

Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

Volume 1.2

www.lifelongfaith.com

Summer 2007

Family Faith Formation

- 3 The Rule of Family Faith: Practicing the Presence of God in Our Outward Lives
Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore
- 12 Faith Formation with Families in Today's Church
Leif Kehrwald
- 21 Faith Formation with Hispanic/Latino Families
Ida Miranda
- 30 Making Parents a Priority
Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain
- 39 Recommended Resources: Parenting
- 41 Transforming Faith Formation One Family at a Time
Jim Merhaut
- 50 The Human Body in Family Spirituality
Cynthia Dobryznski
- 57 Recommended Resources: Family Faith Formation

Cover Art: "Extended Holy Family" by Michael O'Neill McGrath, OSFS.
Copyright © Bee Still Studio. www.beestill.org. All rights reserved. Used by permission.



LifelongFaith Associates, LLC

Copyright © 2007 LifelongFaith Associates, LLC.
No articles may be reprinted without permission.

From the Editor

It's All About Family!

Our second issue of **Lifelong Faith** explores family faith formation from a variety of perspectives—theological, cultural, sociological, and educational. Yet, I believe you will find two common themes throughout all of the essays. One is the primacy of the family in passing on the faith and nurturing the Christian way of life, and the need for churches to recognize this reality in the conduct of their ministries. Second, you will also see how each author is drawn to Christian practices as a way to help families grow in faith in their daily lives at home and in the world.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore takes us inside the often chaotic world of family life to find the presence of God. In the “Rule of Family Faith” she explores how families might create a rule, i.e., a pattern or model that guides a way of living. She illustrates how families can “pursue the love of God” through spiritual practices. **Leif Kehrwald** proposes a way for families to recognize and respond to God’s gracious activity in their daily lives by reflecting upon “moments of meaning.” **Ida Miranda** writes about the faith and religious practices of Hispanic/Latino families and the opportunities to nurture faith if we acknowledge and respect the religious heritage that Hispanic/Latino families bring to our churches. **Jolene and Gene Roehlkepartain** report on five major findings from a national poll of parents in their article, “Making Parents a Priority.” They describe each finding and then offer specific suggestions for how congregations can make a difference in the lives of parents. **Jim Merhaut** summons research and pastoral experience to claim that authentic faith formation in the home is absolutely essential for successful congregational faith formation, and then goes on to explore a process for nurturing Christian practices at home. **Cynthia Dobryznski** concludes the journal with a reflection on the human body and its implications for family life and spirituality. You will also find two reviews of recommended resources for parenting and for family formation faith formation.

The new web site for LifelongFaith Associates has launched. Please go to www.lifelongfaith.com to learn more about our work, find free resources on lifelong faith formation, and register for the free monthly e-newsletter. We also have a new phone number: 203-490-1975.

I am grateful for all the positive response we have received to our first issue. I hope you find our second issue informative and helpful. Please let me know what you think by sending me your comments and suggestions at jroberto@lifelongfaith.com.

Thank you for supporting our new initiative!

John Roberto
President, LifelongFaith Associates

Lifelong Faith

Lifelong Faith is published quarterly by LifelongFaith Associates, LLC.

Managing Editor

John Roberto

Editor

Mary Carol Kendzia

Design

Brian Parda, Alias Creative, LLC

LifelongFaith Associates, LLC

40 Brighton Road
Naugatuck, CT 06770
203-490-1975
www.lifelongfaith.com

Inquiries

To submit articles or letters to the editor, send an e-mail to jroberto@lifelongfaith.com or send a letter to John Roberto at the above address.

Individual Subscriptions

One year (4 issues)—\$36
Two years (8 issues)—\$64
(Foreign and Canadian addresses please add \$12.)

Group Subscriptions

2-5: \$32 per subscription (4 issues)
6-9: \$29 per subscription (4 issues)
10+: \$26 per subscription (4 issues)

Subscribe by mail or online at www.lifelongfaith.com.

Upcoming Issues

Fall 2007
Best Practices in
Lifelong Faith Formation

Winter 2007
Teaching



The Rule of Family Faith: Practicing the Presence of God in Our Outward Lives

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Ph.D.

Family spirituality does not always look like “spirituality” as many people understand it. When we think of spirituality, we often picture inner peace and tranquility. But families are anything but tranquil. In fact, if you want to turn your life upside down, entertain a serious love relationship, consider marriage, or better yet, have a child. To obtain the serenity we often associate with spirituality, one would have to flee all this for the desert or monastery, as some early church fathers did.

We also envision spirituality in terms of revelatory mountaintop experiences, the kind religious mystics claim. But again, such an occurrence seems more likely to happen on retreat from, not in the middle of, domestic life. In search of epiphany, people have often left home and family and embarked on a journey. Taking care of a home is actually one of the most ordinary of activities. In fact, preparing food, cleaning toilets, and folding laundry can be downright humdrum, drab, and dreary. It is the kind of work that is never finished and that endlessly recycles, rising up again almost as soon as one has finished the last load of wash or cleaned the most recent mess.

Those who cannot pursue either monasticism or mystical visions often turn to the church and congregational worship as the heart of faith. But once again those with kids, especially families with young children, can sometimes find it difficult to get everyone out the door, into the car, and to church on Sunday morning without a minor family feud over who wears what or sits where, arriving frazzled and distraught from the effort. Once there, children’s noise and constant movement are often unwelcome. So families disperse to age-appropriate settings, such as a cry room, and then leave, wondering whether the faith of the family as a whole has been deepened or further fragmented. Neither child nor adult knows what the other encountered for

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Ph.D. is the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Pastoral Theology at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Her latest books are *In the Midst of Chaos—Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), *Let the Children Come—Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), and *Children in American Religions* (Rutgers, forthcoming 2007). One of seven recipients nationwide of a Henry Luce III Fellow in Theology in 1999-2000, she has also received grants from the Lilly Endowment, the Association of Theological Schools, and the Wabash Center on Teaching and Learning in Religion and Theology for the study of families, children, and religion; research on practical theology; and exploration of teaching and vocation.

This article draws on her book, *In the Midst of Chaos: Care of Children as Spiritual Practice*.

the past hour or two. Nor does the Sunday school flyer or church bulletin usually make it out of the van and into the home.

If we cannot flee family relationships, travel to the mountains, or join together to worship in the right spirit on a regular basis, then we might at least consider a quiet half-hour set aside daily for individual prayer and Bible reading as the bedrock of faith. Yet again there is nothing like having children to disrupt this. Such practices are often further complicated by the demands of paid employment.

Given these powerful preconceptions of what it takes to be a spiritual person and daunting obstacles to church participation, what becomes of faith in families? Are those people who are immersed in what one psychologist calls the “parental emergency”—the heavy lifting of parenting that easily consumes at least eighteen years of adulthood—just “on idle” with their faith, taking time off while others seek God on their behalf?¹ If not, just how does one understand the development of faith amid the demands and chaos of families? What about the children themselves? Is their way of faith included in these common views of spirituality as somber reflection, mystic awakening, corporate enactment, or personal prayer?

So persuaded are we by these definitions that we do not recognize family spirituality when we see it. The problem, in other words, is as much the common perception of spirituality as any failure to practice our faith. My hope in this article is actually quite simple, therefore: I want to explore ways to envision the rule of faith in families so church leaders and those in families can nurture and uphold it. In other words, I will not suggest one more spiritual chore to do, one more

I want to help enrich the active practice of faith already percolating in families and congregations by exploring the peculiar character of the rule of family faith.

program to create in congregations, or one more family faith activity to work into an already overloaded schedule. Rather I want to help enrich the active practice of faith already percolating in families and congregations by exploring the peculiar character of the rule of family faith.

Christianity's Ambivalence about Family Faith

It might help to understand the broader nature of the challenge first. Few religious traditions have escaped the tension between spiritual practice and family life, although most have explored ingenious ways to deal with it that do not, in the end, adequately resolve it. Catholics, for example, have attempted to mediate the hierarchy of celibate spirituality over spirituality of the home by identifying the family as a “domestic church,” a small-scale model of the Church itself, an idea that goes back to the fourth century and that has enjoyed resurgence in the past two decades.² Jews in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe and other periods separated spiritual practice along gender lines, with religious study reserved for men and care of family the obligation of women. Hinduism regulates the problem chronologically, dividing the life cycle into four periods with a special stage of “householding” for rearing children.³ Seventeenth-century

Puritans sanctioned the home as a “little church” but then elevated the father to the role of pastor, nearer to God than others—with all the potentially harmful consequences of this equation.⁴ None of these patterns is ideal. Almost all have biases against women and children and their full participation.

Christianity has its own ambivalent history on the family that goes right back to Jesus himself. A curious passage appears in the Gospel of Mark, right at the beginning of the gospel, defining his ministry, in which he rejects his own family (Mark 3:31–35).⁵ Jesus has just been baptized and tempted, he has eaten with tax collectors, refused to follow religious rules about Sabbath keeping, and gathered a group of men around him for intimate fellowship. His family is rightfully worried about him. All they want to do is protect him. But they can barely get through the throngs of those who will not leave him alone. When they do, what does Jesus say? “Who are my mother and my brothers?...Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

It is not that Jesus does not love his mother or cherish families; other Scripture passages suggest otherwise. He blessed wedding wine, welcomed children, valued marriage, and rejected divorce. But Jesus had a larger vision in mind. He disclaims his own family to proclaim a new family of believers defined not by

birth but by commitment to doing God's will.

Jesus himself was, of course, single and without children, and he asked those who followed him to leave their families. The apostle Paul never married or had children. He thought the coming of God's kingdom advised against changing the situation in which one found oneself. He and his followers described the early Christian community as the new "household of God" (Eph. 2:19), a portrait that subtly shifted the locus of faith from the hearth of the biological family to house churches and new extra-familial relationships.

It is no surprise, then, that the early church did precisely what Jesus predicted: set brother against brother, father against child, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Matthew 10:21, 35–36; Luke 12:52–53). It is also no wonder that letters written to the Ephesians and Colossians—not by Paul himself, most Bible scholars say, but by Paul's disciples in his name—try to re-impose order on the family. These letters contain what early Greeks and Jews called *household codes*, or codes that sanction the authority of the *pater*, the father and husband, over his children and wife (wives be subject to husbands, husbands love wives, children obey parents, and slaves be obedient to masters). Why this attempt to re-impose order? Jesus and Paul and their disciples had disrupted ordinary family life. They had turned the world upside down. They had made all free and one in the love of Christ—Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free—all children of God (Gal. 3: 20).

The Rule of Religious Life

Early church theologians attempted to resolve this ambiguous legacy by setting up a two-tier spiritual path. Those who were "religious" left families to pursue a higher calling. This calling involved living by a fresh "rule" or pattern of life carefully crafted around disciplines of charity, celibacy, poverty, shared possessions, and steadfast commitment that helped preserve bounded religious communities.

In some cases, the established hierarchy of celibate religious life as superior to the faith of the laity left the latter without spiritual guidance.⁶ But this was not always the case. Although some leaders, such as fourth-century monastic St. Jerome, viewed family life as a major impediment to religious enlightenment, others, such as Augustine of Hippo and John Chrysostom, saw the family as part of God's good creation and, in Chrysostom's case, believed families were as important as monastic communities in putting key virtues into practice. Rich reciprocal relationships often developed between religious communities and families. Those in the former sought the good of the latter through prayerful intercession and daily practice of the rites of the church. Families were blessed when a child would enter a religious order. Monastic communities served as sanctuaries for orphans and the poor and as outlets for women who sought education and relief from domestic work.

Families have always benefited from the spiritual knowledge of those in religious orders such as the Jesuits and the Benedictines, both of which encouraged integration of faith into daily life.⁷ In the fifth-

century, Benedict of Nursia, created an order that balanced prayer and daily work, while Ignatius of Loyola founded the Jesuits in the sixteenth century as a religious society that combined contemplation with action designed to change the world. Today thousands still belong to these orders, and their practices are receiving renewed attention not only among Catholic laity but also by all those who seek richer ways to incorporate a religious "rule" of faith into daily living.

The term *rule* does not refer to a set of directives, instructions, or step-by-step exercises. Its meaning is better captured by the Latin word *Regula*, suggesting a pattern or model that guides a way of living. From this angle, "every thoughtful person," observes Thomas Moore in his Preface to *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, "no matter what his or her lifestyle may be, has a rule." Even though we may associate *rule* with ideas like regulation and authority that go against freedom, living an examined life actually has the potential to liberate followers from being pushed and pulled around by internal desires and outside forces. A rule for religious life is "an instrument for shaping a particular kind of life for which a person has deep and genuine desire." Such a rule remains open to further interpretation and reflection.⁸

The Rule of Benedict points to practices and patterns that sustain a way of life centered in the love of Christ. As such, for fifteen hundred years, the Rule has shaped those under vows in Benedictine communities; but it also has the capacity, according to Anglican historian and mother Esther de Waal, to aid those "struggling to follow our baptismal promises in the world."⁹ De Waal is convinced that the Rule's monastic wisdom

The Rule invites us to wake up and listen for God through Scripture, our lives, the wisdom of others, and the Rule itself. It values stability gained through perseverance and endurance, just the sort needed to sustain faith through the constraints of families.

can speak directly to “those who like myself are seeking God in the midst of a busy, often confusing and exhausting daily life.” Her reflections on the Rule emerge, as she confesses, not from any kind of spiritual retreat or direct participation in monastic community but out of the lived “experience of a wife and mother with many commitments.” Joan Chittister, a member of the Benedictine Sisters, also seeks to “distill” the wisdom of the Rule but does so after thirty years of living by it. The Rule is written “by a layman for laymen,” she argues. It offers “sensible, humane, whole, and accessible” guidance for the “overworked, overstimulated, and over-scheduled;” that is, for the average person who does not seek to escape their world but live more thoughtfully, caringly, and fully within it.¹⁰

The Rule invites us to wake up and listen for God through Scripture, our lives, the wisdom of others, and the Rule itself. It values stability gained through perseverance and endurance, just the sort needed to sustain faith through the constraints of families. It anchors all relationships in a humility that sees God as God (and not us) and refrains from seeking to control others or push oneself and children ahead. The Rule establishes a balanced rhythm of daily prayer, study, and work, all in a kind of moderation that counters the drive to overload our

days. It regards each person as God’s created, deserving of respect, never to be used as an instrument for our own gratification. It encourages us to hold material possessions lightly while also seeking God in our most ordinary surroundings and daily labor. Paradoxically, the ordinary is sometimes the most extraordinary. In all this and its other rich counsel, the Rule ultimately hopes to point beyond itself to the rule or way of Christ.

In the last several years, many lay people have also turned to the rule of seventeenth-century Carmelite Brother Lawrence. Three centuries ago, he attracted attention because of the spiritual centeredness he embodied despite his menial surroundings. As a lay brother, his primary responsibility among the Carmelites, was serving others. Yet despite monotonous labor—cooking, washing dishes, cleaning hallways, and repairing shoes—he reached a point where work was no different from prayer. “In the noise and clatter of my kitchen,” he says, “I possess God as tranquilly as if I were upon my knees before the Blessed Sacrament.”¹¹ This was his “best rule” of “holy life.” “My most usual method is this simple attention, an affectionate regard for God to whom I find myself often attached with greater sweetness and delight than that of an infant at the mother’s breast.”¹² This is how Brother Lawrence describes his steady

practice of speaking with and reflecting upon God amid the mundane tasks of life or “practicing the presence of God” throughout the day regardless of external circumstances.

Extending the Rule of Religious Life to Family Faith

All of this is helpful as far as it goes. But does it go far enough? Can rules written for monastic communities account for the unique demands of families, such as solving conflicts deeply embedded in the biological legacy of family intimacy, caring for close relatives in sickness and health, or bearing and raising children? Does the rule of religious life need further development to correspond to spirituality in families?

Various aids to prayer, such as Brother Lawrence’s practicing the presence, are helpful. But they still require an interior focus of mind, will, and heart that one can rarely find time for in family life. They call for a kind of stepping outside of one’s routine, or for bringing something that is outside one’s routine—God, spirituality, tranquility—into it. One participates in these disciplines “despite” or “regardless” of the chaos. They still assume one meets God in a quiet inner space.

Despite popular publications affirming everyday spirituality and longstanding movements in Christian history encouraging integration of faith into daily life, Christian perception of faith as something that happens outside ordinary time and within formal religious institutions, or within the private confines of one’s individual soul, still pervades Western society. Bias against “outward” forms of spirituality, as enacted by the body in the

midst of family and community, still persists.¹³ Limiting spirituality to the “inner” life and restricting theology to the life of the mind ends up marginalizing many Christians, and excludes a huge portion of life from both faith and theology. The closer one is to the outward life of the family, it seems, the farther from God.

Monasticism rests on a wholly distinct pattern for Christian faith—whom and how to love, how to work, where to live, how to care for the body, how to spend one’s money. This pattern includes celibacy, silence, solitude, a dispassionate extension of love to all, transcendence of sexual desire and the body, voluntary poverty, and pilgrimage beyond the bond and boundary of home.¹⁴ Has anyone ever outlined so clearly and carefully a rule for family faith that has comparable weight, integrity, and cohesiveness?

to the world.”¹⁵ Do those most proximate to children have anything comparable to offer? What can we learn about faith in families that provides its own “privileged” perspective on spirituality?

Practicing God’s Presence in Our Outward Lives

What might be included in a fresh rule for families? A kind of wisdom can arise in families and parenting, as is evident in memoirs of mothers, empirical studies by social scientists, and theological reflections of parents. Some of this wisdom, documented and elaborated in my books, can be stated in pithy maxims: Utterly physical acts of birth and care can be powerful spiritual catalysts. Walking “according to the pace of children” can deepen

human and essential to creativity, they can sometimes contribute to faith. Work, activity, and service within the home and in relationship to children can bring us as close to God as sublime contemplation. God loves and transforms us in the midst of messy details and troubles. The family can function as a workshop or laboratory for honing practices of faith that nurture forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, and justice.

These kinds of maxims shaping the rule of family faith are not meant to eliminate qualities often associated with the rule of religious life, such as silence, solitude, rest, humility, and non-anxious peace. These are all needed dimensions of a full faith. Nor do I want to sanction busyness as somehow sacred: there is nothing spiritual about over-extension and burnout. We should be cautious when we find ourselves boasting about our many activities or those of our children.

I simply want to widen the circle of faith for the sake of children and parents. Millions of parents face the question of how to live a life of faith when silence and solitude, rest and tranquility, contemplation and centeredness are rare. Widening the circle of faith means balancing profound silence and fruitful words, potent solitude and invigorating company. More important, widening the circle of faith means redeeming chaos and redefining spiritual peace to include disruption, interruption, and disturbance as equally essential to a Christ-like life.¹⁷ Grace is active not only when we are passive and quiescent or tranquil and mindful but also when we are deeply involved in the activities of childhood and parenthood themselves. People respond powerfully to Brother Lawrence precisely because he seems to

A gap exists between the monastic rule or pattern and daily life for most of us: marriage, children, and passionate attachment to specific people; immersion in bodily, sexual activity; commitment to one location; ownership of material possessions; and the daily grind of making a living and maintaining a home.

A gap exists between the monastic rule or pattern and daily life for most of us: marriage, children, and passionate attachment to specific people; immersion in bodily, sexual activity; commitment to one location; ownership of material possessions; and the daily grind of making a living and maintaining a home. The monastery, Chittister argues, offers a “privileged perspective from which to speak

faith.¹⁶ Children form adults as much as the reverse, and they have much to teach adults about the life of faith. Words rather than silence, especially in the lives of young children, have the potential to open up worlds, build a home, breathe life into our lives, and invoke the Word “with God” (John 1:1). Anxiety and chaos are not in themselves antithetical to the Christian life, but when understood as part of being

suggest that our outward actions themselves might become prayer.

Sample Practices of Faith in Families

Practicing the presence of God in families involves recognizing practices that invoke, evoke, and form faith in our outward family lives. We already participate in such practices in the varied contexts where children and adults live together: cleaning, playing, working, eating, talking, learning, fighting, making up, arriving, departing, and otherwise making a home.

Doing Laundry as Spiritual Practice

My own Protestant background shapes my desire to reclaim a rule of family faith. The Protestant tradition has long seen the ordinary as significant. Protestant Reformer Martin Luther challenged the sequestering of Christian vocation to a select few, capable of practicing celibacy and living in cloistered community, and reclaimed mundane life as a potential site for sacred activity. To put his own sixteenth-century principles of religious reformation into action, he renounced his vow of celibacy and wed Katherine von Bora, a former nun. Together—and she was a wonderful, straightforward, hard-working partner who knew how to hold her own—they raised a large and boisterous family that included six of their own children and four orphans. His comments on faith and family are among the most remarkable of any classic Western theologian. Christians should look on the “insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties” of household work and child care—rocking the baby, washing its diapers, changing its bed, staying up at night—as “adorned

with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels.”¹⁸ When done in faith, raising children pleases God.

So, several years ago when I saw God in the most unlikely of places—in changing my sons’ cloth diapers—I was in good company. Somehow the mundane routine of rinsing, washing, drying, folding, and piling up a fresh stack of clean diapers became a source of graced solace through which Christ entered my life. I still like folding clothes. There are others who know what I am talking about. When Kathleen Norris published an essay about laundry in the *New York Times Magazine*—specifically, about the “joys of hanging clothes on the line to dry”—she received at least a hundred letters in response.¹⁹

Although Norris doesn’t explicitly connect her attempt to reclaim the mystery of the “quotidian”—the daily, the ordinary, the commonplace—with her own Protestant heritage, I speculate that there is a close link. It takes discipline to notice the distinctive grace of Christ in the ordinary. Many Protestants have fallen out of the habit. We have developed a kind of amnesia about the call in our own tradition to sanctify the ordinary.²⁰ This call is worthy of retrieval.

Playing as Spiritual Practice

Few Thanksgivings go by when I do not think fleetingly that I am late for the “turkey bowl” and then realize, a bit deflated, that our family does not play turkey bowl any more. Like the stimulus-response of Pavlov’s dog, when my family got together with close friends, we played. We—adults and children together—played Hearts and Oh Hell, we played Wiffle ball in the side yard, we took trips to major league baseball games, theme parks, and

zoos. And we played turkey bowl. Even though I don’t like football, I’d show up in sweats and mittens every November, rain or shine, to divide into lopsided teams.

All this playing filled many good purposes. We never dwelled on them or even spelled them out. But we knew deeply and thoroughly, without having to define them, the lessons of fun, vigor, joy, happiness, defeat, recovery, conflict, arbitration, reconciliation, camaraderie, sensual energy, touch, tackle, and roll.

Especially for families with boys, as in my case, playing in today’s society is frequently driven by technology (with video games a primary illustration) and organized activities (with travel sports the epitome). How does one reclaim play as a potentially rich faith-formative practice? Has play moved so far out of the orbit of spirituality—not only in our technological, economically stratified world but also over the long history of Christianity’s subtle disdain for embodied fun—that making this connection is ludicrous?

To answer, we must first consider a larger question about how to regard popular culture and its relationship with family faith. Do these two stand in adversarial relationship with technology or sports or marketing, tainting and threatening faith? If not, just how does one withstand the powerful influence of wider society? Society does not always support our efforts to raise faithful children. This may come as a surprise most particularly to mainstream Protestants like myself who have otherwise escaped religious and social marginalization and presume cultural affirmation.

The solution is not to get rid of TV, spurn competitive sports, and otherwise reject the ways culture defines play, however. Instead we are challenged to

transform play from within, in the same way that theologian H. Richard Niebuhr talked about “Christ transforming culture.”²¹ We must discern its negative impact so we can resist and transform it “even as we make appropriate use” of it, as Richard Gaillardetz says about technology.²² This means talking more self-consciously with each other and in our families about how play subtly forms us and shapes our view of the world. It also means recognizing criteria by which to distinguish faith-filled play from less faithful play.

Faith-filled play involves pleasure of a holistic sort. Mind, body, spirit—all are engaged together. Play has rich interpersonal and intergenerational potential, connecting us to others, and is wonderful when done together in a communal or cooperative context. But play also involves activity done by oneself. One must be able to play well alone in order to play well with others. Play sparks and fuels imagination and creativity. It suspends and transforms reality but does not supersede it. It creates legitimate spheres of irresponsibility and liminal space where failure and risk can occur without dire consequence, and transformation can happen. It involves an attitude of delight and enjoyment—an embodiment of joy—as much as any specific activity. In fact, any playful act can become work if the pleasure dissipates. Everyone should have equal access to play, regardless of talent, wealth, or the right outfit. Genuine play does not harm those playing or others around them. Through its unique power to create, re-create, and resurrect, faith-filled play embodies essential facets of God’s relationship to the world and of our relationships with God and each other.

Such criteria may or may not rule out certain video games. They simply give us a solid rule on which to stand as we measure the play that dominates our lives. They give us guidelines by which we can revitalize forms of play that sustain relationship, connect us to the environment, and foster genuine joy. Adulthood by definition involves growing up, out, and weary of play. Adults outgrow some of the best kinds of play, in much the same way that our capacity for wonder fades. Living with children keeps play alive, and we adults are fortunate when kids invite us to run in this direction.

out of the sun and the rest of the world. In hushed voice, we browsed. We sat on the floor, leafed through books, picked this one, put back that one, and then read a few together before final decisions on what to check out and load into the wagon for the trip home.

The books felt like gifts, much more precious than if we had gone to the store to buy them. I even liked explaining to our kids how a public library works—a community agreeing to pool resources and share the wealth so all, the haves and have-nots, can benefit. This only works as long as borrowers abide by the covenant

...family can function as a workshop or laboratory for honing practices of faith that nurture forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, and justice.

Reading as Spiritual Practice

Reading aloud together is one of the most satisfying and mutually transformative experiences adults and children can share. Like play, reading can subvert and transform the world. Kids also know and remind us how to read slowly, meditatively, savoring the words, asking us to read the same book over and over again.

Pilgrimage to our favorite local library was an integral part of our larger practice of family reading when my children were younger. We traversed the walking distance between home and library with an incredible tricycle that had a little wagon behind the seat where we put the fifteen or twenty picture books we were returning. The library had the feel of sanctuary: a cool, quiet, welcome respite on our way in and

of care for the books, returning them as they received them. So people “hand on” what they “received,” much like Paul passing on the tradition of the breaking of the bread (I Corinthians 11:23) or people handing on stories they have known and loved from one generation to the next.

We discovered a lot of books on these treks, some wonderful authors never heard of before, and others that evoked deep-seated memories from our own childhood. I cannot easily describe our criteria for selection. Our choices had something to do with sensual, aesthetic appeal: size, color, quality of picture, word spacing, feel of the book in our hands. But it also had to do with other elusive, faith-related goals. We looked for and stumbled across books that not only gave pleasure. We sought books that

would embody values and ideals in which we believed, “a moral vision,” as Herbert Anderson says about Dr. Seuss, “without moralism.”²³ We read to move “into the shoes of another, and thus ultimately to learn compassion” in Anne Thurston’s words.²⁴ We also looked for books that raised tough religious and philosophical questions about loss, death, human meanness and evil, ambiguity and daily struggles so familiar to all of us who, like Judith Viorst’s *Alexander*, know what it is like to have a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” In all these ways, reading is a rich practice in an active life of faith.

Doing Justice as Spiritual Practice

This is perhaps the most challenging rule of faith in families and the most overlooked practice in books on family faith. Lots of popular literature feeds off specific religious traditions while overlooking the mandate that often stands at their heart: family love must not stop at the doorstep. Genuine Christian family values are not simply about commitment or fidelity. They compel love of one’s neighbor.

Families are actually crucibles for learning ethics and for practicing justice internal to the family and in relationship to the wider public good. When our family moved ten years ago, we had to decide where to live. We soon discovered that choosing a house was not just a decision about location, size, and school district. Instead, it plunged us into much bigger questions. Deciding where to live, which itself is a privilege not extended justly to all, marks one’s fundamental convictions and forces one to put one’s values into action. Our decision ultimately

came down to a complicated compromise between a variety of commitments.

Doing justice in families often involves negotiation and compromise—something that seems to go against the grain of genuine prophetic justice. “How to be peacemakers both at home and in the larger world is quite a challenge.” So James and Kathleen McGinnis, Catholic parents and peace activists well known for more than two decades of work on “parenting for peace and justice,” admit on the first page of the tenth-anniversary-edition of their widely read book *Parenting for Peace and Justice*. They have refused to see parenting and doing justice as divorced from one another. But they have struggled. “For almost twenty years,” they say, “we have wrestled with the challenge of integrating our family life and social ministry... We have wanted...to be able to act for justice without sacrificing our children and to build family community without isolating ourselves from the world.”²⁵ The effort to raise children faithfully pushed both of them to a whole new level of what it means to do justice.

Fortunately, love of one’s own children need not exclude love of other children, and under the best of circumstances the love evoked by one’s own children helps us “see each person as someone else’s child, someone else’s pain and joy,” as it did for one mother. It left her less able to bear some of the “misery we inflict on each other.”²⁶

Parents are also a bridge or a hinge standing between children and the wider world, helping children move from love of self to love of others in the wider community.²⁷ Precisely at the point where one’s heart might turn away, might curve in on itself—on the doorstep, at the

gate, from the center of one’s most primal, passionate, intimate love of our children—we are called to realign our passions and help our children do likewise.

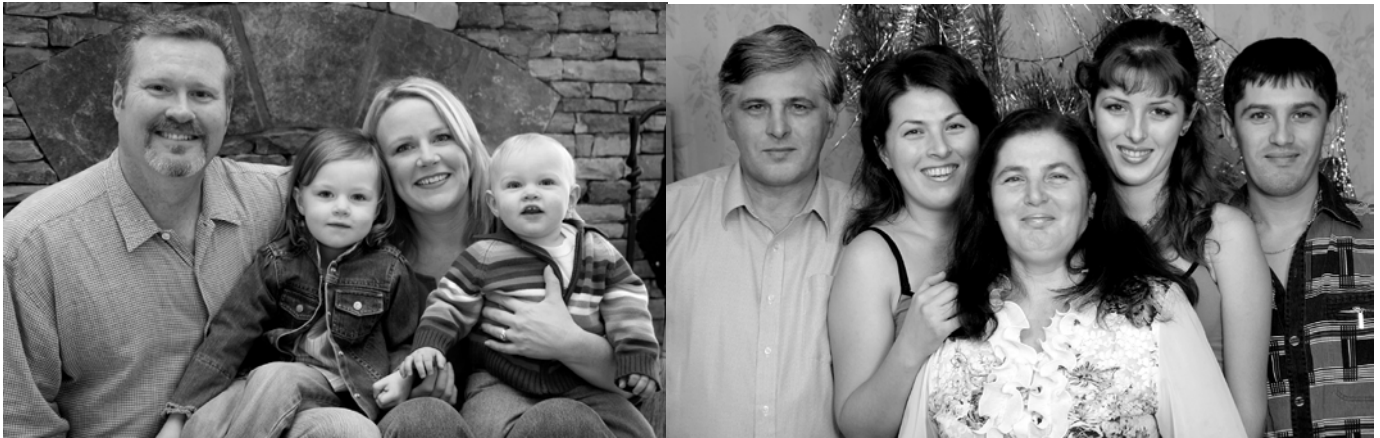
Finally and not least important, how families model justice internal to the home powerfully shapes children’s understanding of justice in the wider world. When the “first and formative example of adult interaction” is “one of domination and manipulation or of unequal altruism and one-sided self-sacrifice,” rather than “one of justice and reciprocity,” children are considerably hindered in learning justice. “It is within the family,” political scientist Susan Moller Okin argues, “that we first come to have that sense of ourselves and our relations with others that is at the root of moral development.”²⁸ The family must be just, she asserts, if we are to have a just society.

Conclusion

Out the great hubbub of daily life, it helps to look at a few sample practices like cleaning, playing, reading, and doing justice as full of rich spiritual potential. I name these practices as illustrative, not exemplary. The last thing those caught in the demands of families need is one more exercise to implement, one more ideal to live up to, one more task to execute. No one can excel in all the practices of faith. Instead one cultivates favorites, those toward which one naturally gravitates, by which to live and raise children. I simply hope to extend an invitation to people to consider areas in their own family lives where they already find themselves pursuing the love of God.

Endnotes

- ¹ David Gutman, *Reclaimed Powers: Toward a New Psychology of Men and Women in Later Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 190 and Janet Martine Soskice, "Love and Attention" in *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, Michael McGhee, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 62.
- ² See Florence Caffrey Bourg, *Where Two or Three are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2004). See also Vigen Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children," in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Children in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).
- ³ Ernest Boyer, *A Way in the World: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984), pp. 32-33.
- ⁴ See John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- ⁵ The story also appears in the other Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:55; Luke 8:19-21).
- ⁶ See Carol Harrison, "The Silent Majority: the Family in Patristic Thought," in Stephen C. Barton, ed., *The Family in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 87-105.
- ⁷ See Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, Louis J. Puhl, S. J., trans. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951); Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of Saint Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1982); Marilyn Schauble and Barbara Wojciak, eds., *A Reader's Version of the Rule of Saint Benedict in Inclusive Language* (Erie, PA: Benet Press, 1989).
- ⁸ Thomas Moore, Preface, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), pp. xvi-xvii.
- ⁹ Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. 12-13. See also de Waal, *Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1989).
- ¹⁰ Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), pp. 3-4.
- ¹¹ Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a critical edition by Conrad De Meester, Salvatore Scriurba, trans. (Washington, DC: ICS, Institutes of Carmelite Studies, 1994). The quote is cited by Marjorie J. Thompson (*Family: The Forming Center*, Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996), pp. 81-82 comes from an earlier 1985 edition, p. 93.
- ¹² Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, The Second Letter.
- ¹³ See Owen C. Thomas, "Interiority and Christian Spirituality," *Journal of Religion*, Jan. 2000, 80(1): 41-60.
- ¹⁴ Wendy M. Wright, "Living the Already But Not Yet: The Spiritual Life of the American Catholic Family," *Warren Lecture Series in Catholic Studies*, no. 25, University of Tulsa, Mar. 21, 1993, pp. 2-3. See also Wendy M. Wright, *Sacred Dwelling: A Spirituality of Family Life* (Leavenworth, KS: Forest of Peace Publishing, 1994) and *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating Contemplative Spirit at Home* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
- ¹⁵ Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, p. 9.
- ¹⁶ See Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, pp. 152-153 and Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 27. The phrase comes from Genesis 33: 14.
- ¹⁷ For other treatments of faith within the ordinary practices of family life, see Bradley J. Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Tom Montgomery-Fate, *Steady and Trembling: Art, Faith, and Family in an Uncertain World* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005); Elizabeth Ann Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994); and Delores R. Leckey, *The Ordinary Way: A Family Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).
- ¹⁸ Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," in *Luther's Works*, Walther I. Brandt, ed., and Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), pp. 39-41.
- ¹⁹ Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and "Women's Work"* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 15.
- ²⁰ See Douglas F. Ottati's chapter, "The Sanctification of the Ordinary" in *Reforming Protestantism: Christian Commitment in Today's World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).
- ²¹ H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1951).
- ²² Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), p. 138.
- ²³ Herbert Anderson, "Sense and Nonsense in the Wisdom of Dr. Seuss," *New Theology Review* (Aug. 2001): 45.
- ²⁴ Anne Thurston, *Because of Her Testimony: The Word in Female Experience* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 47.
- ²⁵ Kathleen and James McGinnis, *Parenting for Peace and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981, 1995), pp. 1-2.
- ²⁶ Camille S. Williams, "Sparrows and Lilies," *First Things*, Aug.-Sept. 1993, p. 12.
- ²⁷ See Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993) and Cheryl J. Sanders, *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth, and the Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997).
- ²⁸ Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 14, 22.



Faith Formation with Families in Today's Church

Leif Kehrwald

The pressures, challenges, and realities facing families today make it difficult for them to intentionally grow in faith together. Societal and cultural trends point toward individualism, pluralism, personal choice, instant gratification, and a belief that any persons or institutions of authority are suspect. Add to this the frenetic pace of activity that most American families keep, and the result is a situation where both intention and availability to explore faith at home are severely limited.

One can also paint a rather bleak picture of congregations today. Over the last couple of generations, the Catholic Church—and, I suspect, most mainline Christian congregations—have fostered a passive approach to faith growth at home. With our schools, our faith formation programs, our youth programs, our Bible camps, our retreats and rallies for youth, and a plethora of other well-meaning programs, we have successfully communicated to parents and families that the best thing they can do for their children and teens is to *drop them off* at the church, and we will make disciples out of them.

But of course, our disciple-making efforts have yielded less positive results than we (anyone) had hoped, so we conclude that parents and families are not doing their part. We remind them over and over that they are the *primary educators* in the faith. Yet why don't they behave like it? Why are their priorities skewed? Could it be that *we* have conditioned them to behave in exactly this way?

In his 2006 pastoral letter on faith formation, *Learning, Loving and Living Our Faith*, Catholic Bishop Tod Brown of the Diocese of Orange, California, raises some rather pointed and poignant questions.

- Our religious education programs are packed with youngsters preparing in the second grade to receive their First Communion but the enrollment often drops dramatically in the ensuing years. Why don't they come back?
- In some of our schools less than half of the Catholic students come to Mass on the weekend with their families. Why aren't they there?
- After preparing for and receiving Confirmation, many...good-hearted young men and women move on to other things. Why do so few remain regularly involved in service projects or youth groups?
- (Referring to couples who come to the Church for marriage, Bishop Brown writes,) After their marriage, why are so few of them regularly involved in the life of their parishes? (Brown, 2-3)

Leif Kehrwald, project coordinator for Family and Intergenerational Services at the Center for Ministry Development, has published books and articles on family life, family ministry, marriage, and youth ministry. He is the editor and co-author of *Families and Faith* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), and author of *Youth Ministry and Parents* (Saint Mary's Press, 2004). Leif has worked as a family life director in Catholic dioceses. He holds an M.A. in adult and family ministry from Regis University and teaches courses on family ministry and lifelong faith formation across the United States.

I believe we must raise the bar in our commitment to challenge and support all families in their faith-building efforts. I also believe we must raise the bar in terms of our expectations for families and households themselves to make a stronger commitment to explore faith at home. We need to shift the paradigm of household faith growth as something optional and hoped-for to something that is expected; from extraordinary to ordinary.

Families and Faith

From the Roman Catholic perspective, there seems to be a disconnect between what the church says about the holy and sacred nature of family life and how the typical family *feels* about themselves. In short, the church says rather pointedly that the family is indeed sacred, an authentic ecclesial expression, a *domestic church*. Yet, the average American Catholic family (and presumably, Protestant as well) rarely *feels* that they are holy and sacred.

The source of this disconnect could lie in two places. Either the church is wrong in its claim, or families do not have an adequate understanding of holiness, in particular, *homemade* holiness. I find the church's stance on family life difficult to argue with. In fact, a great deal of what the church has said about marriage and family life through the centuries is downright inspiring. So I must conclude that families themselves don't quite get it. They just don't grasp the meaning and possibility that they are inherently holy and sacred.

And yet, at the same time nearly every family catches glimpses of the Spirit on occasion. Even amidst its foibles and quirks and problems and dysfunction,

every so often the very nature of living as a family reveals the wholesome sacredness of this unique community. Most people cannot explain it, but nearly all have experienced it. But the fact remains that on the whole and from day-to-day, most families would not consider themselves holy and sacred.

Holy and sacred does not mean problem free, not by any means. It does not even necessarily mean "capable of solving our problems." All it means is that as believers the family occasionally encounters the genuine Mystery of Love. And therein lies the rub: most families don't realize that it's quite so simple.

In his exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II articulates the fundamental tasks of the Christian family. One of those tasks is ecclesial, meaning to participate in the life and mission of the church. While challenging for many, this task is easy enough to understand. However, to address our concern about ordinary family living, John Paul II goes on to say, "the Christian family also builds up the Kingdom of God in history through the everyday realities that concern and distinguish its state of life" (#50).

The United States Catholic Bishops reinforce this notion of everyday holiness in their 1994 pastoral message to families, *Follow the Way of Love*. Quite simply, yet profoundly, they state,

A family is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. The early Church expressed this truth by calling the Christian family *a domestic church or church of the home*.

This marvelous teaching was underemphasized for centuries but reintroduced by the Second Vatican Council. Today we are still uncovering its rich treasure.

The point of the teaching is simple, yet profound. As Christian families, you not only belong to the Church, but your daily life is a true expression of the Church.

Your domestic church is not complete by itself, of course. It should be united with and supported by parishes and other communities within the larger Church. Christ has called you and joined you to himself in and through the sacraments. Therefore, you share in one and the same mission that he gives to the whole Church (8).

Notice what they did *not* say. They did not say that when Christian families say their meal prayers, when they gather around the Advent wreath, when they worship on Sunday, they are a true expression of the Church. Of course all of these are true expressions, but the bishops use the term *daily life*. Believing families seeking God's presence in their normal activities, in their *daily life* as a family, are a true expression of the Church.

According to Jim Merhaut, holiness simply means set apart. Merhaut writes, "Divine holiness, expressed in the person of Jesus Christ, means to be absolutely set apart *from* sin and set apart *for* love. Holiness is not distinct from creation and physicality; holiness is separating oneself from the ways of sin so as to live a distinguished life of love" (Kehrwald, 12). With respect to families, Merhaut reminds us "family living is embodied living. Day to day, hour to hour, and minute to minute, family members literally brush up

against each other and the world around them as they explore the depths of love in and through their fleshy experiences” (Kehrwald, 12). If only families could make the connection between their “fleshy experiences” and their perceived understanding of holiness!

Merhaut goes on to pose a very important question, and then he offers an insightful answer.

What separates Christian families from other families? What makes a Christian family holy or complete? It is not necessarily the organizations to which they belong, although holiness will require the rejections of some organizational affiliations. It is not necessarily the house in which they choose to live, although the choice of a house and a neighborhood may be significantly influenced by one’s path to holiness. It is not necessarily the things they own or the food they eat or the entertainment they pursue, but a particular path too can influence these to holiness. Rather, Christian families are set apart from other families because their love for Christ is the primary motivation for all they are and all that they do. (Kehrwald, 13)

The Christian vision of family life describes the family as a community of life and love. Family life is sacred and family activities are holy because God’s love is revealed and communicated there. As a result, families can come to believe that God dwells among them, empowering them to recognize and respond to God’s gracious activity in their lives.

Faith Moments in Family Life

The first, primary, and most important task for families to grow in faith is to recognize their “moments of meaning” and intentionally mine them for what they have to teach. Everyday, families experience what I call “moments of meaning” that have the potential for becoming religiously significant. Aside from those extraordinary moments when God’s grace literally explodes in the face of the family, many of these ordinary moments may go by undetected, let alone reflected upon. To probe their religious significance, someone in the family must point it out, and then the family must acknowledge it and respond to it.

In his classic book, *An Experience Named Spirit*, John Shea writes

There are moments that, although they occur within the everyday confines of human living, take on larger meaning. They have a lasting impact; they cut through to something deeper; they demand a hearing. It may be the death of a parent, the touch of a friend, falling in love, a betrayal, the recognition of what has really been happening over the last two years, the unexpected arrival of blessing, the sudden advent of curse. But whatever it is, we sense we have undergone something that has touched upon the normally dormant but always present relationship to God. (97)

We seek to help families recognize God’s gracious presence in their daily lives, *and* show them how the Christian tradition can illuminate their experience, turning “ordinary” human moments into religiously

significant ones. In order to do this, we must help families become aware of the moments of meaning in their lives, filter their experiences through the lens of faith and spirituality, become aware of God’s gracious presence in their lives—and respond to it—develop a faith rapport with one another, connect their informal faith experiences with the more formal religious practice of the community, and become intentional about their desire to grow in faith.

A tall order, you may think. Indeed, it is! Yet we must keep two things in mind. First, some families are doing just that. Some families have found creative and meaningful ways to connect their life experiences with faith growth. They *are* intentional about it, and it is much more than just another “should” in their busy lives. Second, as church leaders, we simply don’t have a choice but to move in this direction.

With this tall order in mind, I offer a four-step process designed to help families notice their moments of meaning, reflect upon them, put them in dialogue with the Jesus story, and see what difference it can make in their lives. I have worked with numerous groups of parents and families, and given a conducive atmosphere, I can attest that the four steps work. When parents and families are given the opportunity to work through these steps, they actually do begin to connect their daily life with their faith practice.

Essentially, what I am about to describe is a rather simple process of theological reflection, a practice learned by anyone engaged in serious spiritual formation. I would never use the term “theological reflection” with ordinary families, for surely it would intimidate them; better to simply call this “remembering and reflecting on our moments of

meaning.” The process helps families pause and take a look at what’s happening—become present to the moment—and then purposefully engage in several sequenced steps that lead them toward a spiritually-based interpretation of what’s happening. The steps help the family mine the sacredness of the key moments of their lives.

Here’s an example of a family moment; I call it “Spring Musical.”

Josh is a high school senior who loves music, dance, and drama. Throughout his high school career he has landed only minor parts in the school drama productions. He has always felt that his true talent has not been fully recognized until one January afternoon, he arrived home and announced, “I got the lead in the Spring musical.”

As I describe the four steps, it will benefit you, to bring to mind a “moment of meaning” from your own family experience. Perhaps the moment occurred just this morning or within the past week, or perhaps it is a memory of a moment that occurred long ago. On a blank piece of paper, make a note of your moment. Write a few lines to describe it. (The four steps described below can be found in greater detail in Chapter Five of *Families and Faith*.)

Step One: Awareness Stop! Look! Listen!

The first step is someone in the family must realize “we’re having a moment of meaning.” Someone realizes that something deeper is going on within the family. The event may be relatively benign, such as a resolution to a conflict or a piece of good news, or an unexpected good deed that someone performs simply out of the goodness of his or her heart.

Or, it may be an extraordinary moment, such as a teenager’s first love lost, or a child’s first day of middle school, or the death of a loved one.

Instead of just enveloping this event into the routine of the day, someone must take notice that something important just happened, and then point it out to other family members. He or she must speak up and say, “*Stop! Look* what’s happening here! Can we *listen* to what the Spirit wants to say to us at this very moment?”

There is risk involved here because other family members may not want to recognize the moment. It may mean being intimate with one another, or reconciling with each other, or any number of things that would bring them out of their protective shell and be vulnerable with each other. It’s easy to dismiss the gut feeling and let the moment of meaning pass.

Growing up, Josh’s mother always dreamed of being a professional ballerina. Her dream never came true. When Josh announced his good news amidst the noise and chaos of preparations for supper, Mom knew how what a triumph this was for him. And she knew that unless she did something, the rest of the family would just let it go with a “That’s great, Josh.”

- Take a look at your moment of meaning. How did you and other family members become aware of it?

Step Two: Acknowledge It!

In their own way, the family acknowledges that things are not the same as they were before the “moment.” Their routine of ordinary life has been disrupted so they can embrace this new

encounter. They begin to recognize the presence of the Spirit in their midst.

Like the first, this step also requires some intention and leadership by one or two persons, who urge the whole family to venture into the encounter. As a whole, the family must be willing to allow the disruption. They must be willing to trust enough to go along this unexpected path to see what can happen.

Mom gives Josh a congratulatory hug, and announces to all, “Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Don’t be late; we have something wonderful to celebrate!” When they all sit down for supper, Josh finds that he’s been given the “special plate” reserved for special occasions and accomplishments. And everyone finds a wine glass at his or her place. Wine or juice is poured into the glasses, and Mom begins the meal with a toast to Josh, “It’s not everyday that one of our lifelong dreams comes true, but today, for Josh, one did. Hurray for Josh in landing the lead role in the Spring musical!” Applause all around. The meal conversation centers on what the audition was like, how Josh selected and prepared his monologue and solo, and if the director is aware that Josh, while a great actor and a good singer, is not a strong dancer. Later, the discussion flows into rehearsal schedules, performance dates, and arrangements for Grandma and Grandpa to come see the show.

- Take a look at your moment of meaning. How was it acknowledged? Who led the family into further exploration of the moment?

Step Three: Connect to the Sacred

The family senses that the moment can teach them something, and they are convinced it has implications for their spiritual well-being as a family. They want to mine its riches. How do they do so? With intentional action, the family will seek answers to no less than five basic questions to help them reflect on the moment of meaning, and to glean what it has to teach them.

1. **How does our story connect to the Jesus story?** Is there a gospel story that connects to the family encounter? What is the meaning and message behind that story? Does that message also apply to the family encounter? What does the Bible say about this situation? What would Jesus do in this situation?
2. **How do we pray about this encounter, or how does this encounter change our prayer?** Does the moment call for rejoicing or repentance? Does the encounter draw the family into intimate embrace and prayers of gratitude, or does it call for prayers for courage and resolve? Does it challenge the family to stand up for others, or call us to circle their wagons and draw in on themselves? What are the prayers, and what are the ways to pray in each of these circumstances?
3. **Who are the wisdom people with whom we should connect?** Does the encounter require some interpretation? Who does the family turn to help them understand it? Or

does the event simply cry out to be shared with others in joy and happiness? Does the family have an outlet to do just that? Or does the moment of meaning call for comfort, support, and encouragement? To whom can the family turn? Or does the moment simply call for mutual commiseration from someone who's "been"?

4. **How does this encounter intersect with the life of our faith community and our religious practice?** Does the moment of meaning impact the way the family worships or otherwise participates in their faith community? Is it calling them to engage in a ministry, service, or program that is new to them? Are there others in their church who can benefit from hearing about this encounter?
5. **What resources should we pursue for further growth?** Is there a book the parent or family can read, a movie they should see, a music CD they ought to hear that will help them continue their learning and growth from this encounter? Is there a class or lecture or intergenerational event that might help? Is there a magazine or journal to which they should subscribe, or a website that they should frequent?

Josh's triumph is also Mom's dream come true. She finds herself reflecting on how she has prayed for Josh continually since he was a baby. She just knew that someday his talent would be discovered. In her prayer she feels a bit like the

persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) or the midnight neighbor (Luke 11:5–13) in pestering God with her prayers for her son. Now she is emboldened to ask her family to pray for Josh, and the whole cast and crew, by adding a simple blessing to their meal prayer each evening. Also, since several members of the cast and crew go to the same church, Josh's mom has asked if they could receive a special blessing on the Sunday before the show opens. .

- Take a look at your moment of meaning. Did your family make a connection to the sacred? How so? What questions was your family confronted with?

Step Four: So What?

After the family has pursued the faith connection to their moment of meaning, they need to evaluate its impact. Maintaining a posture of intentional awareness, they should discuss questions such as these:

- What difference has this experience made in our lives?
- How have we grown from it?
- What about ourselves has it revealed to us?
- What memory have we created? How will we revisit it?
- What have we learned about our faith, about life, about each other?
- How will this experience change our behavior?

It is likely that individual family members will reflect on these or similar questions. Ideally, however, the routine of family life will bring members together for opportunities to share their reflections with each other. Of course, the family needs time and space to do this. They need plenty

of quantity time together in order to have the quality time to share with each other on a deeper level.

Of course Josh performed well, and the family has a complete video of the entire show. While Mom will never tire of watching clips, she knows Josh will grow up and move on, and his performance will seem juvenile. No matter, because she knows that for both of them this experience has renewed their confidence in God's gracious activity in their lives, and in God's response to prayer.

➤ Take a look at your moment of meaning. What have been the implications for you and for your family?

Most families are overwhelmed by all of the information coming at them and all the expectations laid in their laps. If they perceive faith and religious practice as just one more “should” in their lives, it will likely fall near the bottom of the priority list. Yet through the steps outlined here, their faith can actually become a valuable tool for discovering family balance, discerning choice, building camaraderie, experiencing intimacy, and of course, spiritual growth.

Recognizing the Moments

It's not enough to simply declare that the Christian family is holy and sacred, and therefore, that all the events in the life of the family are potential moments of faith growth. While this is certainly true, the vastness of possibilities may render both the family and the church leader blind to all but the most obvious possibilities. Therefore, categorizing these experiences allows for the practical application of resources, assistance, and connection with

others in the community who may have had similar encounters.

The following points form a framework for strategic response in helping families make the connection between faith and everyday life. These points recognize the full range of faith encounters that families can have, yet offer seven separate “categories” from which to offer pastoral assistance and effective resources (see Kehrwald 70-71). Notice the repeated connection between faith and ordinary life. Imagine helping the family place their “moment of meaning” into one of these responses, and assisting their learning in that context.

1. **Intentional.** Parents are the first and most influential educators of their children. Families provide the foundational setting in which a young person's faith is formed. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the parents' role as primary faith educator?
2. **Daily Life.** Families grow in faith when they “stop, look, and listen” in order to recognize God's gracious activity in their daily lives. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the ordinary or extraordinary events of daily life?
3. **Wholeness and Well-Being.** When families build healthy relationships with each other through positive interactions, sharing meals, solving conflicts, and so on, they also grow in faith together. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to maintaining, healing, or enriching family relationships?
4. **Change.** While sometimes resisted, moments of change and transition in family life open windows for faith growth. Several predictable transitions correspond with sacramental moments. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to an experience of change or transition in the family?
5. **Religious Practice.** When families practice their faith—through conversation and discussion, ritual and celebration, outreach and service to others—they grow in faith together. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to religious activity in the home or in the larger faith community?
6. **Worship.** When families participate in the liturgical feasts, seasons, and rhythms of the church, they make connections between their faith encounters and the faith life of the larger community. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the worship celebrations of the faith community?
7. **Contemporary Culture.** Families meet the challenges of contemporary culture by articulating their values, establishing clear priorities, and making careful decisions, all in an atmosphere of community support. Does the “moment of meaning” connect to the family's relationship with society and popular culture?
When family members, particularly adults and teens, are familiar with and understand these seven points, two things occur quite readily. First, they will more easily and more often recognize the “moments of meaning” that occur in their families. Second, they will have a clearer sense of how to respond to the movement of the Spirit in a way that benefits all.

Application

When I have shared the seven points described above with church leaders, I am often asked how to put them into practical practice so that the leader can actually help families recognize and reflect upon their moments of meaning. In response, I invite the leader to engage in the following steps:

1. **Articulate your sphere of influence.** In other words, what program or service or ministry do you have responsibility for and influence over?
2. **Describe the families in your sphere of influence.** In your program or ministry, what can you generalize about the families connected there: e.g., school-age, adolescent, dual-career, and so forth. Of course, every family and household is unique and there is a great deal of diversity among any group of families, but there will also be some similarities. Name those similarities.
3. **Develop home activities.** With these family similarities in mind, try to surface one or more practical, doable home activities that will help families recognize each of the seven key points. You may want to link these activities to a particular season or event of church life. As an example, see the chart at the end of the article, “Connecting Family to Congregational Life: Lent,” which shows some Lenten home activities connected to each of the seven points.

4. **Determine delivery method.** Go back to your sphere of influence. What’s the best way for you to package and deliver these ideas to the families in your program or ministry? How do you tailor the content and the promotion of these activities in order to maximize their potential for use? How do you build in opportunities for feedback and accountability?

Ideas for family faith-building activities are plentiful. The challenge lies in getting families to engage in them. Here are some practical tips:

- **If they build it, they will use it.** When families create it, they are more likely to remember, value, and do something with it.
- **Keep it simple.** Be creative and make it pleasing to the eye, but make it simple to accomplish. Given them options to choose from, but not too much to do.
- **Give them all they need.** Be sure households have the tools and supplies they need to engage in the activity at home.
- **Show them what they’ve got.** When you have the parents and/or families gathered, walk them through the activity and resources. Show them how it works.
- **Practice.** If we want families to express their faith at home, give them opportunities to practice doing so while they are gathered with facilitators and other families.

Conclusion

Today’s family is busier than ever before. We cannot coerce them into exploring faith, just as we can no longer coerce them into worshipping every Sunday. But amid their frenetic pace and their constant effort to provide for and raise healthy families, today’s parents are also searching. They search for meaning, for answers, for insight into what will help their children and themselves navigate the dangerous waters of today’s American culture. Many have discovered that a living, thriving faith congregation helps them do just that. But in order to fully benefit from that community, they must also become an intentional domestic community of faith. For their sakes, as well as our own, we must help them do just that.

Works Cited

- Brown, Tod David, Bishop of Orange. *Learning, Loving and Living Our Faith*. Orange, CA: Catholic Diocese of Orange, 2006.
- Kehrwald, Leif, editor. *Families and Faith: A Vision and Practice for Parish Leaders*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006.
- Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*. www.vatican.va, 1980.
- Shea, John. *An Experience Named Spirit*. Allen, TX: Thomas More Publishing, 1983.
- United States Catholic Bishops. *Follow the Way of Love*. Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1994.

Practice Ideas

Connecting Family Faith to Congregational Life: Lent

Principle	Home Activity	Church Link
<p>Intentional Parents are the first and most influential educators of their children.</p>	<p>Sacrifice Sacrifice needs to be alive and well in family life. Everyday acts of sacrifice—parent to child, husband to wife, sibling to sibling—show how much we love and care for each other. Sacrifice focused on our relationship with God needs to be a priority too. Talk about sacrifice in your household.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the ways members of our family make sacrifices for each other? Why do we make these sacrifices? • What sacrifices can we make to grow closer to God? What sacrifice does God want us to make for others at home, in our neighborhood and world? 	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas to the families in your sphere of influence?</i></p>
<p>Daily Life Families grow in faith when they “stop, look, and listen.”</p>	<p>Serving/Almsgiving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show an act of kindness to each family member today. • Show an act of kindness to a friend and to someone who is difficult to like. • Do someone else’s chores one day this week. • Donate a new item of children’s clothing to the local homeless shelter. 	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p>Well-Being When families build healthy relationships they also grow in faith together.</p>	<p>Ideas for Fasting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give up one TV show today and spend that time helping a family member. • Think about a bad habit that you would like to change, like telling a lie, yelling at others, getting angry, or putting people down. Choose to avoid that habit and do something positive instead. 	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p>Change Change and transition in family life open windows for faith growth.</p>	<p>Sacrifice continued Using the list of ways to practice sacrifice, create goals for your family, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will think of each other’s feelings and needs, and sometimes be willing to give up what we want freely and happily. • We will not always have to be first to choose a seat in the car, to use the computer, to have that piece of homemade pie. Sometimes we will be last. 	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p>Religious practice When families practice their faith, they grow in faith together.</p>	<p>Ash Wednesday Blessing of a Home Cross Many families have a cross or crucifix which hangs on a wall in their home. On Ash Wednesday, the family can gather to bless this special Home Cross. Provide a blessing prayer.</p>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p>Worship When families participate in the liturgical feasts, seasons, and rhythms of church.</p>	<p>Lenten Daily Prayers Provide simple ideas for daily Lenten prayers, such as this meal prayer: <i>Bless us, Lord, and the food we are about to eat. May our love for one another, and the food we share, strengthen us to share your love with others</i></p>	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>
<p>Contemporary Culture Families meet the challenges of contemporary culture.</p>	<p>Grow in Awareness of Justice What can we do together as members of a family to increase awareness of justice issues and the ways to work for justice?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect “information nuggets” that family members find on various justice and service topics. A sample “nugget” could look like this: <i>Did you know? Every day in the United States, one in four children under 12 run short of food; most at risk are families headed by women with incomes less than 75% of the federal poverty level.</i> Talk about ways your family can help. • Participate in a movie night for families, or the entire community, focusing on a “values video” or a justice-oriented theme. • Participate in a school, church, or community justice education program. 	<p><i>How would you package and deliver these ideas...</i></p>



Faith Formation with Hispanic/Latino Families

Ida Miranda

The majority of Hispanic/Latino families today identify themselves as Christians, specifically as Catholics,¹ and they attend church here in the United States more so than they did in their native countries. This is mainly due to the feeling of loneliness and isolation they experience after leaving behind their extended families and friends in their native countries; they look to the church for support and a sense of belonging during this time of loss, change, and transition.

Studies indicate that 72.6 percent of Hispanics living in the United States—close to 26 million—are Catholic, and that 64 percent attend church services regularly.² They are present today in every church in the United States, participating in the life of the church by way of prayer groups such as Talleres de Oración (prayer workshops), the Charismatic renewal, the Cursillo movement, Marriage Encounter, Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (small Christian communities), and other apostolic movements. Both those who are not as involved in church activities as well as those who are search for a deeper knowledge of the Bible, faith and leadership formation, and spiritual development. In addition, many practicing as well as non-practicing families come to the Catholic Church to register their children for *la doctrina* (religious education classes) so that they may receive their First Communion, and more and more families are registering their non-baptized children who are of catechetical age in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children (RCIC).³

It is, therefore, of utmost importance that all church leaders recognize and affirm the Hispanic/Latino presence not only by responding to their spiritual needs, but also by ensuring that they are included in every facet of church life. Church leaders are challenged to support and nurture their relationship with God by making positive efforts to provide faith formation opportunities specifically for them.

This essay will address three key issues and challenges for faith formation with Hispanic/Latino families: 1) understanding their faith and religious practices; 2) presenting ways in which we can support and encourage Hispanic families to nurture, celebrate, and share faith at home; and 3) identifying ways in which churches can nurture family faith through family-centered faith formation models.

Ida Miranda is a bilingual author and national speaker. She is the author of *A Pocket Guide to Pastoral Spanish* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006) and “Multicultural Catechesis and Whole Community Catechesis: As Seen Through the Lens of the Hispanic/Latino Community” in *Whole Community Catechesis: Come to the Table* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2005). She is a religion consultant for the Sadlier Publishing Company. Ida contributed to *Un llamado a la fe*, a bilingual children’s catechetical program (Harcourt Religion).

I will be writing from my experience as a Latina Roman Catholic⁴ who has ministered in catechesis in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, in predominantly Anglo churches with a strong Hispanic/Latino presence. The majority of Hispanic/Latino families I served were first or second generation Mexicans or Central Americans and first generation Cubans. For the sake of uniformity, I will use the term “Hispanic,” which is used by the United States government and by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops.⁵

Faith and Religious Practices of Hispanic Families

Hispanic families have a very deep faith in God, Mary, and the saints. They may not know a great deal about the Bible or about the religion they profess, but without a doubt their faith in God is strong and constant. When asked to reflect on their relationship with the triune God, their testimony is of conversion and grace, giving witness to a loving, compassionate, and ever-present God. Although many struggle daily with the fact that they left behind some or all of their family members, the presence of God in their daily lives is very much a part of their lived experiences. They maintain their faith by being a people of hope and trust in a God whom they

know is always with them through their joys and sorrows, trials and successes.

Hispanics speak of God with endearing terms: Diosito, Papacito Dios, Papa Dios. They name their sons, Jesús, Ángel, Gabriel; their daughters Guadalupe, María, Miriam, Concepción, Milagros; and give names of saints to their children, clearly demonstrating their comfort and familiarity with the sacred and the holy. They attribute all that happens in their lives to God’s intervention with the words, *está en las manos de Dios* (it is in God’s hands), *que sea la voluntad de Dios* (may it be the will of God), *si Dios permite* (if God permits), *Dios es tan grande* (God is awesome), *Dios me libre* (God help me), and *lo que Dios quiera* (whatever God wants). When asked how they are doing or feeling, God is automatically included with use of the phrase *bien, gracias a Dios* (good, thanks be to God). Sr. Anita De Luna, professor of religious studies, describes the Mexican and Mexican-American image of God as a God of Providence who “chooses the poor to be rich in faith and inherit the riches in heaven.”⁶

Hispanic families have a passionate belief in the Blessed Mother and devotion to Mary plays a central role; it is a significant factor in the preservation of their identity. The Marian devotions are a strong element in the identity of a people

who, even when no longer in their native countries, maintain their devotion to the Blessed Mother who protects them, loves them, and intercedes to the Father for them. Hispanics call Mary by affectionate familiar names; she is their *madrecita* (little mother). For Colombians, she is *La Chinita*; for Cubans, she is *Cachita*; Costa Ricans, *La Negrita*; Mexicans, *La Morenita* or *Lupita*. The images of Mary and the stories of miracles related to many of these images speak to the people in a profound way. The mysterious and scientifically unexplained history of Mexico’s Our Lady of Guadalupe⁷ and Venezuela’s Virgin of Coromoto⁸ contribute to the national identity of each of these nations.

The religious practices of Hispanic families are linked with their everyday living, and encompass the struggle that exists between that which is good and that which is evil. The saints and souls of the dead are as real to Hispanics as are their own neighbors. In speaking of popular religious practices, Fr. Virgilio Elizondo states that devotions to Jesus, Mary, and the saints “celebrate and keep alive the best of the Catholic tradition of making God present and easily accessible to anyone and everyone.” The following are some of the many religious practices common to Hispanics.

Blessings

Blessings are important to all Hispanics, no matter what country they are from. I was born in New York City of Puerto Rican parents. As a child, I was taught that before I left for school and upon returning from school, I was to greet my grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles by asking for *la bendición* (blessings). This pattern was repeated whenever I left the house, went to

It is of utmost importance that all church leaders recognize and affirm the Hispanic/Latino presence not only by responding to their spiritual needs, but also by ensuring that they are included in every facet of church life.

bed at night, or visited one of my relatives. I remember that they would respond *que Dios te bendiga*, (God bless you), and I would feel the presence of God whenever I heard this blessing. Blessings are so important to Hispanics that they will ask a priest or the pastor to bless their homes, travels, search for employment, businesses, the purchase of a car, and so on.

Hispanics bless themselves in a unique way. The blessing is called *persignarse* (literally, to sign oneself over the senses),⁹ and *santiguarse* (literally, to make holy).¹⁰ Many Hispanics make the sign of the cross when passing by a church, an expression of reverence and respect for the house of God, and when passing by a cemetery, out of respect and reverence for the dead. They use Holy Water extensively to bless themselves, their homes, their religious articles, etc

The *Novenario* Vigils

The rosary is prayed in the home of the departed for nine consecutive nights, an expression of intercessory prayer for the deceased and his or her family. *La rezadora* (female prayer person) or *rezador* (male prayer person), the person who is known in the community for the gift of prayer, is asked to lead the family and friends in praying the rosary. A *rezadora* is found in every community where the predominant neighborhood is Hispanic; many times the *rezadora* also teaches catechism classes in her home.

Promesas (Prayer Promises)

Promesas (promises) are made either to God, the Blessed Mother, or to a particular saint for a special petition that has been answered. The *promesa* can be

walking to a church on one's knees while praying, or for one year, wearing a habit of the saint who answered their prayer. These prayer practices might seem strange to many non-Hispanic Christians who may feel that these practices do not emphasize Jesus' message and mission. However, when you hear the stories of those making a *promesa* and how their petition was answered, you truly experience God working in their lives in a very deep and profound way.

Quinceañera

The *quinceañera* is one of the most misunderstood of these popular religious practices. In a study of Hispanic ministry, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops noted:

Despite the fact that there has been a clear change in attitudes towards popular devotions since Vatican II, instances of discrimination can still be found. This is evident in practices such as the *quinceañeras*. . . . In the eyes of some pastors, popular devotions are nothing more than "a Catholicism of a day" which focus on rituals and symbols, stressing great but isolated moments of fervor, yet failing to translate into deep and lasting spiritual transformation and sustained participation in the life of the Church. Some pastors mentioned that practices like *quinceañeras* are too time-consuming, especially when there are other more important pastoral needs such as celebrating the Mass and other sacraments. (USCCB, 5)

The *quinceañera* is a celebration of life and gratitude to God on the fifteenth birthday of a young girl; it is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. It is

a time in which the young girl thanks God not only for her life but for the love and protection of her family, and for all the blessings she has received in her life. The parents, in turn, thank God for giving them the gift of their daughter, for all the blessings God has gifted them with, and for keeping their daughter from harm. Families usually request a Mass, which includes a renewal of baptism vows. The rite is most popular with Mexican families, although at times Central, South American, and Caribbean families may also request it, using different customs and/or at a different age.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is so engrained in Catholic culture that those who work in pastoral ministry know that on this day, many will remember they are Catholic and come to receive their ashes. Hispanic families are no exception; they will come in great numbers with their children of all ages and their elders. For many, Ash Wednesday is the first time they have been to church in a very long time. They come not only to receive the ashes but to hear the words traditionally used by the priest: *Recuerda que de polvo eres y al polvo volverás* (Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return). Hispanics take these words very much to heart, and the new words used in the ashes ritual, *Arrepiente y cree en el Evangelio* (Repent and believe in the gospel), do not resonate in the same way for them. To be reminded that we are dust and to dust we will return is an affirmation that *estamos solo de paso en esta tierra* (we are here on this earth for only a short time).

Holy Week

Hispanics place more emphasis on the six days of Holy Week, especially Good Friday, than on Easter Sunday itself because they identify more with the crucified Jesus, and see God as someone who suffers with them. Good Friday services during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) are observed in dramatic fashion; for example, the Stations of the Cross become a public re-enactment of the Passion of Our Lord, accompanied by Scripture reflections and music. A young man portrays Jesus through the events of his passion and death, beginning with Pilate's condemnation, the carrying of the cross through the streets, Jesus' crucifixion, and his burial. Other men and women wear costumes that portray key figures in the Stations, while the rest of the community of men, women, and children follow along the route. This dramatic and public prayer recalls that there is violence, pain, and suffering as well as betrayal in their own neighborhoods, a reality that helps them walk along the path of Jesus' journey with hope and consolation.

Las siete palabras (seven last words of Christ) are also part of Good Friday services. Here the seven last words of Jesus, spoken as he hung on the cross, are recited and the words of the Scriptures are made more relevant. The reflections are filled with drama, music, and visuals.

Another Good Friday tradition includes the *Pésame* (condolence), where the community consoles Mary for the loss of her son, Jesus. For those families that have lost a loved one, especially an older son, the *Pésame* is both impressive and healing. Stephanie Innes, a newspaper reporter, interviewed a member of St. Monica Church in Tucson, Arizona, who said:

The call to ministry with Hispanic families challenges every Christian to acknowledge and respect the religious heritage they bring to our churches.

In Mexico on Good Friday, the condolences to Mary are so important and moving. They put a statue of Mary in a black dress and pray the rosary and share sorrow that her son died. The older ladies will offer incense, the young women offer perfume to Mary, the men give palms, and the children give flowers.

Easter in Spanish is called "Pascua Florida" (related to Easter and Spring flowers) although many Spanish speaking church leaders are changing the language so that Easter is called "Pascua de Resurrección" (Easter Resurrection), to give priority and emphasis to the importance of the resurrection of Jesus and its implication for all Christians.

Supporting Hispanic/Latino Families to Nurture, Celebrate, and Share Faith at Home

The call to ministry with Hispanic families challenges every Christian to acknowledge and respect the religious heritage they bring to our churches. Fr. Elizondo reaffirms these religious practices, stating "Hispanics have a lot to receive from the Catholicism of this country, but we equally have a lot to contribute....the Hispanic religious heritage of our ancestors is a great fountain of religious wisdom, beauty, devotion and inspiration." Fr. Elizondo suggests that one of the more

important contributions that Hispanics make to Catholic life in the US is that their religion is home-centered; *religión casera*.

Church leaders who minister to Hispanic families need to recognize, encourage, and affirm the religious practices they are already doing at home to maintain their faith. In addition, church leaders need to be advocates for Spanish-speaking resources that support home-based religious practices by speaking to publishers of Christian communication media of the great need of resources that speak to their religious expressions, and by promoting and making available the resources that are presently in the market.

Altarcito (The Home Altar)

The home altar is a popular religious practice common to all Hispanic families. As a child I prayed the rosary and novenas to certain saints with my family at our little altar. I knew the words to every novena and could recite by heart the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Hail Holy Queen. These traditional prayers were taught to me at home in Spanish, and although I did learn them in English at an older age, to this day my favorite way to pray these traditional prayers is in Spanish. When I married, I created my own altar, which is still part of our home today.

The Mexican tradition of the home altar on the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) in

November is a wonderful demonstration of the Hispanic understanding of death. Families welcome their dead into their homes, and visit the graves of their close relatives. Gravesites and family altars are decorated with flowers and adorned with religious amulets and offerings of food and drink. It is a festive interaction between the living and the dead, a recognition that the cycle of life and death are part of human existence.

Posadas (Seeking Shelter)

The *Posadas* is my favorite Advent-Christmas tradition. *Posada* is Spanish for “home” or “dwelling-house,” and this traditional Mexican devotion re-enacts Joseph’s search for shelter, highlighting the difficulties that Joseph and Mary faced in finding a room in Bethlehem. Adults and children form a procession and walk from house to house, carrying candles, a doll representing the Christ child, and images of Joseph and Mary riding a burro (donkey). Those in the procession are known as *peregrinos* (pilgrims), and at each house, they stop and sing a traditional song requesting *posada*. But the families (innkeepers) respond in song and refuse lodging, until the *peregrinos* reach the designated site where they are allowed to enter. All then kneel around the nativity scene to pray the rosary. This is followed by the singing of traditional Christmas songs and a party for the children, which includes a *piñata*. A *posada* typically will begin in a neighborhood on December 16 and end on December 24.

Presentación (Presentation of a Child)

Some Hispanic families keep their newborn babies at home for forty

days. Most families do this because they do not want their babies to contract any illnesses. For other families, however, this echoes the Old Testament practice where the mother remained at home for forty days after giving birth, and then presented her child to God.

The style of presentation varies by country: in Mexico, when a child is three years old the family will ask to present him or her at a special Mass. In other countries, families take their newborn child or their child up to three years old to be presented to the Virgin Mary, to thank God for the birth and to ask God’s protection against any illness.

Día De Reyes (Feast of Three Kings)

In Puerto Rico, Mexico, Spain, and other Latin countries, children receive the majority of their gifts on January 6, the feast of the Epiphany. Before they go to bed on January 5, the children fill their shoes or a shoebox with hay, straw, or grass for the camels to eat, then place their shoes or boxes under their beds. I remember my grandmother telling me that the tradition of *Los Reyes Magos* is taken very seriously in Puerto Rico, and how on the morning of Epiphany the island would be filled with the joy and laughter of happy children enjoying their new toys (some of them homemade). Later in the day a holiday dinner is prepared, and friends and relatives join in the festivities.

The Mexican people have another wonderful tradition called the *Rosca de Reyes*, which is a sweet bread filled with fruit and tiny baby Jesus dolls. The person or persons who find a baby Jesus will have to host a party on February 2, the feast day of the *La Candelaria* (Candlemas). I have many Mexican and Mexican-

American friends who continue this tradition every year in their homes, inviting family and friends to join in the festivities.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

As previously mentioned, Mary holds a special place in the heart of the Hispanic people. This is especially evident in their devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is celebrated on December 12, throughout the continent of the Western Hemisphere. It is recommended that all church leaders attend *las mañanitas*,¹¹ which precedes the liturgy at many churches on this day, to experience first hand the special place Mary has in the heart of the people.

No matter what the weather, the people attend *las mañanitas* at 5 a.m. with their children and elderly relatives. Some adults and children dress in native costumes, and after *las mañanitas* the liturgy begins. At the Mass, there may be mariachis, and there is a narration of the apparition portrayed by actors from the community. After the liturgy many stay for the festivities where Mexican pastries, hot chocolate or champurrado,¹² perhaps menudo,¹³ and/or tamales are served. It is a joyful and communal event celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe, Empress of the Americas, who without a doubt is a symbol of hope and unifying power for each and every one of us.

Visits to the Blessed Sacrament

This is a popular and deeply religious practice for many Hispanics. They see adoration as a way to pray and be in the presence of God, and to ask for intercession in times of most need. Many Hispanics believe in the real presence of Christ in the Holy

Families need to have space to come together to share their stories, their religious traditions, and their cultural richness.

Eucharist, yet do not receive communion at Mass. But they also believe in the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, and receive this presence spiritually through adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In this way they experience how much God loves them and feel a deep connection to God.

Ways To Nurture Family Faith through Family-Centered Faith Formation

Although many Hispanics have received the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, they have not had the opportunity to learn about their faith. Many do not know the basic tenets of their faith, including Scripture. It is crucial that church leaders recognize and understand that for Hispanics, their commitment and obligation to family is a priority, expressed by the phrase *la familia viene primero* (the family comes first). When they speak of family they speak not only of their immediate family—i.e., father, mother, and children—but the extended family: grandparents, parents, children, uncles, aunts, cousins, their *compadres* and *comadres*.¹⁴

Many Hispanics work two and three jobs not only to take care of their immediate family here in the United States, but also to support their families in their native countries. Many times you will find aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces all living together in one household. This is

not totally by choice but due to economics and to the support system they extend to each other; again, *la familia viene primero*. Some Hispanics are single parents, others work nights and weekends in hotels, restaurants, and hospitals. There are many who are domestics, gardeners, painters, maintenance workers, migrant workers, and so on. Many do not speak English and are unable to attend ESL classes due to their work schedules, problems of transportation, and lack of child care. Some may be illiterate, or their reading and writing skills in Spanish are poor.

Relationships are the primary focus for the Hispanic community, so that persons are more important than time. There are times when someone may have every intention of attending a church program or meeting, but a family member or friend stops by the house. Most Hispanics would never think of telling the friend that they have a previous commitment; they will extend hospitality to the visitor and forego attending the meeting or program.

When planning faith formation programs, these factors need to be considered. Families need to have space to come together to share their stories, their religious traditions, and their cultural richness. There should be flexibility when it comes to the days and times that events are held. The need to have staff members who can conduct meetings and programs in the Spanish language must be a priority, and child care provisions should be made. Here are several

examples of community faith formation opportunities.

CEBs (Small Christian Communities)

The CEBs offer families the opportunity to come together as vibrant communities to renew and nourish their faith. Since the 1970s, CEBs have provided a new model of being church in Latin-American countries. The CEBs—or small Christian communities, sometimes called faith-sharing groups—meet in homes to discuss the weekly Scriptures and how best to apply them to daily life. The CEBs also come together to pray, learn, respond to issues of social justice, and mutually support one another.

Quinceañeras

As noted before, the *quinceañera* has become very popular in many dioceses in the United States where there is a Hispanic presence. The *quinceañera* is a family affair that includes the extended family and friends. Sometime, this religious practice can be seen in a negative way because parents do spend a tremendous amount of money on the celebration.

Many families save for years in order to have this celebration for their daughter, granddaughter, goddaughter, or niece, but that the custom of having sponsors for the *quinceañera* makes it possible for many of the items to be donated by family and friends. All are considered sponsors, *padrinos*, and part of the extended family so important to Hispanic families. The celebration of *quince años* is an important teachable moment in which the young girl is invited to reflect on her relationship with God and the church.

Church leaders should have an idea of how this popular religious devotion is practiced, and how a church can use these events as opportunities for faith formation. Our young people today feel many pressures from their environment; this celebration can be a means of affirming and recognizing their coming of age, as well as of their acceptance of God and of responsibility for their lives. It can also be a time for young people to discover their roots by recognizing their cultural heritage. In this rite of passage, they can be challenged to develop their gifts and talents, to celebrate their faith in God, and to trust themselves as they continue to grow and mature in wisdom, age, and grace.

The congregation can support quinceañera by creating positive guidelines that will allow the young girl and her friends to learn more about the nature of the ritual and why the church considers spiritual preparation an important element in planning the celebration. (A blessing ceremony for the quinceañera will be incorporated in the Catholic Church's *Book of Blessings*.)

Family-Centered Faith Formation

There has been a recent move by many churches toward educating the whole community. Bill Huebsch describes the process in the following way:

Whole community catechesis is an approach to parish or school religious education through which youth and adults, as well as children, are invited to participate in faith formation programs throughout the year. It's a process through which we take up and implant elements of the catechumenate into the way we catechize in our

parishes and schools. These elements include "breaking open the word" of the Sunday readings, implementing a wider use of sponsors, focusing on education for community life, using the children's program as our springboard to lifelong learning for adults, and more. (Huebsch, 6)

Whole community catechesis provides a natural framework for family faith formation by incorporating learners of all ages into the learning process. Families participate in church-based learning and activities, but also bring elements of the formation process home with them, complementing the home-based faith practices described above.

A proven model for family-centered faith formation based on whole community catechesis is found in many parishes in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, where there is a large Hispanic community. This is not a new idea for Hispanics, as Latin American countries have been at the forefront of faith formation with the family, a key element in whole community catechesis.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* also gives special attention to the family and to the responsibility that the community has in supporting them in their role as the primary educators in the faith of their children:

...the Christian community must give very special attention to parents. By means of personal contact, meetings, courses, and also adult catechesis directed toward parents, the Christian community must help them assume their responsibility—which is particularly delicate today—of educating their children in the faith. (#227)

Family-centered faith formation should include

systematic and well-organized faith themes that reach learners of all ages, as well as an invitation to and support in doing Christian service in their churches, homes, and communities.

There are several ways in which family catechesis can be implemented:

- **Weekly parent gatherings** in which parents are invited to attend religious education classes at the same time their children attend. Child care is provided for smaller children (high school students and confirmation candidates can do this as a service to the church).
- **Monthly intergenerational gatherings** in which parents, children, other family members, and sponsors come together to share faith themes. They gather as one group for an opening prayer and song, are divided into faith-sharing groups according to age, and return to pray together, do an activity, and share a meal. Hispanic leaders of prayer groups and the Charismatic movement already gather in this way to reflect on Scripture. We need to tap into what is already working within the community, support these groups and affirm them.
- **Seasonal sessions** in which families are invited to attend religious education classes either with their children or while their children are attending their formation classes. Here they discuss themes of the liturgical season and of the faith, e.g., Advent, Lent, feasts of the saints, Mary, or the

faith themes their children are studying.

- **Sacramental preparation meetings and retreats** in which parents attend with their children to share, pray, and learn, do activities related to the sacrament they are studying, and share a meal together. Include the *padrino*, who many times are not only the godparents for baptism and confirmation, but also for First Communion.

Family catechesis, or *catequesis familiar* as it is called in Spanish, is an approach that helps share the faith with all generations. As each person grows in faith they will gradually become more like Christ, who shows us what it means to be his disciples.

Hispanics can teach the church much about what it means to be a people of faith. We are called to affirm their special gifts and to welcome them into our communities of faith.

Home Visits

The biggest challenge facing the church today is the number of Hispanics who do not attend any church. The reasons for this vary: they may not be accustomed to attending church services because they did not do so in their own country; some families who have gone to a church here in the States were made to feel unwelcome; others do not understand Anglo parish practices, such as registering in order to be a member or perhaps not having services in Spanish. Many come from rural areas where there is no priest, or where they see a priest only once or

twice a year. Whatever the reason, the church must welcome the growing numbers of Hispanic non-attendees. This can be done by training Spanish speaking lay leaders, deacons, priests, and religious to knock on the doors of Hispanic families and invite them back to church. Churches should also gather these families in their neighborhoods for celebrations of their traditions and important church feast days.

Conclusion

As we respond to the issues and challenges of faith formation with Hispanic families we must not lose sight of the fact that Hispanics can teach the church much about what it means to be a people of faith. We are called to affirm their special gifts and to

welcome them into our communities of faith. The mission for Hispanic families is the same mission for every culture; that is, to bring all people into full, enthusiastic participation in the life and mission of Jesus Christ, and to strengthen our unity as one Body of Christ. Providing faith formation for Hispanics of all ages is one of the ways in which this mission can be fulfilled.

We must also be open to the Spirit in this work, and allow the grace of God to motivate the marvelous deeds of salvation for all. Christian families are called to be “domestic churches,” praying together, living, and passing on the faith to their children and

youth. If we live up to this ideal, with the help of the Holy Spirit, our homes will be true centers of faith formation.

Endnotes

- ¹ Roberto Goizueta writes that “...while about three-fourths of U.S. Hispanics belong to the Roman Catholic Church, all Hispanics have Catholic roots: Latino culture and Catholicism have deep, historical links.” *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p 8.
- ² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Hispanic Affairs – *Demographics*, 2002, p. 1.
- ³ *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) is a process of formation and liturgical rites that prepare adults and children of catechetical age for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation and is celebrated on the Easter Vigil.
- ⁴ I have identified myself as “Latina” because I feel it best describes my Puerto Rican heritage.
- ⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Hispanic Affairs – *Demographics*, 2002, p. 6.
- ⁶ Anita De Luna, MCDP, *Faith Formation And Popular Religion: Lessons from the Tejano Experience* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002) 54-55. “I observe that Mexicans and Mexican Americans image God as a God of Providence. This God of Providence is not Jesus or Our Lady of Guadalupe, nor is He a dominant controlling God or the God of predestination. He is the consoler of his people’s pain and the one who listens to his prayers.”
- ⁷ The Virgin of Guadalupe is a symbol important to Mexican identity. In 1974, Octavio Paz, Nobel laureate wrote that “Mexican people, after more than two centuries of experiments, have faith only in Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Mexican Lottery.”
- ⁸ Venezuelans celebrate their patroness each year on three different occasions: February 2, September 8, and September 11.

⁹ *Persignarse* is done with the following gestures and words: with the thumb and forefinger in the form of a cross, a small sign of the cross is made on the forehead while saying *por la señal de la Santa Cruz* (by the sign of the Holy Cross), a small sign on the lips saying, *de nuestros enemigos* (from our enemies), a small sign over the heart saying, *libranos Señor Dios nuestro* (free us our Lord God.). The signing is completed with the sign of the cross over the forehead, shoulders, and heart. The Amen is said with a kiss on the same thumb used in signing.

¹⁰ *Santiguarse* means to make a large sign of the cross over the forehead, shoulders, and heart while reciting *en el nombre del Padre, del hijo, y del Espíritu Santo* (in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit).

¹¹ The *mañanitas* are a serenade to Our Lady of Guadalupe; the songs chosen are dedicated to her and tell the story of the people's love and devotion to her. Many times mariachis will be invited to sing the *mañanitas* and to sing at the liturgy.

¹² *Champurrado* is a creamy hot drink made with chocolate, sugar, milk, cinnamon (corn is optional).

¹³ *Menudo* is a hot soup made with beef tripe, beef "librillo" (book tripe), cow's feet, corn kernels (optional), oregano, lemon, salt, and chile colorado.

¹⁴ *Compadres* and *comadres* are the godparents of the child to be baptized. Mexican parents also have godparents for the celebration of First Communion. Sponsors of *quinceañeras* are also known as godparents, *padrinos*. Their responsibility is not as important as it is for baptism. If a family member does not step forward such as the grandparents or aunts and

uncles, the compadres for baptism are responsible for parenting the child if one or both of the parents are seriously ill or deceased.

Works Cited

- Congregation for the Clergy. *General Directory for Catechesis*. Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1997.
- Elizondo, Virgil. "Many Faces in God's House: Hispanic Gifts." *Catholic Update* (June 2000).
- Innes, Stephanie. "Hispanics' Customs on Rise: Easter's New Look in Tucson." *Arizona Daily Star* (April 11, 2004).
- Huebsch, Bill. *Whole Community Catechesis: Bringing It All Home*. Orlando: Harcourt Religion Publishers, 2004.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Hispanic Ministry Study*. Washington, DC: Hispanic Affairs Office.
- ### Bibliography
- Congregation for the Clergy. *General Directory for Catechesis*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997.
- Dahn, Charles W., O.P. *Parish Ministry in a Hispanic Community*. New York: Paulist Press, 2004.
- Davis, Kenneth G., and Presmanes, Jorge L., eds. *Preaching and Culture in Latino Congregations*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000.
- Deck, Allan Figueroa, SJ. *The Second Wave: Hispanic Ministry and the Evangelization of Cultures*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989.
- De Luna, Anita, MCDP. *Faith Formation and Popular Religion: Lessons from the Tejano Experience*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002.

Elizondo, Virgilio. *Virgen y Madre: Reflexiones bíblicas sobre María de Nazaret*. Liguori, MO: Libreria Ligouri, 2003.

- Elizondo, Virgilio. *Los Católicos Hispanos en los Estados Unidos/Hispanic Catholics in the United States*. New York: Centro Católico de Pastoral para Hispanos del Nordeste, Inc., 1981.
- Goizueta, Roberto S. *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Huebsch, Bill, editor. *Whole Community Catechesis: Bringing It All Home*. Orlando: Harcourt Religion Publishers, 2004.
- Huebsch, Bill. *Whole Community Catechesis in Plain English*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002.
- John Paul II. *The Church in America*. Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*. Washington, DC: USCCB Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1999.
- Miranda, Ida Iris. *A Pocket Guide to Pastoral Spanish*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006.
- Salcedo, Michele. *Quinceañera!: The Essential Guide to Planning the Perfect Sweet Fifteen Celebration*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997.
- Thigpen, Paul and Leisa. *Building Catholic Family Traditions*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *National Directory for Catechesis*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005.
- Wright, Wendy M., *Sacred Dwelling: An Everyday Family Spirituality*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007.



Making Parents a Priority

Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain

What does your family ministry look like? In many congregations, family ministry is more about children than it is about families. Maybe you have a nursery, religious education for children, youth activities, and an occasional family activity as your family ministry. These are all important, but many family ministries overlook equally important members of the family: the parents.

How can your congregation help parents? The way you answer that question determines not only how children grow up but also how parents develop as individuals and how well each family thrives. Too many parents are merely surviving. Your congregation can help bring out the best in families so that each individual in the family does well.

Understanding Parents Today

You can't minister to families effectively if you leave out the parents. What are your parents thinking, experiencing, trying to change? To understand parents more fully, we were part of a research team that conducted a poll of 1,005 parents in the United States (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 5). We also interviewed parents and talked with congregational and community leaders to find out how they're effectively helping parents. Through the poll, we discovered five key findings:

1. Most parents are going it alone.
2. Many parents lack a strong relationship with a spouse or partner.
3. A majority of parents feel successful as parents most of the time.
4. Most parents face ongoing challenges.
5. Many things these parents say would help them as parents are easy things that others can do. (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 6-7).

Jolene Roehlkepartain is the founding editor of *Children's Ministry* magazine and the author of over 25 books, including *Embracing Parenting—How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families* (Abingdon, 2004) *Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose: Caring for Your Kids and Yourself* (Search Institute, 2006), and *Nurturing Faith in Families* (Abingdon, 2002). She is a veteran parent educator.

Eugene Roehlkepartain is senior advisor in the office of the president, Search Institute, where he provides leadership for research, publishing, training, and consulting projects that focus on spiritual development, congregational life, and families. He has written more than 25 books, most recently he has co-authored *Embracing Parenting* (Abingdon, 2004) with Jolene, and is coeditor of *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality—Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), and *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Sage, 2006).

This study revealed that most of the parents surveyed are working hard as parents, despite little support from family, friends, and their community. Rather than focusing on what parents do wrong (which is what researchers usually examine), we asked parents about their own sense of success and what they need to be effective parents.

The Power of Your Congregation

Many congregations are doing many things right, but this study of 1,005 parents suggests ways for congregations to be even more effective. This study invites your congregations to rethink how you engage parents. For example, your congregation can provide:

- **A caring community for parents.** This study clearly shows that parents want to connect with others in meaningful ways but that they have few opportunities to do so. By encouraging members and congregational leaders to get to know parents, these relationships will help parents feel more supported and nurtured. When parents are part of a caring community, they also will know whom to turn to when parenting becomes difficult.
- **Positive activities that engage and challenge parents.** This study shows that parents generally value informal, personal forms of support more than programmatic supports. This doesn't mean you should stop providing programs for parents, but the study does suggest that it may be helpful to rethink these programs so that they

help parents connect with each other and with other people in your congregation.

- **Clear values, beliefs, and commitments that guide parents.** Congregations are one of the few places in our society that articulate and teach positive values, beliefs, and meaningful commitments. These values, beliefs, and commitments help parents teach their children and teenagers to make wise and healthy choices. With the complexity of life today, a congregation can be a prophetic voice in teaching the difference between right and wrong while also helping individuals respond with integrity to the many shades of gray.
- **An invitation to ministry.** Parents are not primarily objects of a congregation's ministry. They are subjects, contributors to the mission of the church not only through their involvement in congregational life, but also as they nurture their children. By emphasizing and unleashing the strengths of parents, congregations not only help parents be better parents but also equip them to live out their calling to help their children grow in body, mind, and spirit.
- **Practical ways for parents to succeed.** This study also ties into a research framework that reveals how parents can best help their children grow up well. A number of congregations are using the Developmental Asset

framework to help parents succeed (see *Building Assets in Congregations*). This framework, which Search Institute developed in 1989, identifies the key building blocks that children and teenagers need to grow up to be competent, caring individuals (see *What Kids Need to Succeed* and *What Young Children Need to Succeed*). Surveys of more than 2.2 million young people in the United States and Canada show that the more developmental assets young people have the less likely they will try dangerous things (such as using drugs and having sexual intercourse as teenagers), the more likely they'll act in positive ways (such as succeeding in school and helping others), and the more likely they'll bounce back from difficulties.

The Difference Your Congregation Can Make

As a congregation, you have been called to be God's hands and feet in our world. How will you do that for parents and their children? Your congregation will be most effective in helping parents when you see yourself as having a real impact and realize that the little things you do can make a big difference. Your congregation can do more than you think in helping parents. All it takes is some creative thinking in response to this study of 1,005 parents, and the faith that what you do for parents really does matter.

Finding I: Most Parents Are Going It Alone

The U.S. Census reports that one out of three families is headed by one parent, instead of two (*U.S. Census*, 51). When Search Institute interviewed parents across the United States, researchers learned that not only are single parents going it alone, but also so are many married parents. A number of married parents are not getting adequate help from their spouse, much less from others in their families and communities (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 15).

Research shows that parents are more effective when they have the support and encouragement of those around them. Whether the support comes from a spouse, another adult family member, extended family, friends, or people within the community—ideally, all of these places—that support makes a big difference. Adding this role to the many that your congregation, leaders, and members already have may seem daunting, but it doesn't need to be overwhelming or exhausting. Congregations that have taken on this new role have found that not only do young people and parents benefit, but so does the congregation and those in it.

"This is what the church is about," says Mark McCormick, a Roman Catholic priest in South Dakota. He contends that any role the congregation can play in galvanizing the community to care for parents and their kids "is why we are here."

When parents do turn to others for support, they're most likely to turn to immediate or extended family. More than one third of the parents interviewed said that it was "very true" that they turned to family members, making the family the most common source of support. Only

twenty-five percent said that it was "not true" that they turned to immediate or extended family (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 16). Twenty percent of parents turn to friends for help, and eleven percent seeks support from community resources. What was most alarming, however, is that fifty-three percent of the parents polled said they did not have any support. Only four percent say they get support from all three sources: family, friends, and the community (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 11-14).

How Your Congregation Can Help Parents Feel Less Isolated

As a congregation, you have much to offer parents so they feel less alone. How can you do this when you already have a full plate with many needs? Start thinking big by starting small in significant ways. Supporting parents doesn't have to entail starting a new ministry or even a new program. Consider some of these ideas:

- **Incorporate a parent gathering into an educational or fellowship activity.** Periodically invite all the parents to their children's Christian education class. Have one leader do activities with the parents that help parents get to know each other, while in a separate area another leader does activities with the children. End the class with an activity that parents and children can do together. Consider doing this for a youth group gathering, a confirmation class, or other activities that are designed for young people in your congregation. It's

one thing to build community among the children and youth; it's another to build it among their parents.

- **Expand your concept of congregational care.** Some congregations call this "pastoral care," while others call this "congregational care" and expect all members of the congregation to minister to each other. In many congregations, however, this often turns into crisis care, especially visiting the sick, the hospitalized, and the homebound and praying for those who are in dire need. The truth is, we all need care. Effective congregations often create circles of care where every person who attends church regularly (member or not) is assigned to a "care group." Sometimes these are assigned by geographic location (according to where these people live) or by interest, such as a parenting teens group, a young adult group, a seniors group, and so on. Consider ways that all members can be included in receiving and giving care.
- **Designate someone to get to know parents.** This may be a lay leader or a congregational staff person, but having one person in charge can transform your congregation into being a more parent-friendly congregation. All this person needs to do is to seek out the parents in your congregation and talk with them briefly. Get to know their names. Find out how they spend their day. Learn what

their joys and concerns are. Then connect parents with similar interests and concerns with each other.

Finding 2: Many Parents Lack a Strong Relationship with a Spouse or Partner

What helps parents succeed? People often point to income, education, or race. Yet we found that the *quality* of a parent's relationship (whether or not they were married) proved to be the most important factor in raising children well. This was even more important than income, education, profession, religiosity, and race. Parents in this poll who reported having an excellent relationship with their partner were more likely to feel successful and up to the challenges of parenting. These parents even had significant advantages over the parents who rated their relationship as good (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 29).

In polling parents, we found that a strong relationship between parents was beneficial to the parents and the children. Of the parents we polled, those who reported an excellent relationship with their spouse or partner were more likely than other parents to:

- experience fewer challenges as parents;
- feel confident in dealing with the daily challenges of parenting;
- seek support from immediate or extended family as well as community resources;
- feel successful as parents most of the time;
- believe that certain opportunities (such as talking with other parents or seeking advice from a trusted

professional) could really help them as parents; and

- engage in parenting strategies that contribute to the healthy development of their children (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 18).

Despite the importance of a high-quality relationship between parents, only half of those surveyed rate their relationship with their spouse or partner as excellent. Although married parents were more likely to report having an excellent relationship with their spouse, marriage itself does not guarantee of a high-quality relationship (though it makes one much more likely).

Isn't a good relationship good enough? We found that good was better than fair to poor, but a good relationship didn't produce the benefits that an excellent relationship did. Analysis of the data revealed that parents tended to feel consistently more successful (and actually were in some cases) when they had an excellent relationship instead of a good relationship with their partner.

How Your Congregation Can Nurture Partner Relationships

Nurturing adults in two-parent families is one thing and ministering to single parents is another. Your congregation can do both, and you'll often be more effective if you create separate strategies for these two types of parents. Before you begin, consider these suggestions:

- **Define what family is.** How do you define family as a congregation? Which types of families are you willing to minister to? Nurturing a relationship between two adults who live and parent together requires some theological

and programmatic thinking on your congregation's part since some people have strong feelings about certain types of families. Controversy can arise within your congregation when two-parent families are made up of unmarried couples or same-sex couples. Although there are types of single-parent families that also can stir up your congregational gossip lines (such as an unmarried mother who had her first child as a teenager), single parents often can hide these things easier than two same-sex parents arriving at your worship service with children. Some congregations have developed a process to work with members to develop an open and affirming stance toward all types of families. Diana Garland, author of *Family Ministry*, recommends that congregations shift from defining family as a married couple and their children (if they have any) to defining family as the persons who commit themselves to attempt to be family for one another (Garland, 26).

- **Create marriage study groups.** Marriage enrichment leaders recommend two books for couples to study in small groups. One is *The Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* by Scott Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain, and Milt Bryan (Jossey-Bass, 1998). The other is *The Seven Principles for*

Making Marriages Work
by John Gottman and
Nan Silver (Crown
Publishers, 1999).

- **Link single parents with other caring adults.** Just because a single parent does not have a partner does not mean that you can't provide community for that parent. Some congregations create single-parent support groups to help single parents connect with other single parents to work together to raise kids, rather than going it alone. In other churches, individuals help single parents identify other significant adults who can be helpful in parenting, such as a grandparent, a sibling, a neighbor, a co-worker, or a friend.

Finding 3: A Lot of Parents Feel Successful as Parents Most of the Time

Although the media likes to portray parents at their worst and our society likes to judge parents harshly in general, researchers have found that most parents are doing a reasonably good job as parents. While there are no perfect parents and there are some parents who hurt their children, most parents meet their children's basic needs and help them grow up well. Not only is it important how parents are doing but also how parents feel about their parenting. While there are slight differences among parents surveyed, we found that most parents feel successful as parents most of the time (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 47).

How do parents define parenting success? We asked

parents directly, and we received a wide range of answers. The top four definitions that rose from the data included:

- having children who are respectful, exhibit good behavior, and have positive values;
- giving love to their children;
- being involved and making time to be there for their children; and
- helping their children lead healthy, productive, successful lives.

We also found that parents tended to define success in the positive rather than the negative. Only one percent of parents surveyed said that the definition of a successful parent was keeping their children off drugs. Most pointed to raising their children in ways that helped their children develop well and succeed (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 22).

Most parents surveyed say they feel successful as parents most of the time. About one third say they feel successful as parents nearly every day. Fifty-four percent say they feel successful on most days. Some differences exist among parents about how successful they feel. The following groups of parents are more likely than others to feel successful:

- younger parents (those ages 18-34);
- parents who have lived in their neighborhood between one to five years;
- parents with children four years old or younger, particularly compared to parents of 11 to 15 year-olds;
- parents who have an excellent relationship with their spouse or partner; and
- African-American parents compared to white parents. (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 48).

What do these results mean? The age of the child, the age of

the parents, and the length of time in a neighborhood suggest that parents may feel more successful in the earlier stages of parenting rather than the later. How parents "feel" about their parenting and how they're actually "doing" as parents are actually two different things. Most parents tend to become even more effective when they feel they're on the right track, but it's also true that some parents have misperceptions about themselves. Congregations can give parents concrete ways to help parents feel like they're succeeding when they actually are.

How Your Congregation Can Help Parents Feel Successful

Parenting is one of those jobs where there is no annual review and no outside assessment of how parents are doing (unless the state's Child Protection Services is considering removing a child from the home due to abuse or neglect). Parents aren't required to take any training or learn any skills. (Although prospective adoptive parents often feel they are carefully scrutinized.) This is where congregations can have a major impact on helping parents by supporting parents and helping them feel successful. Consider some of these ideas:

- **Teach parents the Developmental Asset framework to help them and their children succeed.** Many congregations now use the Developmental Asset framework in their family ministry, children's ministry, youth ministry, and religious education. Some even use the framework as a lens for everything the congregation does. Once parents see how

developmental assets help their kids succeed, they're often inspired to use the framework in their parenting.

- **Check in with parents periodically.** We often greet each other with a "How are you doing?" and hope that everything is fine. Yet, stopping for a moment and seeking out an honest answer can be revealing and helpful to parents. In congregations, parents often don't share their difficulties because these situations seem small compared to people who are in the hospital, dealing with long-term illnesses, or may be even dying. Yet how will you know how parents are really doing if you don't ask them—and take the time to hear their honest responses? Seek them out and find out what's happening in their lives.
- **Focus on the positive.** Examine your existing parenting and family programs to determine whether they focus more on family problems or family strengths. Parents are more likely to attend events and classes that affirm the good work they're doing so far, and how they can be even more effective as parents.

Finding 4: Most Parents Face Ongoing Challenges

Although most parents feel successful as parents, they still face obstacles and challenges. In this parenting poll, job demands and bickering among their children are the top things that

parents say make parenting harder. The specific situations that parents find themselves in also shape the challenges they have (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 61).

We asked parents about the effect of various issues on their role as a parent. Out of the six potential obstacles named, job demands topped the list. Seventeen percent of all parents surveyed said that work demands their parenting much harder, while thirty-three percent said that their job made parenting somewhat harder.

Bickering among children was the second biggest challenge to parents. Forty-eight percent of parents said conflict among their children made their parenting very much or somewhat harder. Two other significant stresses (which forty-one percent of parents said made their parenting challenging) were overscheduling (which included getting children's homework done) and the family's financial situation. The family's financial situation was much more stressful for parents who have a hard time buying what their family needs. Yet even among families who say they have no problem buying what family needs and can also buy special things, twenty-five percent say that finances are an obstacle for them.

Thirty-four percent of parents say they feel pressured to buy things, and that pressure creates stress for them. Twenty-four percent said that being a single parent and having little support was a major challenge (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, p. 36).

We combined all six challenges and analyzed which groups of parents are more likely to report that they found these issues make parenting harder. We discovered that parents were more

likely to experience challenges if they:

- have a household income of less than \$50,000 a year or report having a hard time financially;
- have child-care arrangements other than staying at home with their child;
- have only a good, fair, or poor relationship with their spouse or parenting partner; or
- are unmarried.

These parents may have deeper challenges as parents, such as inadequate supports and allies in parenting, economic hardship that consumes parents' energy, and other responsibilities that make parenting harder, such as working outside the home or working multiple jobs (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 64).

How Your Congregation Can Ease Parenting Challenges

Depending on where they live and their circumstances, parents may have different challenges. The key to ministering to them effectively is knowing what their challenges are and being part of the solution. Consider these ideas:

- **Find out the challenges of parents in your congregation.** Create a short, written-survey, asking parents what their challenges are. Or, have a meeting with parents and form small groups to have these groups talk about the challenges. No matter how you find out the information, learn about the unique challenges of the parents within your congregation. They may differ from other parents. (Or you may also discover some similarities.) Some congregations even get

parents' feedback on an annual basis to ensure that they're continuing to meet their needs.

- **Seek out uninvolved parents on their turf.** Most likely you have some children and teenagers who get dropped off at your congregation for activities and you never (or rarely) see the parents. Call these parents and set up a time to visit them in their homes. Use this meeting as a way to gather information about how to support parents and make it easy for them to be involved. Take seriously the concerns parents raise about overscheduling. Work together to help parents find balance in family life.
- **Provide opportunities for parents to serve others.** When parents are struggling, our first reaction is to presume that they just need to be cared for themselves, so we may stop asking them to participate in ministries that help others. Leif Kehrwald suggests, serving others can have a healing, renewing effect on parents and families. "Faced with so many problems of their own," Kehrwald writes, "many families are not motivated to serve others. Yet often, acts of selfless mercy can transform woes into healing as well as bring help to those in greater need" (Kehrwald, 56).

Finding 5: Many Things that Would Help Parents Are Easy Things Others Can Do

Parents value many simple ways that others can support them. Sometimes parents look for a bit of advice from a congregational leader or another parent. Other times, they just long to hear someone say that they're doing a good job as parents. We asked parents about what specifically would help them in their parenting. The results suggest that parents may be more interested in building their informal, relational network of support, advice, and encouragement than in using formal programs, services, and resources.

Our results show that there are a number of things that parents say would really help them as parents. The things they think would help them the most are not expensive or time consuming. Most emphasize informal supports that can be provided by congregational leaders and members, family, and friends. These include:

- getting parenting advice from their religious leaders, their child's teachers, and their doctors;
- people they trust spending a greater amount of positive time with their kids;
- talking with other parents about parenting issues;
- people telling them they're doing a good job as a parent; and
- having a more flexible work schedule.

At least one in four parents say that each of these opportunities would help them very much. In contrast, only about one in ten say that going to parenting classes or having more

after-school programs and child-care options would help them very much (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 73-74).

How Your Congregation Can Make a Difference for Parents

Little things mean a lot to parents, and your congregation can offer parents support just by getting to know them and by being interested in their family lives. You also can go deeper and provide more for parents.

Consider these ideas:

- **Ask parents.** A first step in helping parents know that your congregation is paying attention is to ask them what they want, need, and value. What do the parents in your congregation and community value? Where do they feel a need for support or information? Instead of having an "if we build it, they will come" attitude, adopt an attitude of "Let them build it, and we will come to them."
- **Create parenting groups by linking families with similar backgrounds.** Some congregations create parent groups by the age of children or the number of children. Others create parent groups by family type, such as blended families, single-parent families, and dual-income families. At St. Luke's Methodist Church in Indianapolis, the congregation has a group called Jesse's Street, which is a group for parents who have children with special needs. At Bon Air Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia,

there's a support group for parents of autistic children. Because St. Luke Presbyterian Church in Minnetonka, Minnesota, had many parents who had adopted children internationally, the congregation periodically sponsored events where the families got together.

- **Encourage education teachers to get to know their students and their students' parents.** Build community and connections to parents by having other adults in your congregation get to know their names and a little about them. Parents often are interested in how their children are doing in religious education, confirmation, and other congregational activities, so giving them some feedback while also taking the time to talk with them often is helpful and appreciated.

Conclusion: Equipping and Supporting Parents

The five findings from our study of parents across the United States invite you to reflect on the ways your congregations do—and could—equip parents. Your congregation already has a strong start. It does a number of things well for parents, and you can do even more. This doesn't mean you need to start new programs, hire additional staff, or tap into resources that you don't have. It's about more effectively using what you do have and building on your strengths. These include:

- **Parents feeling part of a caring community.** How connected are parents to other adults and other parents in your

congregation? Do parents feel they have people they can turn to in good times and bad? This keeps parents from falling into finding #1: going it alone, and finding #4: feeling overwhelmed by challenges.

- **Parents being nurtured and supported.** How does your congregation help parents grow? How are marriages and parent partnerships strengthened? How are parents nurtured to be even more successful as parents? This focuses on finding #2: most parents lack a strong parenting partner, and finding #3: many parents feel successful as parents most of the time.
- **Parents being the recipients of small, helpful gestures.** How do congregational leaders and members help out parents in small ways? When a young child begins to misbehave during a worship service, do adults try to help the parent, or does the parent feel scolded and shamed? How often do adults in your congregation interact with children and teenagers so that young people know other adults besides their parents? This ties into finding #5: small things make a big difference for parents.

Effective programs can make a difference for parents, but effective programs are only one piece of the puzzle in helping parents. Parents need time to get to know other parents and other adults in your congregation. But how do you do that if a parent only attends a worship service for an hour each week and nothing

else that your congregation offers? How do you get parents to connect with each other if your programming is only about training or educating them?

Create structures so parents have time to connect with each other. Build in time for parents to talk (such as assigning them a conversation starter) during an educational activity. Form support groups for parents. Reach out to parents so that they feel welcome and want to come to your congregation more often.

Your congregation has the power to influence parents and their children in positive ways. When congregational leaders and members help parents, parents can more easily raise their children and teenagers well.

Works Cited

- Benson, Peter L., Galbraith, Judy, and Espeland, Pamela. *What Kids Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1998.
- Garland, Diana, "Family Ministry: Defining Perspectives," *Family Ministry*, Volume 16, Number 2, Summer 2002, 26.
- Kehrwald, Leif, "Families and Christian Practice," *Family Ministry*, Volume 13, Number 4, Winter 1999, 56.
- Roehlkepartain, Eugene C., *Building Assets in Congregations: A Practical Guide for Helping Youth Grow Up Healthy*. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1998.
- Roehlkepartain, Eugene C., Scales, Peter C., Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., and Rude, Stacey P. *Building Strong Families: An In-Depth Report on a Preliminary Survey on What Parents Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis: Search Institute and Chicago: YMCA of the USA, 2001. All other statistics that appear in this article from this study can be found in this publication.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene and Eugene. *Embracing Parents: How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., and Leffert, Nancy. *What Young Children Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1999.

U.S. Census Bureau, "No. 57. Family Groups with Children under 18 Years Old by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1980 to 2000," in *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, 51. (Data is taken from the 2000 Census.)

Bibliography

Benson, Peter L., Galbraith, Judy, and Espeland, Pamela. *What Kids Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1998. This book presents the Developmental Asset framework for kids from age 12 to 18.

Roehlkepartain, Eugene C., *Building Assets in Congregations: A Practical Guide for Helping Youth Grow Up Healthy*. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1998. This book presents helpful information on how to create an asset-building congregation.

Roehlkepartain, Eugene C., Scales, Peter C., Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., and Rude, Stacey P. *Building Strong Families: An In-Depth Report on a Preliminary Survey on What Parents Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis: Search Institute and Chicago: YMCA of the USA, 2001. All other statistics that

appear in this article from this study can be found in this publication. You can download this study free of charge from the Web site www.search-institute.org/families. You also may download highlights from the study (a 16-page booklet) titled *Building Strong Families: Highlights from a Preliminary Survey from YMCA of the USA and Search Institute on What Parents Need to Succeed*.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene and Eugene. *Embracing Parents: How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004. This book is a practical guide on what congregations can do to nurture families based on the survey of 1,005 parents.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., *Nurturing Faith in Families*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. More than 425 creative ideas for family ministry are presented in this practical, family ministry book.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., *Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose*. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2006. Care for yourself as a parent and also for your three- to five-year-old with the creative tips and ideas in this book on 40 everyday issues from sibling relationships to bedtime battles.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., and Leffert, Nancy. *What Young Children Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1999. This book presents the Developmental Asset framework for children from birth to age 11.

Web Resources on Parenting

Search Institute

www.search-institute.org

- Search Institute offers information and many resources, including a scientific, low-cost survey for congregations. Go to: www.search-institute.org/congregations
- For information on the Developmental Assets go to www.search-institute.org/assets

Building Strong Families Research

- For an in-depth report and summary reports on the "Building Strong Families" research go to the Search Institute web site: www.search-institute.org/families/bsf2002.html

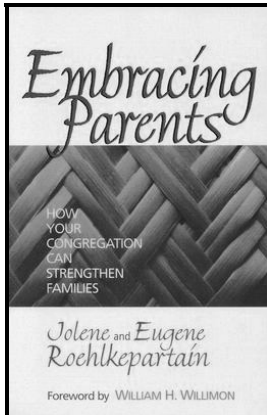
MVP Parents (Search Institute)

www.MVPParents.com

- All parents want their children to succeed. But knowing how to help them make smart choices and avoid pitfalls isn't always easy. MVPParents.com is a trusted resource for raising smart, strong, responsible kids. Sign-up for *Everyday Parenting Ideas Newsletter*—a collection of weekly affirmations and parenting tips from the experts at Search Institute, designed to speak to specific parenting issues from a positive, asset-building perspective.

Recommended Resources

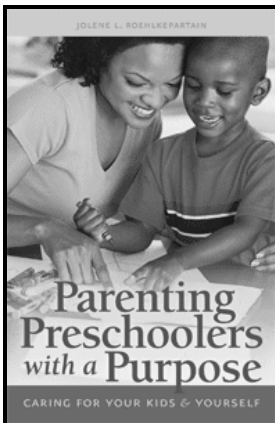
Parenting



Embracing Parents: How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families

Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004)

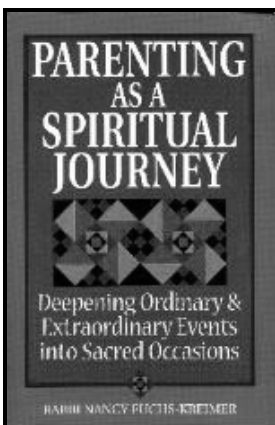
Based on the results of 2002 poll of 1,005 parents by the Search Institute and the YMCA, this book presents true stories, quizzes, checklists, and practical tools that congregations can use to become more effective in working with parents and strengthening family life. *Embracing Parents* challenges pastors and other church leaders to expand their vision, to become proactive in meeting the needs of families, and to provide a key place where parents and their children can grow. The first five chapters report on the five major findings from the research. Chapter Six provides tools and ideas for equipping and supporting parents; Chapter Seven describes how to unleash the power of the congregation.



Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose: Caring for Your Kids and Yourself

Jolene Roehlkepartain (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2006)

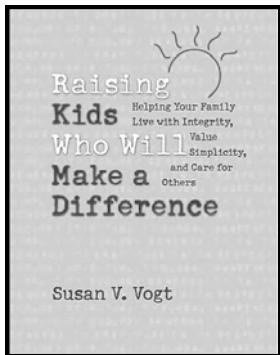
Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose promotes the physical, social, and emotional well-being of children 3 to 5 years old and their parents while enhancing the parent-child relationship. Enlisting the 40 Developmental Assets for Early Childhood, a research-based framework for healthy development, this book offers comfort and reassurance to parents seeking to nurture their preschooler and themselves. Included are innovative approaches that provide answers to 40 everyday issues such as discipline, sibling relationships, eating, bath time and rebellion; as well as simple and effective solutions to 15 common challenges that parents face, such as finances, isolation, job demands, guilt, sleep deprivation, and unsolicited advice from others.



Parenting As a Spiritual Journey: Deepening Ordinary & Extraordinary Events into Sacred Occasions

Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996)

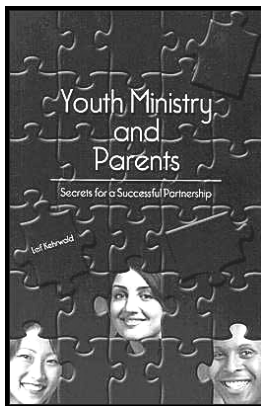
Parenting as a Spiritual Journey explores the transformative spiritual adventure that all parents can experience while bringing up their children. Fuchs-Kreimer shows, by looking at a typical day's routine, how even the seemingly insignificant moments in a day can be full of spiritual meaning. From waking up in the morning to bedtime at night, there are many opportunities for parent and child to connect in a spiritual way. *Parenting as a Spiritual Journey* helps parents recognize, understand and appreciate the joys, insecurities, wonder and awe that can contribute to the spiritual fulfillment of raising children. Included in the book are interviews with parents, rituals, prayers, and inspiring passages from sacred texts.



Raising Kids Who Will Make a Difference: Helping Your Family Live with Integrity, Value Simplicity, and Care for Others

Susan V. Vogt (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002)

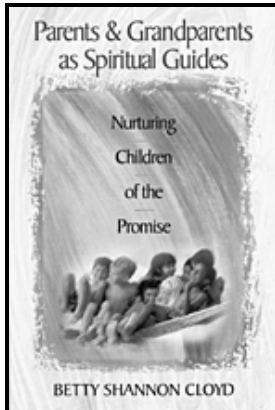
In this guide to raising socially conscious children, Susan Vogt sets out to inspire, equip, and comfort parents in the awesome task of raising kids who will make positive contributions to the world. Using a delightful blend of honesty and humor, Vogt offers successful parenting strategies and straightforward discussions on important issues like sexuality, substance abuse, materialism, racism, global awareness, and death. Personal anecdotes, stories from other parents, and perspective from Vogt's children enhance the practical information. Each chapter concludes with reflection activities to stimulate discussion for the whole family.



Youth Ministry and Parents

Leif Kehrwald (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004)

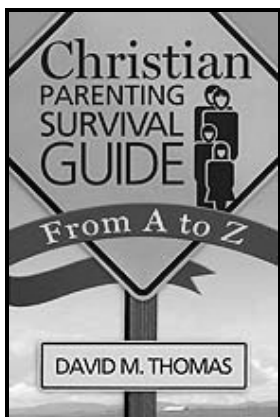
Because parents are the primary evangelizers of young people, they must be integrally involved in any successful youth ministry program. This book paves the way for youth ministers to create successful partnerships with parents of the teens in their church. It helps youth ministers understand parents of teens and gives youth program leaders concrete strategies for enlisting parental support, overcoming resistance, and using the parental support system to complement youth ministry programs. Chapters include: Partnership with Parents, Family Stages, Why Parents?, Understanding Parents of Teens, Families and Youth Faith Formation, A Christian Vision for Family Life.



Parents and Grandparents as Spiritual Guides: Nurturing Children of the Promise

Betty Shannon Cloyd (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000)

“Spirituality makes persons look beyond themselves to the well-being of those around them,” writes Betty Shannon Cloyd. “How we care for the spirituality of our children, then, is not only crucial for their own well-being; it is crucial for the well-being of our society as well. Spiritual training is a primary role for parents and other family members. It cannot, must not, be neglected or relegated to some other person or agency.” Cloyd explores the simple ways parents and grandparents can introduce children to the presence of God and nurture them spiritually—through daily, routine activities, as well as planned devotional times. The book includes biblical models of spiritual guides along with insightful stories.



Christian Parenting Survival Guide

David M. Thomas (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007)

David Thomas believes that parenting is a sacred vocation that comes right from the heart of God. When we become parents, he says, we enter an entirely new world. We experience sidesplitting laughter, bone-chilling worry, backbreaking burdens, and mind-bending challenges. But parenting is above all a vocation to follow Christ as a family. Faith can be connected in a thousand ways to our lives as parents. His goal is to help parents see and make the connections. This is a down-to-earth guide on Christian with topics from A to Z, including acceptance, caring, goodness, intimacy, openness, patience, understanding, and zest. Each chapter concludes with a prayer for parents and questions for reflection and discussion.



Transforming Faith Formation One Family at a Time

Jim Merhaut

An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy. This old Spanish/Portuguese wisdom saying captures a core truth about faith formation. There is simply no more powerful influence upon the faith formation of a human being than a parent.

The core context for educational success is the family. Educators, both religious and secular, have been proclaiming this message for millennia. A great tragedy of the modern era is that we have pushed to the margins the potent tool of parental influence in our educational institutions. On the other hand, a great blessing of the postmodern era is that we are learning from our mistake. Educators are acknowledging, discerning, and even celebrating the indispensable role of parents in the learning process.

The most successful schools in the country are schools that invite parents back into the classroom and encourage meaningful educational interaction between parents and their children. For example, Susan B. Anthony Elementary School in Sacramento, California, reduced annual suspensions from one hundred forty students to five students in one year by creating a parent partnership program. Before the parent program, student test scores were among the lowest in the district. After the program was implemented, student achievement and test scores improved immediately and dramatically.

One of the great challenges for Susan B. Anthony School was overcoming a cultural-linguistic barrier between teachers and parents. English was the first language of the school, but most of the parents did not speak English. The new program called for teachers to make home visits, with interpreters if necessary, just to get to know the parents of their students. Getting into the home, the teachers were now on their way to teaching with a family perspective, and parents were motivated to view themselves as partners in the educational process. The astounding results of this simple, personal, family-oriented approach drew national attention to this school (Furger, 47).

Some schools are trying to incorporate the patterns of family life into the institutional education process. Quest High School outside of Houston, Texas, is the highest rated school in its district. A family-like atmosphere with high parental involvement is their recipe for success. Students at Quest are grouped into

Jim Merhaut is the author of *Your Catholic Family—Simple Ways to Share the Faith at Home* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006) and “Families and Faith Formation” in *Families and Faith* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006). Jim works as a parish director of religious education in Youngstown, OH, and teaches courses and workshops on family and lifelong faith formation. He holds a masters degree in religious education from Duquesne University, and is married with five children.

family clusters with at least three adults. They remain in those families, meeting daily for forty minutes, for the duration of their high school years. Parents are viewed and treated as partners in the educational process, and family structure is the foundation upon which the school is designed (<http://qhs.humble.k12.tx.us/>).

Churches are also discovering the benefits of parental involvement in the faith formation of children. Family and intergenerational faith formation processes and programs are multiplying by leaps and bounds around the country. The Generations of Faith project developed by the Center for Ministry Development trained more than 1,500 parishes in a five-year period. These parishes are developing new and exciting ways to help parents, children, and other adults explore their faith together both at church and home (www.generationsoffaith.org).

Programs like Kathy Chesto's *FIRE (Family-centered Intergenerational Religious Education)* ground their success in replicating an extended family gathering as the methodological structure out of which catechesis happens. These initiatives succeed when they combine meaningful intergenerational faith formation gatherings at church with faith formation activities for the home that respect the existing rhythms of family life. This essay will focus on the latter.

Authentic faith formation in the home is absolutely essential if there will be any successful congregational formation. Institutional Christianity will decline into insignificance if congregations do not find ways to work from the family back to the institution, rather than from the institution into the family. This paradigm shift, from the false perception that faith formation originates in ecclesial institutions

to the truth that faith formation in fact originates in the home, is where we will focus our exploration of family faith formation.

not unusual for a modern Christian family to move into a new community and make a checklist of things that they must have in order to have a sense of

Authentic faith formation in the home is absolutely essential if there will be any successful congregational formation. Institutional Christianity will decline into insignificance if congregations do not find ways to work from the family back to the institution, rather than from the institution into the family.

Working from the Family Back to the Church

Church ministry for families will be effective when ministers and educators enter the worlds of the families with whom they minister, and provide resources that will help families discover God in the routines of family living. We spend far too much of our time, talent, and treasure creating church programs that produce poor to fair attendance, while families are struggling to make sense out of the often chaotic pace of modern living. The church program ends up being just one more appointment on an already overloaded schedule. Even worse, church programs are perceived by families as commodities among commodities.

Georgetown theologian Vince Miller, in his book *Consuming Religion*, argues that consumer culture has the effect of reducing culture itself to a material good that can be consumed, collected, or even discarded. Tragically, even the church or God can be perceived as a commodity. It is

social identity and acceptance. The church, unfortunately, can become one item on the checklist, e.g., we have our house, our school, our cars, our yard, our riding mower, our church, our vacation spot, our grill, our entertainment system, and so on.

Churches feed into this perception. When churches offer programs, either church-based or school-based, as one more choice among other commodity choices, it is no wonder that families skip church programs for the soccer game. We have trained them to do so by not helping them to discover that God is the source from which all experiences emerge. God is not just one item on a list of things to have or to do; God is the *heart of everything* on their list of things to have and to do. All of our ministries, including our liturgies and our schools and our church educational programs, are in danger of being perceived as commodities if we do not help families become aware that God is the source of all, and is present in all.

As long as families are choosing religion as something that is produced outside of their homes, they will continue to

perceive it as an expendable item on a list of other things that are produced outside of their homes. If families can discern and act upon the presence of God in their homes and in their daily activities, then church will make sense as the place where we gather to celebrate the God whom we have personally encountered in the course of family living. Not only will worship services be more meaningful for families who practice the presence of God in their daily lives, but the dismissal from Sunday services will also take on new meaning. It makes little sense to tell people to “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” when they are uncertain of how to identify or find this Lord to whom they offer their love and service.

Our church-centered and school-centered programs have not helped the majority of our people believe that God is with them constantly. Our dismissal from Sunday worship is in danger of becoming an empty platitude because we have unconsciously trained our people to believe that God is found primarily within the confines of our churches, within portions of our schools, and within the church programs that take place in church buildings. We tell people that we send them out to love and to serve the Lord throughout the week, but our actions, i.e., our programs, tragically speak louder than our words; we are implying that they won't find God until they return to church next week. Why? Because we do not give families the tools they need to explicitly discover God at home or anywhere else other than church.

Families can become more aware of God's constant presence only if they practice unveiling the presence of God in their homes and in their daily activities. Better church schools and stronger church-based programs will not solve this problem. We

need to help families understand that God *is*. Wherever they are in their daily lives, God is there as well. They need to be reintroduced to God as “I Am Who Am.” They need to know God as *Emmanuel*, which means “God is with us.” They need to recall that Jesus' parting words include the promise to be with us always—yes, even at home. They need to remember that St. Paul instructed us to pray without ceasing because every moment of every day is saturated with divinity, and we need only open our ears and eyes to commune unceasingly with the divine presence.

Families need to develop a spirituality of God's constant presence because God *is*. Buying a house or renting an apartment and all the other things that go along with becoming established in a community are spiritually pregnant events, activities, and practices. God is always in the mix and is never disinterested. And the ongoing routines of daily living are loaded with God-centered practices that can invite every member of the household into deep and meaningful encounters with God at any given moment.

When families discover the presence of God in daily living, they will then have a reason and motivation to share their discovery with others, who are also meeting God in surprising and wonderful ways each day. This is when church life will begin to make sense to families. When families see the flame of God's presence burning in the random and sometimes chaotic events of daily life, they will naturally desire to gather with others to praise God for the simple and wonderful gifts that are given to them each day.

The great patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith shaped our religion in response to a God who

met them in the ordinary experiences of family life. We should not expect that God will act differently today, especially in light of the fact that Jesus came to the awareness of his divine mission in the context of family life. We must work from the family back to the church if our churches are to have any relevance in contemporary culture. We must empower the family and give them the tools necessary to facilitate their spiritual growth in recognition of the fact that it is within the family, day by day, moment by moment, that God *is*.

Rejoice In and Proclaim the Vision

How shall we go about this paradigm shift? How shall we cease doing ministry from the church to the family, and begin doing ministry from the family back to the church? We first have to celebrate the vision. We have to rejoice in the wisdom that God has given us, a wisdom that reveals the power of family ministry and of parents as primary educators.

We are thankful that church leaders of all denominations and educational leaders of all political persuasions agree that there is no greater predictor of educational success than an active and involved parent. In 1990 the Search Institute released its study, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*, showing the undeniable link between teen religious commitment and parent religious commitment. In Merton Strommen's commentary on the study, he highlighted that teens are far more likely to attend church services, to be intentional about their own faith development, and to participate in service programs if they have

When families discover the presence of God in daily living, they will then have a reason and motivation to share their discovery with others, who are also meeting God in surprising and wonderful ways each day.

parents that actively nurture faith in their homes, compared to teens who have non-religious home environments (Schuller, 57-63).

These findings were reinforced by the 2005 *National Study of Youth and Religion*, released by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This study showed that Catholic teens tend to be the least religious teens in America, falling behind conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, and black Baptists. It's no surprise that the same study ranked Catholic parents as the least religious parents among the same four groups of parents surveyed. The study concludes that Catholics have relied too heavily upon schools and church programs to pass on the faith to children, and have neglected the active participation of parents in faith formation initiatives (Smith and Denton, 207-17).

The National Education Association states that, "Research shows that the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to:

- Create a home environment that encourages learning
- Express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers
- Become involved in their children's education at school

and in the community (<http://www.nea.org/parents/research-parents.html>).

These insights confirm the results of numerous other studies from a wide range of researchers including medical, social, and behavioral sciences. They can and should be interpreted as refreshing and liberating revelations from God to a culture that has heaped too much pressure on educational institutions as causes of and potential solutions for society's ills. We now know without question that if we want healthy communities, we must have healthy families. If we want vibrant churches, we must start by nurturing households of faith and we cannot do it as an afterthought; it must be a top priority.

The church has existed and even thrived without church schools as we know them today; but the church has never existed without families. Faith formation is most effective when it is done by, or at least done in cooperation with, families. The visionary educational insights that bring the family back to the heart of the educational process are great blessings that should be proclaimed in a multitude of ways. We need to celebrate and promote the vision that *an ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy*, any chance we get.

Know Your Families

Another critical piece of the family ministry puzzle is to know who these families with whom we minister are. How many of the families in your congregation are two-parent families? How many have children? Are your families large or small? How many are divorced? How many are divorced and remarried? How many are blended families? How many are raising preschoolers? How many are raising teens? What schools do they attend? Do they home-school? How many are launching children into college or into the workforce? How many households are made up of retired persons? How many single-person households are there? In what professions are your adults engaged? What social activities do your families prefer? What do they do with their free time? Where do they go on vacation? What television shows are they watching? What is causing them undue stress? What causes them to celebrate? Do you know your families? Do you know what they are doing? Knowing our people shapes the way we do ministry.

A simple reflection on the vast methodological differences between Jesus and St. Paul reveals how important it is to know your people. Jesus preached primarily in rural settings. To reach his audience effectively, he had to use rural imagery and symbolism to frame his message. Paul's letters are addressed to a more urban crowd. The lack of rural imagery and symbolism in Pauline literature is striking. In all of Paul's letters there are only two references to seeds, whereas in the gospels there are more than a dozen, and some of those references include great detail. Paul also only has two references to shepherding, while the gospels literally have dozens. Jesus and

Paul both knew their people and tailored their messages and methodologies to reach their people with great power.

Knowing our people cannot be restricted to knowing facts about them. We must also acquire a sense of the emotional landscape of the families in our churches. While the scope of this essay does not allow for an in-depth examination of this topic, emotional learning is generating a vast body of literature that highlights the relationship between affectivity and cognition, a relationship that has significant implications for how we educate people. Recent brain research is showing that our emotional life and our thinking life are not as distinct as we once believed. Educators need to be in touch with the emotional processes that are influencing a learner's ability to acquire and store knowledge.

For our purposes it is important to acknowledge the family as the foundation of any person's emotional makeup. The family is the place where a person's basic emotional patterns are formed. Because these family-based emotional patterns set the course for educational success or failure, educators need to be more proactive about helping families to develop in emotionally stable ways. Emotional instability in families detracts from a learner's ability to focus upon, absorb, and retain information on a cognitive level. Stable families that allow for healthy emotional development lay the foundation for constructive learning.

Identify the Practices of Family Life

A powerful way to help families get in touch with the presence of God in daily life is to raise awareness in families about the routine Christian practices that

are the framework of family life. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra define Christian practices as, "Things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world" (Bass, 5). Bass and Dykstra identified twelve central Christian practices: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives.

Christian practices are essential, repeatable actions that are rooted in the gospels, and they characterize healthy family and community life. Like family life, practices cannot be compartmentalized into tidy and distinct packages; they often overlap in complex but complementary ways. For example, dying well and forgiving have a dynamic relationship. One cannot die well if one has not adopted the daily practice of forgiving. Forgiving is a necessary prerequisite for dying well, and one practices dying well in the very process of forgiving. Forgiving calls us to die to our desire to avenge a past injustice as we imagine and create new possibilities for relating in the future. Each time that we practice forgiving, we are simultaneously preparing to die well.

The death of Jesus weaves these two practices, forgiving and dying well, together not only by the cosmic reconciling truth of the paschal mystery, but also by Jesus' simple gesture of forgiving his executioners as he died an unjust death. We would be fools to think that Jesus was able to offer this kind of forgiveness from the cross by some miraculous intervention from God. Jesus discerned the presence of God from his earliest days, and he discovered God's identity as one who forgives through the very

practice of forgiving those who were constantly against him. The Scriptures are clear that Jesus had enemies from the day of his birth. Without the daily practice of forgiving others, Jesus would have developed into a bitter, violent, and vengeful person. He experienced this temptation to bitterness in his full humanity, but in his divinity he resolutely and regularly rejected the option to hate. Discerning the constant presence of God and practicing forgiveness every day gave Jesus the power to forgive even from the cross.

God became human to invite us to divinity. We are called to be like Christ, and we are called to help the families in our churches be like Christ. Jesus certainly did not leave his faith at the synagogue door as he left Sabbath worship to return to the routines of family life. Jesus, growing up in a family that practiced the presence of God each day, was empowered to discover his unique mission. Families in our congregations who are given the tools to practice their faith at home each day will also empower their members to discover their own mission in the world today.

Practices are the threads that make up the fabric of our lives. They are woven together to create the structure of our days and our nights. We express ourselves through them, and most importantly, we have the opportunity to step back from them and examine them to discern how we respond to the constant presence of God in our lives. The repeatable nature of a practice gives us multiple opportunities to work with it, to study it, to discuss it, to adjust it, and to allow it to be our gateway to spiritual freedom. But we can only be free in our daily practices if we are intentional about them.

The repeatable nature of practices also has a downside in that they can become things we do unconsciously. For example, dimensions of the Christian practice of caring for the body can easily become unconscious because many of the things our bodies do become habit. We walk the way we walk because we practice walking in a particular way every day. Walking style, or gait, becomes habitual and we do it without giving it any conscious thought. Yet an unhealthy gait can cause a body significant pain.

For example, a few years ago I went to a physical therapist because I was experiencing sharp pain in my upper back. The first thing he did was observe me as I walked back and forth in his exam room. He then told me that much of my pain was being caused by the way I carried my shoulders throughout the day. My practice had been to walk with my shoulders and my upper body leaning forward. This unintentional walking pattern was causing certain muscles to become weak, which caused other muscles to work harder in compensation. The overworked muscles were now rebelling and sending me strong and painful messages.

In order to be free from the pain, I had to develop a new way of walking. I had to practice caring for my body. I practiced walking with good posture consciously and intentionally every day for several months. Soon the practice paid off and the pain was gone. I occasionally slip back into my old pattern of walking with my shoulders forward, but as soon as I notice the pain returning, I am reminded that my ticket to pain-free walking is the practice of walking with proper posture.

One may wonder what the example about my back pain has to do with Christian formation.

We can certainly learn great spiritual lessons by the way that we deal with pain, but it is wrong to attribute pain to God. God wants to save us from pain and suffering so that every tear can truly be wiped away. The miraculous healings in the gospels are signs of God's ultimate concern for the salvation of the whole person. In the simple experience of learning to walk in a more healthful way, I was given the opportunity to respond to God's invitation to care for the body, an invitation that came to me through a series of routine visits to my physical therapist; in freely responding to God's gift of my therapist's advice, I was set free from pain.

Connecting Christian Practice at Home with Sunday Worship

Earlier in this essay, I noted how irrelevant Sunday worship can become when ordinary people do not have the skills they need in order to discern the presence of God in their daily lives. They often come to worship believing that the worship service is their only meaningful encounter with God throughout the week. Fostering Christian practices in families is a simple way to improve family life while preparing families for more active and conscious participation in

Christian practices help us to identify possibilities for spiritual growth in a multitude of simple and ordinary ways. Living the practices of daily life in more loving ways is how families can discover the presence of God at home.

To say that God was not part of this process is to deny the power of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Religion has no hope if we do not discern and acknowledge the presence of God in every moment of daily life. God became embodied or enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ so that the glorious and liberating salvation of God might be accessible in any and all fleshly human experiences. Christian practices help us to identify possibilities for spiritual growth in a multitude of simple and ordinary ways. Living the practices of daily life in more loving ways is how families can discover the presence of God at home.

Sunday worship. We now turn to one specific Christian practice that families can do at home, the results of which will create more meaningful Sunday worship.

Welcoming is a Christian practice; Bass and Dykstra call it the practice of hospitality. All families practice hospitality or welcoming. Some practice it better than others. Congregations who welcome well are generally made up of families who welcome well.

Welcoming in a Christian home begins with the way in which human beings welcome each other into their lives on an interpersonal level. There is a lot of spiritual, social, emotional, intellectual, and physical terrain that makes up the person I am.

Each person I meet is welcomed into that terrain in differing degrees. I welcome my friends at one level. I welcome my spouse at another level. I welcome my children at yet another level. I welcome my pastor at a certain level. There are places in my self where my spouse is welcome but my coworkers are not. Interpersonal welcoming sets the tone for how I welcome in general.

In order to practice welcoming well, I need to explore the levels at which I welcome others into my personal life, and discern the limits of my welcoming and why they are there. Some of the limits are necessary and healthy; others protect me from issues I fear to face. Welcoming always involves risk, and we experience that risk most deeply when we welcome another into the inner workings of our souls. Exploring this dimension of the practice of welcoming is properly within the realm of spiritual direction.

There are also ways in which we practice communal welcoming in our homes, and this lends itself to multiple ministry possibilities. How do we welcome friends into our homes? How do we welcome strangers who come to our door? How do we welcome extended family? How do we welcome invited or expected visitors versus those who show up without notice? How do we welcome even the dreadful telemarketer, who always intrudes unannounced with a usually unwelcome message? Christ is truly present in the friend, the family member, the stranger, and even the telemarketer who seeks our attention while we are at home. The Christian practice of welcoming challenges us to see the face of Christ in all who seek our attention and to respond to Christ, who is welcoming us into a deeper relationship with God, a relationship that promises to

transform our ordinary routines into deeply meaningful experiences.

When families practice welcoming in their homes and in their daily routines, they become welcoming people, and they will carry that welcoming practice with them in public as a natural part of who they are. Helping families welcome more effectively at home is the principal way we can make our churches more welcoming. If welcoming is a value at church but not at home, the church welcome will ring hollow; it will look like nothing more than drama. Ushers and greeters will pretend to welcome by saying the right words and using the right facial expressions, but they will not touch the hearts of those they welcome, for it will be nothing more than an act. The externals of worship, while they are important, do not make worship either authentic or phony; rather, it is the internal disposition of the ones who facilitate worship that makes the difference, and internal dispositions are developed and nurtured through daily Christian practice at home. Welcoming families who are rooted in gospel welcoming are the heart of welcoming churches.

A Process for Exploring a Christian Practice at Home

How can we help families to welcome in a way that helps them to practice their faith more deeply? Here is an example of a process for exploring a Christian practice at home using the practice of hospitality or welcoming.

Step One

The first step is to become aware of the patterns of welcoming that are in our culture. Where do people feel welcome? Where do people feel unwelcome? Why do they feel welcome or unwelcome? We notice that country clubs welcome in a different way than amusement parks do.

In my travels, I've noticed that the transportation industry often makes some people feel more welcome than others. Elite or first class travelers wait in shorter lines and sit in more comfortable chairs than the general travelers do. Helping families to examine the patterns of welcoming that are present in the culture serves two purposes: first, it sparks the imagination by showing how common and far-reaching the practice of welcoming is; second, it is a non-threatening way to get into the topic because it does not make any personal demands on a participant to talk about how someone else practices welcoming—it breaks the ice.

This cultural examination can easily happen in the home. Here are some thoughts on how it might look: we can encourage families to use their mealtime as a time to discuss the culture; we can provide them with a few ideas to get them started (see previous paragraph). Parents can comment quite casually on how they witness patterns of welcoming throughout their day. Children can be invited, not forced, to follow suit and share what they might have seen in the course of their day. The family is on their way to a meaningful faith formation experience.

Step Two

The second step in helping families to develop the Christian practice of welcoming is to facilitate an examination of the

patterns of welcoming within the family's household. When people begin to study the patterns of a particular practice in the culture, they often quite naturally turn to the way that practice is played out in their own homes. In response to discussions about the practice of welcoming in our culture, people often say, "I wouldn't do it that way in my house," or "That's a pretty good idea. It reminds me of how my mother used to welcome people." Christian practices naturally grow out of family experiences. Once the topic of a particular practice is broached, household applications are not far behind.

Parents can continue to facilitate the discussion at the dinner table mentioned above by asking questions such as:

- What do you think about the way we welcome people into our home?
- Let's think about the last time a guest was in our house. How did we welcome that person? What did we do? What could we have done better?
- Why is it important to make people feel welcome?
- How do you feel when others welcome you into their homes?

Open-ended questions like these will allow for free discussion of current practice as well as imaginative discussion for future practice.

Step Three

The third step is to connect the family's practice of welcoming with the gospel. There are many stories about welcoming in the gospels. The birth of Christ, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Martha and Mary, and the Emmaus meal are a few that come to mind. There is a particularly

compelling story about welcoming in the seventh chapter of Luke. Jesus is invited to dine with a Pharisee whose hospitality is upstaged by a repentant woman when she lavishes an extravagant and dramatic welcome upon Jesus, one that Jesus suggests would have been appropriate for the Pharisee to emulate. This woman's action is motivated by love, and she experiences profound forgiveness for her sins as a result of her personal encounter with Jesus.

Exploring a gospel story in the context of family discussions about daily Christian practices can be a powerful learning experience. Parents can offer a story like Luke's repentant woman as the prayer for a meal that includes a discussion of welcoming, or they can read it as a follow-up to a discussion that occurred at a previous meal. The order of things is not as important in a family setting as is making the connections between the pieces. The gospel story can introduce the topic as the opening prayer of the meal, or the gospel story can be used at a later meal if that would create a more natural flow for the family. The critical thing is to make the connection between the gospel and the family practice.

Families ultimately need to be clear about one thing: Jesus Christ is at the heart of every Christian practice. When we welcome others into our home, we are encountering Christ in a new way. What is the benefit to the Christian practice of welcoming? The benefits are many, but peace is certainly eminent. Welcoming Christ is a pathway to peace, for Christ always brings with him the gift of peace.

Motivating Parents to Practice Faith at Home

It is naïve to think that parents will take up the challenge of leading their families in the daily practice of Christian faith at home when churches have for so long usurped their authority in that role. Church leaders need to motivate parents to become more intentional about faith formation in their homes. We need to connect the daily practice of faith with the daily hopes, joys, fears, and concerns of parents. Parents will become more intentional about faith formation at home if and when they believe that practicing faith at home will help them navigate the routines of family life more effectively.

I have had great success motivating parents to share faith with their children when I tell them that doing so is what their children need from them. I use the results of solid research to let parents know that practicing faith at home is one way to assure that their children will have a better chance of making it to adulthood safely. Parents are motivated by that knowledge because they love their children and want what is best for them.

There are plenty of reputable studies that show a connection between active parenting and positive family outcomes. There are other studies that show a link between religious faith and positive family outcomes. We need to merge the research to expose the potent combination of an active and faith-filled parenting style, and tell parents in very clear and simple ways that authentic and intentional faith sharing at home will make their lives and the lives of their children better in every way.

Here's the rub. A change has to happen in our hearts first. If church leaders don't believe that

God is just as powerfully present in families as in our programs, then our call to family faith formation will not ring true. If we cannot find God bursting out of every non-church moment of our lives, and if we cannot name the very concrete ways in which our lives have improved because of our discovery of God at the foundation of all that we are and all that we do, then how can we motivate others to embark on the quest? Church leaders need a joyous conversion; a conversion of heart that will motivate us to share the good news of God's abiding presence in the family with energy and enthusiasm.

Conclusion

An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy. Some may consider this wisdom saying to be an anticlerical remark, but nothing could be further from the truth. The truth that lies within this axiom has the power to set the clergy free to be what they are called to be. It is not their responsibility, nor is it the responsibility of the institutions

over which they preside, to implement the details of faith formation. The role of the clergy, and religious institutions is to be the visionary leaders who empower adults to pass on faith to their children. It is the role of the parent in the context of family living to do the actual passing on of the faith.

Churches need to consistently proclaim the vision—a vision that they wholeheartedly trust—that family is the primary place where faith formation happens. They must listen to their families in order to know them from the inside out, and provide families with the resources, programs, and motivation that will help them to practice their faith at home every day. Transforming faith formation one family at a time in this manner could have an explosive transforming effect on congregations.

Works Cited

Bass, Dorothy C., editor. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

- Chesto, Kathleen. *FIRE (Family-Centered Intergenerational Religious Education)*. Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2000. (Multiple volumes)
- Furger, Roberta. "Secret Weapon Discovered!: Scientists Say Parents Partnering with Teachers can Change the Future of Education." *Edutopia*, March 2006, 46-49.
- LeDoux, Joseph. *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.
- Miller, Vincent J. *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- National Education Association Website, <http://www.nea.org>.
- Quest High School website, Houston. <http://qhs.humble.k12.tx.us/>.
- Schuller, David S., Editor. *Rethinking Christian Education: Explorations in Theory and Practice*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993.
- Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.



The Human Body in Family Spirituality

Cynthia Dobryznski

Throughout history, Christian tradition has had an ambiguous relationship with the human body. In this article, we will explore some highlights of that tradition, and how this might affect our own understanding of what it means to be both incarnational and spiritual, particularly within the context of family life.

The preoccupation with body image and the commercialization of bodies so prevalent in contemporary culture needs a counterbalance that will enable the people we serve to correct these distorted images within their own families. By being attentive to the physical experiences found in everyday family life we encounter the sacredness of a God who became fully human by God's own choice, and is ever present in our individual and communal settings.

The Bodies of Grownups

The bodies of grownups
Come with stretch marks and scars,
Faces that have been lived in,
Relaxed breasts and bellies,
Backs that give trouble,
And well-worn feet:
Flesh that is particular,
And obviously mortal.
They also come
With bruises on their heart,
Wounds they can't forget,

And each of them
A company of lovers in their soul
Who will not return
And cannot be erased.
And yet I think there is a flood of beauty
Beyond the smoothness of youth;
And my heart aches for that grace of longing
That flows through bodies
No longer straining to be innocent,
But yearning for redemption.

(Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*. Used with permission)

Cynthia Dobryznski, MA, is the Director of Family Life Ministry for the Diocese of Worcester, MA. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers as diocesan and New England representative. Cynthia is on the steering committee for the national symposium on lay ecclesial ministry and the 2007 national symposium on marriage ministry at Boston College. She is a spiritual director and also teaches in the Worcester Diaconate Formation Program.

A Brief Summary of a Christian Spirituality of the Body

In the first chapter of Genesis, we discover a God who begins the awesome project of creation. At each step of the way God sees that it is good until finally, all of creation is arrayed before God. To God's delight, it is indeed very good. Humankind was created in God's image, male *and* female, *together* sharing responsibility for all living things on the earth. Even the second creation account of woman being formed from the rib of Adam emphasizes the completeness of male and female together. It too presents a positive image of humanity in relationship with God and each other; it is the original spiritual family relationship.

The incarnation builds upon the relationship between God and God's people in a very human and experiential way, beginning with the birth of Jesus and his life as a member of a family. Jesus' attention to and care of bodies is significant in all the gospels. Think of the stories of the woman with the hemorrhage, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the healing of Jairus' daughter, and even the anointing of Jesus' own body. Clearly, Jesus was interested in the physical well-being of other persons, and his presence was blessing and healing for others.

This attention to the body continues through Paul's epistles. In Romans 8, Paul contrasts the ways of the spirit with the ways of the flesh. And 1 Corinthians addresses the theme of being Christian in a non-Christian world, specifically, that being in Christ means being in the *body* of Christ, a very horizontal relationship. In Corinthians, the actions of the body don't appear

to have moral significance, but Paul says the actions of the body matter because we are in the body of Christ. The body is where God is to be glorified.

When we think of the martyrs of the early Church, we see bodies venerated as both witness and blessing. Martyrdom gave people the chance to truly be united with Christ in all ways as the martyr's body becomes the site of resistance to evil. It is this integrity that is significant, not the suffering by itself. The body becomes the means to turn from sin and glorify God, linking the martyr's death with a testimony of faith.

The sin committed by our physical selves prevents us from achieving full communion with God on earth and contributes to the dualism inherent in traditional theology. If the theological ideal is complete union with God in heaven, our earthly bodies can be seen as obstacles along the path to that goal. Physical experiences may then be considered inferior to spiritual experiences, and the sensate reality of the body a less than desirable burden to achieving divine unity.

Saint Augustine perpetuates the notion of the spirit as detached from body, going so far as to say that the spirit is superior to the body. As a young man, Augustine led the life of a free-spirited person who fully took part in the pleasures of the world. Following his conversion, however, he seems unable to appreciate his own body and sexuality as an integral part of life along with intellect. Augustine's theological reasoning becomes completely focused on God, to the exclusion of any positive discussion of the human body.

It is far beyond the scope of this essay to write a treatise on Augustine's theology, but his writings on the negative

implications of the human body have greatly influenced Christian theology and practice throughout the centuries. For Augustine, the body can only be appreciated when it is separated from sexuality, finitude, and death, a perspective echoing an ancient Greek worldview that values escape from the body. This perspective took on form with the spiritual practices of the monastic tradition (Dreyer, 42), a lifestyle that was held up as an ideal from the days of the early Church up to Vatican II.

Many great people throughout church history have offered views of the body that run counter to those of Augustine. Catherine of Genoa, for example, writes of body and soul conversing and arguing with each other, eventually meeting self-love. She further writes that, during the course of their journey, neither body nor soul are completely satisfied in their appetites until God shows them pure love and explains that man, "given the excellence of his body and soul, might not consider himself God." Instead, love "pointed to the greater good yet for which man was created: the return, body and soul, of the creature to his celestial home" (*The Spiritual Dialogue*).

In the fourteenth century, Julian of Norwich served as an antidote to the dualism and negative notions of the body. Her call to contemplation influenced her decision to become an anchoress, a person who removes him or herself from the community to live a life of solitary prayer. In her book known as *Showings*, Julian reclaims the innate goodness of the body to develop an image of Christ as mother, as well as an image of being enclosed in the body of God. Her language suggests that for Julian relational life with God was a "bodily felt

experience” (to use Eugene Gendlin’s phrase).

And so while the dominant Christian view negated the value of the body, many classic writers on spirituality in fact trusted in their own experience of God to form a healthy respect for the physical body. These spiritual writers generally realized the human capacity for God, yet were knowledgeable about the full range of the human condition, “including self-deception, pride, and evasion.” They are commonsense saints (Dreyer, 46-47).

each bodily function separately and mechanically, almost as if each bodily task is done in a vacuum for the purpose of achieving specific goals. This is still the dominant model we have in Western medicine today. Yet each body is already in relationship not only within its environment but also with itself.

The human body has also been described as a socio-cultural site. Here the body is subject to the outside dictates of a particular society, which then impinges its actions upon the body. In this

mastery of a physical task will forever change his or her subsequent attempts at that task, as accomplishment increases confidence in the ability to perform the task again. In the same way, acquiring knowledge or affective experiences alter succeeding encounters.

It is more useful to look at the body as consciousness and will since that does not preclude the other definitions mentioned here. Consciousness does not merely mean awareness of the senses, but includes a deliberate attentiveness to and awareness of the body. As such, we must be consciously attentive to the experiences of our bodies throughout our daily lives in order to become more aware of God’s activity there, because the accomplishments and limitations of our bodies are the medium through which we discover God. The practice of discernment in trusting our own perceptions and judgments continually exposes the presence of God.

Jesus overcomes any notion of dualism between sacred and profane. All creation is graced through the presence of the Holy Spirit, so all creation is sacramental in nature. The human being is a body in relationship, in community with God and all other bodies, including the body of Earth.

Defining the Body in Contemporary Language and Culture

Can we really define all that a body is? At first glance, we may define our body by its physical outlines, the space it occupies, its sensory perceptions, or perhaps its functions. But the body is not merely a collection of physical processes directed by the brain to perform certain tasks. Each body is an animate organism interacting with an unending array of stimuli and influences in its surrounding environment. In doing so, it becomes an environment of its own.

In the more recent past, we have had a tendency to evaluate

scenario, the bodily response must be some form of adaptation.

Another way of observing the body is as a “product of consciousness and will,” assuming that an individual is able to choose his or her own posture in the world (Synnott). An informed choice depends upon careful attention to the body’s own equilibrium. Each bodily activity can enhance or detract from a determination of self in the body. The ambiguity lies in unintended consequences of one’s actions; not every outcome can be anticipated.

Each of these three ways of describing the body inadequately portrays the process of being and becoming body. During the body’s movement through time and space, the experience of bodiliness changes. A child’s first

Implications for Family Life and Spirituality

Human beings are not merely bodies, but encompass both body and spirit in a mysterious union. This union overlaps loose, fluid boundaries between the two, but the essence or soul of the human person is always expressed bodily in the world. Because of the radical self-revelation of God in human history, Jesus overcomes any notion of dualism between sacred and profane. All creation is graced through the presence of the Holy Spirit, so all creation is sacramental in nature. The human being is a body in relationship, in community with God and all other bodies, including the body of Earth.

In order to reclaim the body as the communal sacred space that is family life, certain

practices become more necessary. By attending to one's "bodily felt sense," a person may become more aware of the workings of the Spirit within. We must experience this "felt sense" of the body if we want to truly inhabit our bodies and not merely use them as instruments (Gendlin, 194). In order to cultivate and develop this felt sense, which I call the presence of the Spirit within, there are practices of faith that can teach us to recognize this presence more readily.

Let us turn our attention to the external physical senses through which our bodies receive information from the world around us. Our sense of smell is not just limited to the odors or aromas that our brain interprets as sweet or stench, but is an important component of our sense of taste, as well. How much less do we enjoy the taste of our food or drink when we have a cold and our nose is stuffy? Our tongues detect elements of sweet, sour, bitter, salt, and *umami* (salts of certain acids). We hear sounds of all kinds, then our brain categorizes them into speech, language, music, and rhythms, which may be pleasing or not. Our eyes view the world around us, and we perhaps rely on this sense more than any other, as evidenced by the expression "seeing is believing." Finally, the sense of touch involves the many nerve endings throughout the skin of our entire body.

Such is the wisdom of the Christian tradition on the integrity and relationality of our bodies. God made us separate from one another, but with the potential to be in relationship with one another. The integrity of our bodies is a gift from God, but the meaning of our bodies does not stop at the boundaries of our skin. For we belong to one

another, and so we are called to attend to the effects of our choices. We belong to one another, and so we have a share in one another's joy and a responsibility to help one another bear grief and pain. The cultivation of the practice of honoring the body can help us remember that in both our integrity and our relations with other bodies, we belong to God. (Paulsell, 25)

Nowhere are these words more evident than in the life of a family. Next, we will look at some of the ways tangible, bodily experiences guide the spirituality of family life today.

Family Life as Spiritual Practice

Since Vatican II, Catholic teaching has presented the family as a locus of spiritual activity. The idea of Christian families as "domestic churches" has its earliest roots in the house churches prevalent during the first few centuries of the Christian era, which themselves drew on the Jewish practice of worship in the home. Today, the recovery of this basic idea has offered new opportunities for shining forth the spiritual light of the family in more contemporary ways.

We Are Family

Lord God, we thank you for the gift of family.
We acknowledge that our image and name as family come from you.
We believe that within our family lies a homemade holiness.
We affirm that it is in this household of faith that we experience
Your presence, your forgiveness, and your love.
We are family. We give thanks to you, for the many joys and
Blessings that have come to us through our family.
As family, we sometimes feel pain.
And so we offer to you our disappointments, frustrations, and hurts.
Help us to forgive those members of our family,
Including ourselves, who have caused pain.
We pray for the strength to be a light within our family.
May we open our hearts, our eyes and ears and carry our
Light to those in need.
God, Creator of the earth and all its people, help us to be
Mindful that, as members of one global family, we are
Equal in your eyes.
Help us to continue to appreciate the diversity of persons
In our homes and in our world.
As members equal in human dignity, may we build
A better world and proclaim our willingness to be the holy
People you call us to be.
Amen.

(National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers)

In 1981, following the United Nations Year of the Family, Pope John Paul II issued his *Apostolic Exhortation on the Family (Familiaris Consortio)*, one of the most influential theological documents on the family. In it, the Pope calls the family “an intimate community of life and love” and tells families to “become what they are.” He then lays out four specific tasks for the family:

1. The family is to form an intimate community of persons.
2. The family is to serve life, both physically by bringing children into the world, and spiritually by handing on values and traditions as well as developing the potential of each member to serve life at every age.
3. The family is to participate in the development of society by becoming a community of social training and hospitality, as well as a community of political involvement and activity.
4. The family is to share in the life and mission of the Church by becoming a believing and evangelizing community, a community in dialogue with God, and a community at the service of humanity. (FC #21)

Notice that these tasks are themselves spiritual practices placed in the context of family life. With this lofty ideal before us, what are the ways members of a family can live out their faith in the world? As we have already seen, the Christian tradition at times has been ambiguous about the ordinary life of human beings. The spiritual life is often spoken of as a journey or pilgrimage or battle....What we lack as a Christian community is a language for the spiritual life that also speaks in terms of settled habitation....Further, we familiarized people who inhabit homes, who

live among and with a people who give us an identity, whom we serve, by whom we are served, need to turn to our experience. We need to reflect on our homes and intimate relationships. We need to turn them around just as we would turn over and admire a handcrafted piece of pottery that has been given to us to appreciate. (Wright, 16-17)

So we must live attentively and look closely at our ordinary experiences and the homes, places of work, and communities where those experiences occur. The members of the family are called, both individually and collectively, to “find God in all things.” That includes the ups and downs of the marital relationship, the raising of children through their periods of growth, caring for elderly parents, weathering changes in health and well-being, and going through the aging process. By focusing our attention on the cycles and rhythms of our lives, day after day, we may come to see the presence of the Holy One in places we might not have imagined.

Let me share an example from my own life. A number of years ago, my mother was hospitalized during a lengthy illness. During that time, she continued to fail until she was in a coma and unable to speak. Having young children at the time and living hours away, my sister and I were not able to be with her as much as we would have liked. Any phone call immediately was cause to wonder if something worse had happened to her, and it often had.

During what turned out to be the last time I saw her alive, one of the aides in the nursing home took me aside and asked me if I minded if she said the rosary with my mother. I said no, I appreciated her taking the time to do so. She told me she had been doing this on a daily basis, and thought it comforted my mother. In the midst of a long period of

grief and trying to come to terms with my mother’s impending death, God gave me a tremendous blessing. The aide was able to comfort my mother with her presence and prayers when I was unable to do so myself. Her generous act connected me to my mother and to God in a way that illuminated the presence of God for all of us.

Another example of God’s presence illuminated through family life was the occasion of my husband’s and my twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Although many people we knew celebrated with exotic trips (without their children, I might add), my husband had told me the only thing he wished to do was to renew our wedding vows. We decided to do so in our home, with family members, some close friends, and a priest friend presiding. One of my daughters sang during the service, and we used family heirlooms for communion, which we passed from one person to the next. A celebratory dinner I had carefully prepared followed. It was one of the most joyous occasions in my husband’s and my lives because of the presence of people we loved, and the recognition of the many blessings we had received throughout the journey of our marriage.

Reminders of God

Recognizing the presence of God in our daily lives requires attentiveness to both ordinary and extraordinary experiences, and an ability to reflect upon their meaning in connecting us with the community of God’s people. The pace of our busy, often frantic culture can sometimes prevent us from living in the present moment. We may be looking back on events in our lives, or looking ahead to the

tasks of tomorrow, next week, next year. Either direction is an obstacle to what we know *now*, in the present. Leif Kehrwald has developed a four-step process that helps enable family members to recognize those present moments that connect them to their faith. (These steps are outlined in Kehrwald's article in this issue of *Lifelong Faith*.)

While this is not the only method of connecting experiences in family life with the life of faith, it is a useful tool for us to recognize how this happens. As pastoral leaders, we don't want to add another item on the family's to-do list, which may already be exhaustively long. Our task is to foster the recognition that each family possesses a unique spirituality lived out in their communal lives, which in turn connects them to the larger community of faith.

The Family Altar

Learning to recognizing the presence of God in the "now" moments of our family life is an excellent spiritual practice. But we can also create an atmosphere of holiness and sacred space in our homes that foster a continual awareness of the presence of God. One of the ways to do this is with a family altar. Scripture is filled with references to altars being built to commemorate great works of God and establish a tangible place that brings God and God's people together (Grizzle, 3-13). In the Jewish tradition, the altar belonged in the tabernacle and temple. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish families moved their worship into their homes; most often, their rites of worship would take place around the table.

Early Christians continued this practice in their own homes. Around the family table,

household members gathered to share Eucharist, the breaking of the bread and drinking of the wine in remembrance of the Last Supper. With the spread of Christianity and building of churches, many families continued to keep small altars for worship in their homes. We can still see this practice in homes today.

When I give talks or workshops to adults and intergenerational groups, I often use a family altar to express those symbols and rituals that have become sacred in my own family's life. First, I take the lace tablecloth off the kitchen table where we normally eat dinner, along with the candles and candlesticks. Next comes a glass plate that was my grandmother's, and a crystal goblet we received as a wedding present and used in our anniversary celebration. A book with special meaning joins these items, as well as a family picture. As I set the table for the presentation with these objects, the group is already making visual connections with the altar in their church.

Next come things that are more specifically symbolic of our family. Music is a big part of our life, so there is usually a CD or some musical instrument. A computer disk demonstrates a means of communication we use often, especially with our daughters in college and family members scattered across the country. A pizza pan reflects our family tradition of making our own pizzas, including the dough, on Friday nights. At times I've used a soccer ball, since we spent many hours watching games and practices (and my husband coaching), but also over the years developed a sense of community with the other girls on the team and their families. Occasionally, I have placed a pair of running shoes on the altar, explaining that

this is my husband's influence on our prayer life. He was a competitive runner for many years and helped me understand the physical connectedness of our bodies with God.

Once, when I included the soccer ball and running shoes on the altar, a woman came up to me after we had concluded the workshop. She told me she had been worried about her ten-year-old boy, who was only interested in sports. (While she was telling me this, her son was running around in circles!) She was trying to get him to understand prayer and his relationship with God and felt like she was failing. As I had placed the soccer ball and running shoes on the altar, her son had looked up at her and said, "See, mommy, that's how I pray." She had tears in her eyes as she told me what hope she had that God was at work in her son's life, although not in the way she had originally thought.

The Family Dinner Table

The family dinner table is another wonderful place to experience the presence of God. While gathered around the table, the family shares more than food. Here is where they

share the experience of being greater than the sum of the individual parts. They sense that the table becomes a place of encounter.... Tables are places of communion, of mutual need and nourishment acted out on several levels simultaneously. Our physical, emotional, and spiritual hungers are fed in a mealtime ritual as old as humankind. The table itself becomes the sacred space where the ritual is accomplished. (Wright, 32).

Places and Activities

In addition to the dinner table, each family has one or more places or activities where that bodily-felt “something more” seem more readily accessible. It may be a grandparent’s house, where sacred memories were formed during childhood vacations. It could be the sheer physical activity of climbing a mountain, and at the end of all that exertion, standing awestruck at the beauty of the view. For some it may be the absorbing the rhythm of ocean waves, while gazing out into what seems an infinite horizon, perhaps lit by the colors of the sunset. Still others may find that something more through music, art, poetry, or any one of the many activities that hold deeper meaning for us.

Conclusion

Individually and collectively, we hold our memories in our bodies, our sacred places, and yes, even our sorrows and joys. In our attentiveness to those experiences over our lifetime, those reminders of God, we will discover the presence of God in the bodily experiences of our daily family lives.

Teaching Tip

Here is a relatively simple exercise to do with both adults and intergenerational groups. Ask them if their family has a favorite song or story. Have them make a list of the family events and traditions that are sacred to their family. With younger children it helps to break it down into daily, weekly, spiritual, and recreational rituals and name those individually. What symbols would best represent those sacred moments and traditions? The final step is to invite each family to take this exercise home, where they can then place all of these objects on a table to remind the family of the sacred presence of God in their lives.

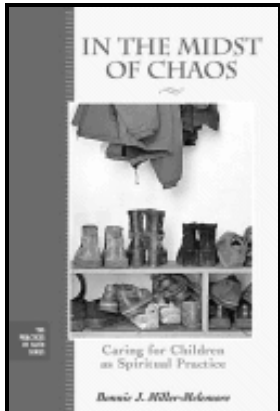
Works Cited

- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Dreyer, Elizabeth A. *Earth Crammed With Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday Life*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994.
- Eiesland, Nancy. *The Disabled God*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

- Gendlin, Eugene T. *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1981.
- Grizzle, Anne F. *Reminders of God: Altars for Personal and Family Devotion*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004.
- Kehrwald, Leif, ed. *Families and Faith*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006.
- Morley, Janet. *All Desire's Known*. Morehouse Publishing: Harrisburg, PA, 1992.
- National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers. *Ministry with Families 101*.
- Paulsell, Stephanie. *Honoring the Body*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- Pope John Paul II. *Familiaris Consortio*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1981.
- Synnott, Anthony. *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Wright, Wendy M. *Sacred Dwelling: A Spirituality of Family Life*. Leavenworth, KS: Forest of Peace Publishing, 1994.
- Wright, Wendy M. *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Recommended Resources

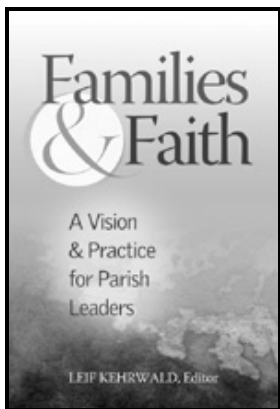
Family Faith Formation



In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007)

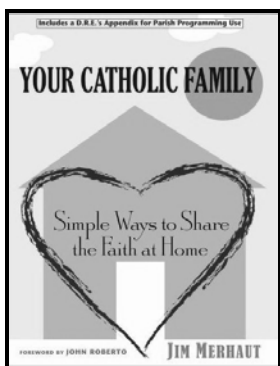
How can we find spiritual depth in the midst of the chaos of our lives with children? Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore gives us answers to this question and shows us how to integrate and strengthen the practice of faith in the everyday (and often mundane) experience of raising children. *In the Midst of Chaos* reveals what it takes to find the spiritual wisdom in the messy, familial ways of living. By rethinking parenting as an invitation to discover God in the middle of our busy and overstuffed lives, it relieves parents of the burden of being the all-knowing authority figures who impart spiritual knowledge to children. Finding spirituality in family activities such as reading bedtime stories, dividing household chores, and playing games can empower parents to notice what they are already doing as potentially valuable and to practice it more consciously as part of their own faith journey.



Families and Faith: A Vision & Practice for Parish Leaders

Leif Kehrwald, editor (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006)

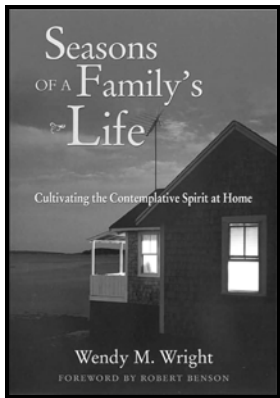
Families and Faith provides practical ways and means for developing a vision and practice of partnership with parish families, including lots of ideas and strategies for helping families grow in faith. Topics include practical steps for connecting faith and life, family faith and spirituality, families and Christian practice, families and serving others. Its premise is that when the church of the home and the church of the parish work together, lasting faith formation occurs for all ages. Eight authors—all experienced in family and parish ministry—show how the family's ability to be a center of religious activity can be enkindled: Judith Dunlap, Kathleen Finley, Jenny Friedman, Leif Kehrwald, Mariette Martineau, James Merhaut, Mary Jo Pedersen, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain.



Your Catholic Family: Simple Ways to Share the Faith at Home

Jim Merhaut (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006)

Your Catholic Family provides parents (and grandparents) with a treasure chest of solid content and engaging activities. Jim Merhaut provides parents with the wisdom and guidance they need to share the Catholic faith with their children and leads families through a journey of discovery, uncovering the riches of the Catholic tradition and helping families apply their learning to life today. Activities are organized into four major sections: 1) Professing our Faith in the Word of God through Scripture and Tradition, 2) Celebrating the Christian Mystery (sacraments and liturgy), 3) Life in Christ (moral teachings), and 4) Prayer. All of the activities are designed for use at home.



Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home

Wendy M. Wright (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

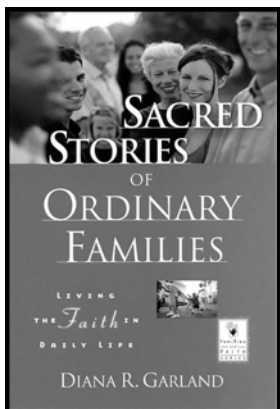
Wendy Wright offers a reflective, story-filled, and inspirational examination of the spiritual fabric of domestic life. This practical and insightful book explores family life as a context for nurturing contemplative practices in the home. Rooted in an appreciation of our deep and wise spiritual traditions that probe the sacred alongside everyday human experience, *Seasons of a Family's Life* reveals a family life replete with sacred spaces, rituals that enrich our time together, shared family stories, and much more. It offers parents a model for integrating family life and spiritual awareness. Each chapter is a lesson in gaining an awareness of the joy in our experience as families and letting the sacred be more present in daily life.



Sacred Dwelling: An Everyday Family Spirituality

Wendy M. Wright (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2007) (Revised Edition)

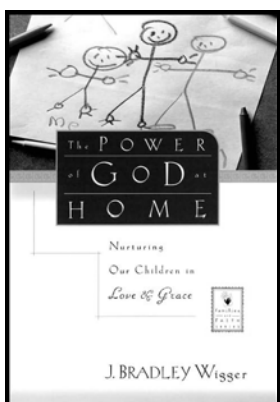
This classic work, newly revised, presents a unique approach to family spirituality by using the home as a background, Wendy Wright brings its various aspects—kitchen, garden, attic, and bedroom, to name a few—into her exploration of the human spirit and human relationships, shedding new light on the family as the “domestic church.”



Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families

Diana R. Garland (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

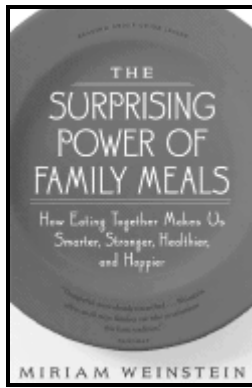
When families are faced with crises and challenges—unemployment, the untimely death of a family member, natural disasters and chronic illnesses—those who seem to weather the crisis best are often those who have an active spiritual dimension to their lives together. And in times of joy and celebration families with strong spiritual lives rejoice in deeper and more wondrous ways. But what exactly is it that characterizes faith and spirituality in family life? Identifying resilience, strength, and faith in the stories of all kinds of families, *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families* motivates readers to think about how faith shapes their own family lives. Drawn from Diana R. Garland's extensive interviews with 110 families, this book includes stories from ordinary families whose lives together both reveal and rely on extraordinary faith.



The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in a Love and Grace

J. Bradley Wigger (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

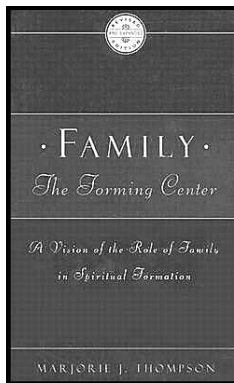
Written for parents and educators, Brad Wigger provides both a biblical model and practical suggestions for helping the entire family become aware of God's presence in everyday life. He reveals the powerful formative influence of family life and shows that homes are the places where some of the deepest, most important learning takes place. *The Power of God at Home* offers a refreshing perspective on family life, revealing families as potential bearers of God's grace and blessing, and providing church leaders with insights on how to nurture faith at home more intentionally and thoughtfully. Chapters include: The Spiritual Power of Learning, The Story of Home, The Joy of Practice, and Sacred Connections.



The Surprising Power of Family Meals: How Eating Together Makes Us Smarter, Stronger, Healthier, and Happier

Miriam Weinstein (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2005)

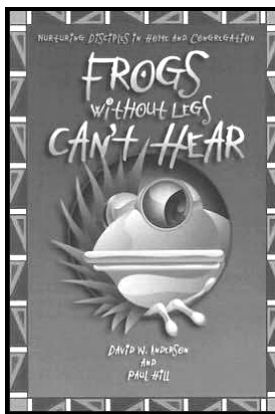
The Surprising Power of Family Meals examines the stories and studies surrounding a ritual that was once so common it flew beneath our radar screens. Weinstein demonstrates how eating dinner together as a family is linked to a wide variety of positive outcomes for individual family members and the family as a whole. She shows how families and communities around North America are responding creatively to the pressures of a 24/7 world, taking what is best from our past and transforming it to meet current needs, and offers valuable strategies that can be tailored to suit a family's situation.



Family the Forming Center

Marjorie Thompson (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996)

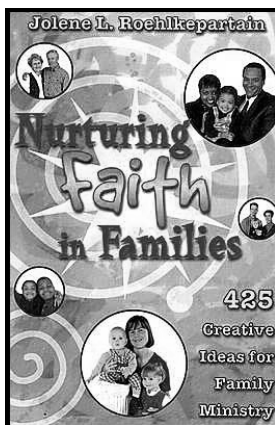
Family the Forming Center by Marjorie Thompson is a classic! It is both visionary and practical. The book presents the vision of the role of the family in spiritual formation. She describes how the family can become a "sacred shelter" for one another, and how the family can experience God's presence within the context of family life. She offers suggestions for developing spiritual disciplines within the family and practical advice on family group discernment. Thompson devotes entire chapters to prayer in the family, celebrating God's presence in rituals and celebrations, the family as storyteller and guide, and the family as servant.



Frogs without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation

David W. Anderson and Paul Hill (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003)

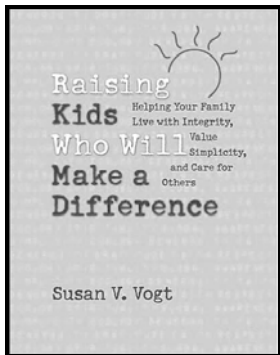
David Anderson and Paul Hill challenge church leaders to shift the center of faith formation from the congregation to a shared center involving the home and ministry in daily life. The purpose of the book is to identify the principles and practices that are faith formative, grounded in research and over a decade of pastoral practice through the work of the Youth and Family Institute in Minneapolis. To do this they present five principles that define the congregation-home partnership, four key faith practices that promote faith growth (caring conversation, rituals and traditions, devotions, and service), and three characteristics of effective adult faith bearers to highlight the importance of faith in daily life.



Nurturing Faith in Families: 425 Creative Ideas for Family Ministry

Jolene L. Roehlkepartain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002)

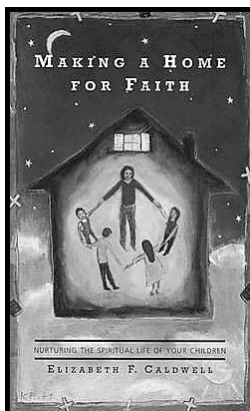
Nurturing Faith in Families provides church leaders with helpful information outlining the importance of family ministry, practice guidance on establishing an effective family ministry program, take-home activities that highlight specific ways families can nurture faith at home, and handy sidebars through the book that offer insightful research briefs, quotations, and resources to support family ministry. The practical, easy-to-use ideas are organized into education, service and mission, worship, congregational care, music and arts, special activities, and take-home activities for nurturing faith at home.



Raising Kids Who Will Make a Difference: Helping Your Family Live with Integrity, Value Simplicity, and Care for Others

Susan V. Vogt (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002)

In this guide to raising socially conscious children, Susan Vogt sets out to inspire, equip, and comfort parents in the awesome task of raising kids who will make positive contributions to the world. Using a delightful blend of honesty and humor, Vogt offers successful parenting strategies and straightforward discussions on important issues like sexuality, substance abuse, materialism, racism, global awareness, and death. Personal anecdotes, stories from other parents, and perspective from Vogt's children enhance the practical information. Each chapter concludes with reflection activities to stimulate discussion for the whole family.



Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children

Elizabeth Caldwell (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000)

Elizabeth Caldwell (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000)

Churches often assume that parents know what to do with their children in regard to nurturing them in a life of faith after baptism or dedication. Elizabeth Caldwell addresses this important need by offering parents and educators insights and ideas for nurturing the faith of children and creating a faithful ecology at home, at church, and in the world. Chapters include: Making a Home for Faith, Parenting for Faith Expression, Imprints of Faith, When Your Child Asks, and A Faithful Ecology.

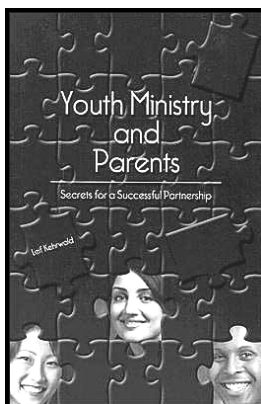


Leaving Home with Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of our Youth

Elizabeth Caldwell (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002)

Elizabeth Caldwell (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002)

Elizabeth Caldwell explores themes faced by adolescents, their families, and their congregations, and seeks to answer such questions as what changes are our adolescents experiencing?, what are the implications of these changes for those who live with and work with them?, and what consistencies of family, congregational life, and faith are necessary to support them? Each chapter deals with a specific perspective of adolescence, and includes discussion questions and brief Psalm reflections.

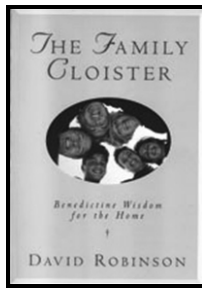


Youth Ministry and Parents

Leif Kehrwald (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004)

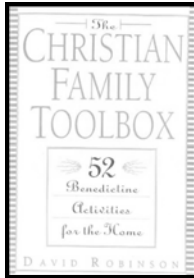
Leif Kehrwald (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004)

Because parents are the primary evangelizers of young people, they must be integrally involved in any successful youth ministry program. This book paves the way for youth ministers to create successful partnerships with parents of the teens in their church. It helps youth ministers understand parents of teens and gives youth program leaders concrete strategies for enlisting parental support, overcoming resistance, and using the parental support system to complement youth ministry programs. Chapters include: Partnership with Parents, Family Stages, Why Parents?, Understanding Parents of Teens, Families and Youth Faith Formation, A Christian Vision for Family Life.



The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home

David Robinson (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000)



The Christian Family Toolbox: 52 Benedictine Activities for the Home

David Robinson (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001)

In these two books, David Robinson presents the key teachings and activities from the Rule of St. Benedict, adapted to the contemporary family. *The Family Cloister* explores Benedict's Rule to unearth the riches found there and offer them to parents for their holy calling of raising children. *The Christian Family Toolbox* is a companion guide, a hands-on activity book for use by parents with their children, or grandparents with grandchildren, in the daily adventure of family life together. Each book is developed around seven themes: Family Design, Family Spirituality, Family Health, Family Life Together, Family Service and Hospitality, and Family Growth.



Home Growth Faith

David and Kathy Lynn (Nashville: World Publishing, 2006)

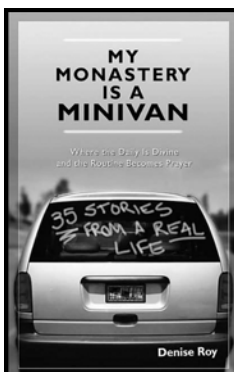
We all know that the single most important social influence on the lives of children and teens is their parents. David and Kathy Lynn present a well-researched and practical book to encourage and teach parents (and church leaders) how they can shape the spiritual lives of their children and teens one day at a time. Section One of the book provides an overview of the "Whys" of a homegrown faith, including "The Top Ten HomeGrown Faith Practices for Parents." Section Two contains fifty practical home grown faith activities organized in categories: prayer, devotions, faith conversations, service projects, family walks, and family fun.



Raising Faith-Filled Kids: Ordinary Opportunities to Nurture Spirituality at Home

Tom McGrath (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000)

Writing from personal experience and drawing from the experiences of others, Tom McGrath shows parents how to bring faith into everyday family life through familiar objects and regular routines. Chapter topics include passing on a living faith, family holiness, parenthood as a spiritual path, spiritual virtues and disciplines, prayer, justice, and storytelling. A special feature of the book are the 23 "Taking Action" activities to develop faith in the lives of children and teenagers.



My Monastery is a Minivan: Where the Daily is Divine and the Routine Becomes Prayer

Denise Roy (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001)

If we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, wisdom can be found in even the simplest of ordinary moments—driving to work, getting children ready for school, or sitting with a child on our lap. Denise Roy offers thirty-five entertaining and touching stories that show how family moments can bring spiritual rewards. Roy's intimate approach invites us to recognize the grace within our daily lives. We needn't pull over to find enlightenment; the divine is always present, even in the carpool lane.