

# Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

*Robert Schnase*

## **Discussion Guide**

*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* by Bishop Robert Schnase, (Abingdon Press, 2007), offers insights on how congregations can become more fertile in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. It examines actions that churches and individuals can take to embody a more vibrant ministry, increase their spiritual potential, and excel in fruitfulness. The five practices are: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. Use this book to begin honest conversations about the life and mission of your church and create a new vision for your own ministry.

**Permission is granted to reproduce this discussion guide, which includes conversation questions and group activities from the book plus additional questions for individual or group study.**

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## Chapter 1

### **The Practice of Radical Hospitality**

*This chapter encourages Christians to offer the absolute utmost of themselves, their abilities, and their creativity to welcome others into the faith.*

#### **Conversation Questions:**

- How do people hear about your church? In what ways are members encouraged to invite and welcome people? How are 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? What contact do visitors receive and from whom in the first days after visiting? How are they invited to further involvement? How can the practices be improved, better coordinated, and more effective?
- When and where do the laity and clergy of our church receive training each year to enhance hospitality?
- Which groups in your church are the easiest for new people to join? What can your group or class learn from them?
- 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 in your congregation?
- How did you become a part of the congregation where you belong? Describe the services, activities, and people who opened the doors for you. What obstacles made it difficult to feel like you belonged?

- How do you feel about talking to other people about your church? How and when have you invited someone to attend or participate in a ministry of the church?

**Group Activity:**

Together with other members of your group, walk through the building as if visiting for the first time. Talk about what you see, what you smell and hear, and what you notice that is welcoming and inviting and helpful, and what you find confusing or uninviting or forbidding. Imagine moving through the building from the point of view of a child, a teenager, a mother with a baby, a person with a disability.

**Additional Questions for Individual or Group:**

1. List some of the different forms that hospitality takes along with words and actions associated with it.
2. When a person actively engages in hospitality to another, how do both people benefit?
3. Give some examples of hospitality as found in Scripture, both Old and New Testaments.
4. Give some examples of how applying radical hospitality could change a congregation.
5. Give your own description of radical hospitality and explain how it differs from ordinary hospitality.
6. What new insights about radical hospitality did you receive from reading this chapter?

Chapter 2

**The Practice of Passionate Worship**

*This chapter explores how the ingredient of passion can transform a worship service and offers insights and ideas on how to have worship that deeply touches souls and changes lives.*

**Conversation Questions:**

- How does the congregation encourage the pastor, staff, laity, and musicians who lead worship to give adequate time to the preparation of sermons and music so as to enhance excellence? When and where do worship leaders receive training? How does the congregation encourage and support training for worship leaders?
- How does the congregation make children feel welcome in worship? How does the youth ministry of the church include significant worship experiences and participation?
- In what ways does your class or group practice and teach prayer? How do you pray for one another, for the church, and for the needs of the world?
- What practices, readings, resources, or relationships sustain your own personal devotional life? How do you prepare your own spirit for worship?

**Group Activity:**

Arrange for several of your class members who have never done so to sit in the chancel or choir loft during an entire worship service. Then ask them about what they noticed or learned about the practice of worship or about the congregation as it worships. How does sitting up front change their perception of worship?

### **Additional Questions for Individual or Group Study:**

1. Share your favorite element of your Sunday worship experience and tell why you look forward to it each week.
2. List words that describe the worship experience that people long for and seek.
3. Name the various ways God uses worship to minister to us and change us.
4. Explain what passion adds to the worship experience and why it is so important.
5. List and discuss some ways to add passion to worship and deepen the worship life of the church.
6. Name some of the benefits of adding more passion to worship for both individual members and the congregation.
7. What new insights about the need for passionate worship did you receive from reading this chapter?

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## Chapter 3

### **The Practice of Intentional Faith Development**

*This chapter shows how high quality learning experiences for all ages mature the spirituality and faith of congregational participants.*

#### **Conversation Questions:**

- List all the weekly small group ministries and activities of your church that occur outside of worship as a means of helping people to study, learn, experience, and practice the faith. How is faith nurtured for children? Youth? Young-adults? Singles? Couples? Mid-aged and older adults? How are the needs of those who are new to the church addressed?
- How does your congregation start new groups, studies, or classes? How are newcomers, visitors, and those outside of the church invited to new studies or short-term classes? Does the number of participants in small group ministries total at least 50 percent of worship attendance for the congregation?

#### **Group Activity:**

In groups of two or three, outline a year's worth of learning opportunities that you would like to attend if they were offered. What do you most want to learn about the faith, and what are the settings that are most favorable to you for learning?

Share with your group one learning experience in your faith life that has changed how you live in a significant way. How did you learn it, and with whom? How have you shared it with others?

#### **Additional Questions for Individual or Group Study:**

1. Discuss what the author means by Intentional Faith Development and why it is a vital practice for fruitful congregations.
2. In order for Intentional Faith Development to occur, what needs to happen? How does this process begin?
3. Discuss how Jesus practiced Intentional Faith Development with his disciples.

4. Why is accountability necessary to grow in faith? Why do good intentions to grow in faith often fall short?
  5. What practices or participation in groups have helped you grow in faith?
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## Chapter 4

### **The Practice of Risk-Taking Mission and Service**

*This chapter reminds us that by reaching out and taking risks, churches become the resources God uses to change lives and transform the world.*

#### **Conversation Questions:**

- What outreach ministries of your church push people out of their comfort zones to make a real difference in the lives of people? What are the ministries that require hands-on, face-to-face engagement with the needs of people that your members might ordinarily not come to know?
- How has a mission initiative or outreach ministry changed your church? How has a service project shaped your own life? What is the most unexpected place your faith in Christ has taken you in order to make a difference in someone's life?
- List the church outreach programs that make the greatest impact on the lives of people in your community who are not a part of your church. How do you suppose your congregation is perceived by those in the community who have the least power—the poor, the unemployed, the stranger, the hungry, the homeless, the abused, the addicted, the immigrant, the victims of violence?

#### **Additional Questions for Individual or Group Study:**

1. How did Jesus personally demonstrate compassionate service?
  2. How and why does risk-taking enhance mission and service projects?
  3. Name some of the benefits of participating in mission outside your comfort zone.
  4. List some reasons why people do not participate in mission and service. What roadblocks need to be overcome for greater participation?
  5. Explain how this chapter illustrates how one person can make a difference.
  6. Brainstorm ways that Christians can help support and encourage mission work.
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## Chapter 5

### **The Practice of Extravagant Generosity**

*This chapter shows how generosity enlarges the soul, realigns priorities, connects people to Jesus, and strengthens congregations to fulfill Christ's ministries.*

#### **Conversation Questions:**

- How do you feel about how your church teaches about money? What values and themes guide your church's efforts to encourage giving and tithing? How do you feel about how faithful your church is with its money?

- How has someone else's generosity touched you and shaped your practices of giving? From whom did you learn generosity? Who continues to influence you toward greater generosity?
- What's the most fun you've ever had giving money? What made the experience delightful, memorable, and meaningful? How do you feel about giving to the church's ministry?

**Group Activity:**

Have your group or class members list what they perceive to be the four most important core values of the congregation—the essential and enduring tenets that are so fundamental that they would keep them no matter what the circumstance. Then list the four most dominant values of American culture as reflected in magazines, television, advertising, business, celebrities, sports, politics, and fashion. Talk about how these contrasting values influence decisions about money, giving, and faith.

**Additional Questions for Individual or Group Study:**

1. What lessons can be learned from the opening story about Keri and Matt?
2. Discuss reasons that some people are not extravagantly generous toward the church and others.
3. What teachings and parables of Jesus encourage generous giving?
4. Explain the difference between generosity and extravagant generosity.
5. Name some of the benefits of proportional giving and tithing.
6. What do you need in order to practice extravagant generosity?

Chapter 6

**Excellence and Fruitfulness**

*This chapter illustrates how and why vibrant congregations perform the five practices in exemplary ways and are constantly learning, improving, and excelling.*

**Conversation Questions:**

- How would your church look if your congregation committed to performing these five practices with excellence? What would change? Who would be with you who is not currently in your congregation? What excites you about that? What scares you about that?
- How would personally practicing these five with greater intentionality shape your own faith journey? How would this change your habits, values, and attitudes? How would practicing the five change your relationship to God, to the church, and to your neighbor?

**Additional Questions for Individual or Group Study:**

1. What inspired you about the story of the church in rural Piedmont, Missouri?
2. What does the Bible say about fruitfulness and being fruitful?
3. Discuss the connection between faithfulness and fruitfulness.

4. List some of the different forms of fruitfulness in churches and in people.
5. Discuss what the author says about churches reaching more people, younger people, and more diverse people.
6. Share some insights you received from reading this book and which of the five practices you wish to focus on and why.