional." For any one of us, our faith will develop; it will change over the years, regardless of our intention. But, if our faith development is intentional, if we make an effort to do these things that bring us into an understanding of God's will, that make us more aware of God's presence, that open us up to God's transforming power; then our faith develops in a very positive way, in a way that deepens our relationship with God, in a way that helps us grow as disciples.

Intentional Faith Development, as a church offers it, exists in community. All those ways I read, the list of opportunities for growth, are groups. In the Book of Acts, the very earliest church, right after Pentecost when thousands of

new disciples were made in a single day, those new Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). See the dual emphasis on learning **and** community.

In his letters to churches, the Apostle Paul mentions a number of times that the Christians should learn, grow, teach, and mature in their faith. And, Paul sees faith not as something we hold on to, not as something static, but rather as something we grow into and strive towards. In Ephesians 4, he talks about putting away the “old self” and putting on the “new self.” Being open to possessing the mind of Christ allows God to shape our thoughts, attitudes, values and behaviors.

This process of maturing in the faith is one that lasts a lifetime. We never finish studying the Bible. We never know everything we should know about prayer. We never reach the point where we are “done” and no longer need community, no longer need to grow; where we can simply rest and wait for God to take us home.

As we make the efforts to mature, God cultivates in us the fruits of the Spirit, which Paul lists as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” (Galatians 5:22-23). Christians aspire to these qualities. These are the qualities that God forms in us as we deepen our relationship with God through Christ. Jesus called the disciples together as a community. That’s how he taught them. He still teaches us that way, so that we can see his Presence in others. Paul’s letters in the New Testament are all to churches, to communities of disciples in places like Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Collosae and, Thessalonica.

John Wesley made the notion of growing in faith within a community central to his Methodist movement in the 18th century. He presented what he called the Means of Grace, the things we can do to be more open to God: public and family prayers, the searching of Scriptures, the receiving of Holy Communion and the practice of acts of mercy – all in supportive community. When we seek God in the presence of other seekers, we find God **in** them and we find support for **our** efforts in them, as well.

As we consciously seek the stories of faith with others, we find their stories; their struggles are not all that different from ours. Our questions, doubts, temptations and missteps are not unusual, but part of the journey. We become bold in the new ways of thinking about God and the new ways of exercising our faith in daily life. This process offers “an antidote to inordinately self-referential or narcissistic interpretations that merely confirm our current lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors.”

In small groups, we find mentors and role models in members of our own church family. We join fellow travelers in our own congregation. Prayer becomes more personal, more important. We grow close to people we’d only seen in a pew on Sunday morning. We find people with whom to rejoice and to weep, as Paul discusses in Romans 12.

Perhaps the most important aspect of being in a small group to study the Bible or to offer prayers or discuss books is accountability. We all know what it’s like to make a decision to exercise every day and eventually slide completely out of the routine. But, when there is someone else waiting for us at the walking park or the Y, we are more likely to get up, lace up the sneakers, and get there on time every day. The same principal applies to small groups.

Everybody wants to study the Bible. Or maybe, more accurately, everybody **wants** to want to study the Bible. Doing it in a group gives us a much better shot at succeeding.

The practices of faith are too demanding without support from others. Our faith is not something so private, so personal, that it's nobody else's business. Our faith is formed in community because that's how God designed it. We need the support we can get only in church groups, groups of fellow travelers on the way. As we consider how **Intentional Faith Development** already exists at Jamieson and what we can do to make it more central to our lives together, let's consider how likely we are to participate in Bible studies or prayer groups or short-term groups studying some theme or topic. The vitality and fruitfulness of Jamieson depends on your participation in these opportunities. But, such groups are not just for the life of Jamieson; they are for your life as well.