

## INTRODUCTION

# FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS

Radical Hospitality. Passionate Worship. Intentional Faith Development. Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Extravagant Generosity. People are searching for a church shaped and sustained by these qualities. The presence and strength of these five practices demonstrate congregational health, vitality, and fruitfulness. By repeating and improving these practices, churches fulfill their mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The words are contagious, and the congregations that use them behave differently. People know that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, but they are seeking to understand how to fit this larger mission into their lives and into their churches in a practical way. These words capture the core process by which God uses congregations to make disciples—congregations offer the gracious invitation, welcome, and hospitality of Christ so that people experience a sense of belonging; God shapes souls and changes minds through worship, creating a desire to grow closer to Christ; God's Spirit nurtures people and matures faith through learning in community; with increased spiritual maturity, people discern God's call to help others through mission and service; and God inspires people to give generously of themselves so that others can receive the grace they have known. These fundamental practices are so critical to a congregation's mission that failure to perform them in an exemplary way

results in congregational deterioration and decline. The words used to express these qualities are irresistible because they move us from abstract intentions to practical and personal directions for ministry. Once our mission becomes practical and personal, it becomes memorable and achievable.

These practices not only describe the congregational activities through which God works to draw people into relationship, they also chart the path for growth in personal discipleship. Followers of Christ aspire to grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God. They do so by repeating, learning, and deepening their personal practice of gracious hospitality, by placing themselves regularly under the influence of God's Spirit in worship, by intentionally seeking to grow in Christ-likeness through learning in community, and by practicing compassion and generosity in concrete ways. In these simple practices of Christian discipleship, the convenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace of God become visible, real, and life changing.

This book is designed to assist congregational leaders in holding a mirror to their own ministries in order to ask the questions, "How are we doing in practicing these qualities of ministry in our congregation? In our classes, choirs, small group ministries, mission teams, and leadership circles? How are we practicing these in our own personal discipleship? And how might we do better?" The task of repeating, deepening, extending, teaching, and improving these practices should fill church agendas, guide church boards, and shape leadership training.

The most visible way God knits people into community to fulfill the mission of Christ is through congregations, and these five practices give congregations a common language. As a result of working through a common language, faith communities become clear about their mission and confident about their future. Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations are those that naturally practice these qualities and constantly seek ways to develop them further.

The language to express these characteristics has an interesting history. Bishop Bruce Ough searched Scripture for images to define congregational health for the Ohio West Conference of The United Methodist Church. Using the story of blind Bartimaeus, Bishop Ough identified four qualities—Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Faith-Forming Relationships, and Risk-Taking Service. When I first heard these, I realized the extraordinary power of the simple, clear expressions. Some of Ough's words find their original source in other writings and in earlier attempts to articulate a common and bold language for the basic elements of

community life in Christ. Upon reflection from my pastoral work, I added another quality that facilitates fruitful congregational ministry: Extravagant Generosity. With other minor revisions, I began to teach and preach among the United Methodist churches of the Missouri Conference, lifting up these five practices of congregational fruitfulness. Gradually, other church leaders introduced them as well, some adding revisions of their own.

The words have taken on a life of their own, and I have been amazed how these simple practices, intensified by strong adjectives, have captured the imagination of church leaders and have pushed them to a higher quality ministry. These practices have helped to create congregational strategies and have stimulated church councils, Sunday school classes, mission leaders, and pastors toward greater fruitfulness to the glory of God. Swept along by the Spirit of God, these words have leaped from conference to conference, congregation to congregation, and pastor to pastor as powerful tools provoking us to focused, intentional, and creative ministry.

These words are dangerous, edgy, and provocative. The practices are basic and fundamental to congregational strength, but the adjectives intensify them toward the unexpected and the exemplary. Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations don't stop at practicing *friendly* hospitality, *helpful* service and mission, or *prudent* generosity. Their practices are extraordinary, exceptional, thorough, and extreme; they are *radical*, *passionate*, *intentional*, *risk-taking*, and *extravagant*. These words draw us in and cause us to ask provocative questions about our own congregational practices. No church that is vibrant, fruitful, and growing performs its ministry exactly as it did in the 1950s, and no pastor leading such a congregation is practicing ministry as she or he did in the 1970s or 1980s. Effective congregations change, improve, learn, and adapt to fulfill their mission, and these words push us to rethink our basic congregational culture, organization, and practice.

I have received these ideas and words from others, and now I commend them to a wider audience by writing this book, not to contain them or to own them but to give them greater life to the glory of God. People want the best for their churches. They long to fulfill the church's mission of making disciples, and they intuitively know that the congregation is the primary channel through which God forms people into the Body of Christ. And yet many laypersons and clergy have difficulty breaking down this universal mission into achievable tasks and practical strategies that