

Intentional Faith Development: Perfecting the Practice of Love

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John 15:8-17; Ephesians 4:22-5:2

The principal of a Catholic high school was taken aback by a phone call. It came from an inmate at a nearby prison. He was known to be wealthy, but had acquired his wealth by fraudulent means. Now the man was offering to make a significant donation to the school.

In return for this donation, the inmate wanted the high school to make it possible for his adult son, a high school dropout, to receive a high school diploma. As the principal inquired further, it became apparent that the inmate did not want the son to have to do anything to earn the diploma. He simply wanted the son to be sent a diploma.

The principal was flabbergasted. Why, she asked the inmate, did he care so much that his son, now in business for himself, receive his diploma?" "Because education is important," replied the inmate.ⁱ

The story is humorous and tragic at the same time. Education is a process, not a piece of paper. Education is interactive, not solitary. Education is a lifelong adventure, not something to be checked off the list as accomplished. The opportunities to learn are endless. The world is changing so rapidly that there are always new things to learn. When we dare stop learning, we will not be equipped to participate in the world around us. Education is a lifelong process of interacting with thoughts, people, ideas, experiences, and places which enhance our knowledge of the world.

Faith is similar. Faith is not simply something inherited from our ancestors, like fine china or sentimental keepsakes. Nor can faith be bought in a onetime transaction. Faith is a relationship of trust in the Divine Source of Life. Like all relationships, faith needs to be cultivated with time, attention, and effort.

Intentional Faith Development is one of the five key practices of a vital, fruitful congregation. Strong healthy churches offer opportunities for disciples of Jesus to learn the tenets of the Christian faith and apply them to their personal lives. It is in a community of learners that our faith is truly challenged and nurtured. Hopefully worship kindles the fire of faith and whets our appetite for deeper insight into the spiritual life. I have found small groups in local churches and with colleagues to be the venues in which I could be honest about my struggles and find support for daily living.

Twentieth-century archaeologists uncovered some interesting things about the ancient Temple Mount in Jerusalem, one of which is the seeming random design of the southern stairs. It was by these stairs that weary travelers climbed several hundred feet from the valley to the actual Temple. The rise of the steps varies in some instances by several inches. The stretch or depth of the steps varies—in no discernable pattern—by several feet! Now, some might conclude that the design engineers were either under the influence of mind-altering chemicals or incompetent. But not the ancient rabbis. They saw the random, sometimes treacherous state of the southern stairs as a powerful metaphor for Intentional Faith Development. They argued that the engineers were not "stoned" but were persons of faith who knew that to ascend the hill of the Lord hurriedly and without thought would be spiritually dangerous. Rather, those who would approach God must do so with intention, caution, and measured steps—paying attention and learning all along the way.ⁱⁱ

In the development and nurturing of our faith, we sometimes grow in leaps and bounds. Other times it feels that we are stuck on the "same step" for too long, not really going anywhere.

The rabbis would teach us that both experiences—and everything in between—offer growth and spiritual maturity. Every aspect of the journey carries us closer to the goal of living like Jesus. The key is in taking the journey with care and intentionality. Each step, no matter how deep or shallow, is an important step in the journey.

In his book *Stage of Faith*, psychologist James Fowler likened the development of faith to a spring with seven identified stages along the way. Each stage builds on the previous stages. The first stages often occur when we are very young and are very basic. Parents, caregivers, and preschool teachers lay this foundation with their words and actions. We wonder what God looks like. Then we begin to think logically about our faith. In a stage Fowler calls Literal Faith, we begin to enter the perspective of others and grow in our ability to capture life and significance in story and narrative. We see this in children as they learn the stories of the Bible.

Abstract thought comes next. More abstract thinking helps us to make sense of things. We can reflect upon past experiences and find within them lessons for today, creating connections between the concrete and the abstract.

We begin to get to where many of us as adults are—points where we have to question, examine, and reclaim the values and beliefs formed to this point. Rather than blindly accepting what has been taught or experienced, we now consciously choose our personal commitments to particular values and beliefs. We may ask ourselves, “At my core, as one created in God’s image, who am I?”

Fowler calls the final stage of growth Universalizing Faith, in which we are grounded in a oneness with the power of God. This is what John Wesley calls Christian perfection.ⁱⁱⁱ By perfection, Wesley meant that the goal of Christian living was to be filled with love of God and love of neighbor. Becoming “perfect,” for Wesley, involves the process of conforming ourselves more and more in thought and deed to this love. There are no better places for us to perfect the practice of love than in small groups, including our families, our circle of friends, and the community of faith.

The early Christian church took the call to faith formation seriously. Persons preparing for baptism spent three years in preparation. It was a formative time for them in which the inner Christian self was brought to birth. They were trained to live, think, and feel in ways that correspond to who God is. The new Christians would emerge from this intense formation with the ability to see God around them, in each other and in themselves. Easter was the day for celebrating baptism. As Jesus emerged from the tomb of death into resurrected new life, so too Christians had released the shells of their former lives and taken on the new life of Christ. The three years of preparation enabled them to shed former ways of life that had been shaped by the world and to clothe themselves with the life of Christ. They put on a new white robe to symbolize their new life in Christ.

These new Christians realized that the work of transformation is a lifetime’s work, done in community with much thought, much wrestling with scripture and the tradition. Their catechism or instruction did not end with their baptism in a glorious Easter celebration; it continued each day of their life.

For example, as the emotion of anger arose within, they had to discern whether that anger was of God or not. If of God, how could they best express that anger? Talking it through with other Christians helped them find a Christ-like expression of their anger and a way to speak the truth in love.

The dean of Duke Divinity School, Gregory Jones, tells of a visit to the National Genocide Memorial in Rwanda. It is the grave of 250,000 people killed in the 1994 genocide.

The tour group found it difficult to absorb the immensity of the killing as well as the intensity of the violence and vengeance between Hutus and Tutsis, which left 800,000 dead. Their host noted that in 1990 Rwanda was described as a Christina county, with approximately 90 percent of the people identifying themselves as Christians.

The tour group took a bus to a small Muslim community in a village called Myamirambo. The host said, “This is the only area in Rwanda that didn’t experience the genocide at all.”

“Why is that?” a student asked.

“Because their identity as Muslims is so fundamental, so important to them, that they could not envision killing one another. Their commitment to Allah created their fundamental identity, more important than any tribal or national identity.”

Jones writes, “We felt ashamed. A small Muslim community, a minority of the population, had not only refused to become complicit in the genocide, but also served as a refuge for others.”

The group also visited churches that were the sites of massacres (sometimes with the complicity of pastors and priests), and learned that more people were killed in churches than anywhere else. There were also stories of individuals risking their lives and of pastors moving people from one safe house to another.

In reflection Jones writes, “We could not avoid concluding that there had been an ecclesiological failure on the part of the church, namely a failure to catechize Christian believers so that they would have recognized that their identity as Christians—their baptism in Christ—had fundamentally altered their identity. They should no longer have been primarily Hutu or Tutsi, for they had become united in Christ Jesus. Or had they?

“What would it mean for Christians, in Rwanda or the United States or anywhere, to take our identity in Christ as the primary defining character of our lives—relativizing all other loyalties?”^{iv}

That’s the purpose of Intentional Spiritual Formation – to take our identity in Christ as the primary defining character of our lives. That’s the mission of the United Methodist Church – to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That’s the mission of Lafayette United Methodist Church – to experience and express Christ’s love. We can’t do it alone. We need the support, the encouragement, the accountability of one another.

John Wesley urges Methodist to go on toward perfection, to grow deep in their love of God and love of one another. May that be our goal as disciples of Jesus Christ.

ⁱL. Gregory Jones, “Swimming in the deep end,” *The Christian Century*, July 5-12, 2000, p. 730.

ⁱⁱ Melissa Bailey-Kirk, “Imago Dei,” in *Five Practices Leader Manual and Media*, by Robert Schnase (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), p. 111.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 112-113.

^{iv} L. Gregory Jones, “Secret of Nyamirambo,” *The Christian Century*, December 13, 2000, p. 45.