

"The Not-So-Fruitful Practices"

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I enjoy watching the “Top 10 Plays” on ESPN Sports Center, but I enjoy even more the “Not Top 10 Plays” on the same show. Those “Not Top 10” plays are often bloopers, errors, and just plain funny mistakes. Somehow seeing the “Not Top 10” helps to clarify what is true excellence.

Since we in the Indiana Conference are focusing upon the “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations” as taught by Bishop Robert Schnase during our 2010 Session, I have had many questions from churches and pastors about what qualifies as one of those practices. There is confusion about that, and I even hear that some churches are simply re-labeling their current practices to try to meet the standard of those “Five Practices.” Maybe it would help to share the contrast by describing “The Not-So-Fruitful Practices.” So here goes:

“Radical Hospitality” is when we extend warm invitations, welcome, and acceptance to all persons in the name of Christ. The “Not-So-Fruitful” practice happens if

- your church does not have adequate parking places for all who attend
- the entrance to your church building is not visibly marked
- you don’t have greeters or ushers, or worse, your greeters and ushers are not trained to smile, be helpful, and welcome newcomers
- your church building looks more like a museum to the past than a place of current vitality
- your hallways have more pictures of dead people than current photos of children, youth, and adults participating in faithful ministry today (new people can’t join your past, they can only join your future)
- you don’t provide follow-up within 72 hours to newcomers to thank them through a phone call or drop-by visit which says, “We’re glad you came, please come back” (most studies show that effective response must occur within 72 hours in a way which is personal and listening – not a sales pitch)

And of course the worst kind “Not-So-Fruitful” practice happens if you never invite anyone to come to your church in the first place.

“Passionate Worship” is when we help everyone to encounter the transforming presence of God through our worship services, no matter what style of music or liturgy we use. The “Not-So-Fruitful” practice happens if

- worship in your church is stuck in forms and styles from the 1950’s while you complain that no one under age 60 ever attends your church
- your worship bulletin is filled with language which is “coded” or unintelligible to newcomers (e.g. “The Lydia Circle will meet at Stella’s on Thursday at 9 AM” – announcements like that are actually saying, “If you can’t decode this message, you are not welcome”)
- your church’s worship and music is performance-based rather than participation-based (so that your musicians and ministers encourage everyone to sit and watch them worship)

- the sermons spend more time defining Greek words or theological concepts than helping people learn and grow in faith for today's world
- your worship service includes more time for announcements than it does for prayer

And of course the worst kind of "Not-So-Fruitful" practice happens if no one in your church comes to the worship service expecting much of anything to happen anyway.

"Intentional Faith Development" involves helping everyone, of all ages, to mature in faith and to grow closer to God. The "Not-So-Fruitful" version of this practice occurs if . . .

- your church only provides Sunday School for children, thus sending the message that adults don't need to continue their faith development
- if you have adult classes, they spend most of their time having coffee and sharing gossip and preconceived opinions, rather than studying and learning
- no one from your church ever goes on an Emmaus Walk or other program that deepens a person's spiritual journey
- there is no prayer ministry in your church, or worse, prayer is a perfunctory routine of being nice but not really expecting God to listen, or heal, or save
- your pastor never preaches or teaches about the Wesleyan concept of "growth in grace" or "Christian perfection" or "holiness"

And of course the worst kind of "Not-So-Fruitful" practice happens when no one in your church believes they have anything more to learn or experience (which is a form of "functional atheism" – believing that God can't do anything more with any of us)

"Risk-Taking Mission and Service" is the practice of reaching beyond the church to extend the ministry of Christ to others. The "Not-So-Fruitful" version of this practice occurs when . . .

- your church's only involvement in mission is being a landlord to other groups or writing checks for others to do missions
- people in your church feel sympathy for "those other people" but you don't really want to be near them or to have them in your church
- the only risky thing anyone has done lately for Christ is to change the color of paint or carpet in the church building

And of course the worst kind of "Not-So-Fruitful" practice happens when your church feels satisfied that giving a few Thanksgiving baskets or donating small amounts of money to the Bishop's Christmas Offering for Children is a fulfillment of the demands of the Gospel expressed in Matthew 25 when Jesus says, "If you did it for these least of these, you did it for me."

"Extravagant Generosity" is the fruitful practice of discovering God's abundant grace and choosing to participate in generously sharing that grace with others. The "Not-So-Fruitful" practice occurs when . . .

- your church is filled with people who give God what is "left" instead of giving what is "right"
- the church budget is balanced by the generosity of a few persons while most of the congregation passively allows that dependency to occur

- people in your church don't know how to spell "tithes" let alone to engage in this Christian practice of giving 10% to God out of gratitude
- the pastor does not set the example of good stewardship or lead others to join her/him
- your church only conducts a yearly pledge drive to support the budget, instead of engaging in continual efforts to teach stewardship as a spiritual lifestyle
- you only have a few special offerings a year, rather than allowing people to respond generously to a wide variety of opportunities to give

And the worst kind of "Not-So-Fruitful" practice occurs when your church doesn't even pay its share of its conference tithe and district support and thus becomes a "welfare church" which is dependent upon the other congregations of the Conference to carry your share.

I'm not sure if my "Not-So-Fruitful Practices" list will ever make ESPN Sports Center, but maybe naming those unhealthy practices will remind us to engage in the "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations." Keep on practicing.