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Best Practices in Faith Formation Special Double Issue

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Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation

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ntergenerational faith formation may seem "new" to contemporary Christian churches, but it has deep roots in our Jewish and Christian heritage. The call for one generation to share its faith and story with future generations is deeply embedded in the Jewish tradition. Moses' instruction to the parents and grandparents of his day makes this clear:

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:1–9)

From the first century onward, Christian faith communities have been intergenerational communities. Allan G. Harkness writes, "Ever since the development of Christian faith communities in the post-Pentecost era of Christianity, there has been a consciousness that such communities need to encourage and embody a genuine intergenerationalism" (Harkness 1998, 431). From its Jewish roots, the early Christian church maintained its intergenerational identity with all ages considered to be integral parts of it. "The church is all generations. From the newly baptized infant to the homebound, aged widow—all are members of the faith community. None are potential members; none are ex-members. Though some congregations may have no younger members (and a few no elderly), most have all five generations. And all are members of the Body" (Koehler, 10).

Intergenerational faith formation was an integral element of the Christian church from the very first days. The Israelites and the first Christian communities may not have used the term "intergenerational faith formation" to describe the transmission of the faith story and way of life to the next generation, but it most certainly was.

Harkness provides a helpful, contemporary understanding of intergenerational faith formation when he writes, "Intentional IG (intergenerational) strategies are those in which an integral part of the process of faith communities encourages interpersonal interaction across generational boundaries, and in which a sense of mutuality and equality is encouraged between the participants" (Harkness 2000, 52-53). Drawing on theology, education, and social sciences he makes a strong case that intergenerational learning "can contribute to the achievement of the normative educational goals of faith communities, which (for Christian communities at least) integrate the gaining of knowledge, holistic growth to maturity of individual believers, and the development of the corporate Christian community for its mission" (52-53). Harkness identifies four major areas in which specifically IG educational strategies may enhance the achievement of these goals:

- by providing the foundation of consistency between the theology of the community and its educational strategies;
- by embodying the essence of appropriate and authentic education in faith communities;
- 3. by enhancing the potential for faith development in the individual members of the communities; and
- 4. by encouraging the corporate edification that enables the community as a united entity to more effectively live out its God-given vocation. (Harkness 2000, 53)

James W. White offers what has become the guiding definition of intergenerational religious education: "two or more different age groups of people in a religious community together learning/growing/living in faith through in-common experiences, parallel learning, contributiveoccasions, and interactive sharing" (White, 18). White explains that an ideal IGRE program will have all four patterns of relationships: in-common experiences, parallel learning, contributiveoccasions, and interactive sharing. The IGRE methodology can be utilized in many forms: monthly IG learning programs, weekly or bi-weekly IG small groups, IG/family summer camp programs, IG/family vacation Bible school, IG Sunday school or Bible study, IG retreats, IG workshops.

The dominant form of Christian education or faith formation in most Christian churches today is not intergenerational. For over sixty years it has been homogeneous-age education, organizing children, teens, and adults into separate learning groups or classes organized by age or grade level. In many congregations even worship is age-segregated. Holly Catterton Allen, in her research on IG observes, "It seems that learning how to be God's people has become less a joining in with community, and more a gathering of age-segregated groups to study about being God's people" (Allen, 271).

Since the 1970s there have been a number of significant attempts to make intergenerational and/or family-centered learning central to Christian faith formation (see Harkness 1998). Many of the lectionary-based approaches and resources developed since the 1970s have incorporated a family and/or intergenerational learning component. Kathleen Chesto's FIRE (Family-centered Intergenerational Religious Education) program, originally developed in the 1980s and revised and updated in the 1990s, is a comprehensive five-year curriculum: Celebrating Community, Becoming Community, The Responding Community, The Living Community, The Believing Community. Faith Inkubators (www.faithink.com) has developed Generations in Faith Together, intergenerational learning programs focused on Advent, Lent, and stewardship that are an integral element in their curriculum for congregations. The Center for Ministry Development and Harcourt Religion have developed the *People of Faith* curriculum, six volumes of intergenerational learning sessions on Jesus and the church year, the Creed, sacraments, morality, justice, and prayer, that can be used as the primary form of congregational faith formation for all ages.

Unfortunately there is very little scholarly writing or research on intergenerational faith formation. James White's 1988 Intergenerational Religious Education is one of the only substantial books presenting the theory and practice of Christian intergenerational education.

The Challenge of Intergenerational Faith Formation

There are many forces in our society and within our congregations that make the (re)establishment of intergenerational faith formation countercultural. To these forces we now turn our attention.

The general culture in the United States is becoming increasingly age-segregated. We live in a society defined by age segregation, in which adults and children go their separate ways. Young people experience very few settings that are truly intergenerational. The architecture and design of communities and neighborhoods tend to isolate

families, and virtually every program and institution is organized to meet age-specific needs at the expense of the richness of intergenerational community.

While intergenerational communities and extended families have long been the norm in human societies all over the world, U.S. society is pulling the generations apart. Among the many factors contributing to this are: individualism, mobility, grandparents living at often great distances from their children and grandchildren, and separation of children and youth by age levels from adults in education and activities.

Age-segregation is detrimental to all generations. "This lack of intergenerational contact leads each generation to see itself as a separate subculture rather than as an integral part of an entire community, perspectives that often lead to conflict and competition rather than cooperation" (Martinson and Shallue, 4).

Religious congregations are among the very few settings where three or more generations gather for intentional activities. Yet even in churches, young people are segregated by age from the rest of the community for most of their activities. In a typical church today a child can be involved in Christian education programs from first grade through high school and never have the opportunity to meet and learn with other generations in the faith community—to the detriment of the individual and the other generations. In some congregations they are even separated for worship.

Intergenerational Contact

The 2000 research study, Grading Grown-Ups: American Adults Report on their Real Relationships with Kids found "there is clear evidence that young people benefit from multiple, sustained relationships outside their immediate family. For example, Search Institute research has found that the more adults a young person reports that he or she can turn to, the better off that young person is. Yet just 22 percent of the youth surveyed reported having strong relationships with five or more adults other than their parents" (Scales, et al., 5).

To grow up healthy, young people need to be surrounded, supported, and guided within a sustained network of adults, in addition to their parents, who choose to know, name, support, affirm, acknowledge, guide, and include children and adolescents in their lives. Yet, the *Grading Grown-Ups* study found that most young people lacked this sense of "connectedness" to other generations.

The *Grading Grown-Ups* study revealed that youth and adults have shared priorities for intergenerational relationships. However, there was

also general agreement that these relationship-building actions are not happening often enough. There appears to be a gap between what adults believe and what they do. Of the 18 actions studied, only the top three—encouraging school success, teaching respect for cultural differences, and teaching shared values—are reported to be happening with any regularity. Some very important actions that adults could exercise in their relationships are not being practiced: passing down traditions, having meaningful conversations, being engaged in giving and serving to help the needy, modeling giving and serving to make life fair and equal, discussing religious beliefs, and discussing personal values.

What is clear from the study is that "forming meaningful relationships across generations needs to become an expected part of everyday life. All adults need to see being engaged with kids as part of their responsibility, as part of their community and this society. Children and youth need to be able to count on adults for support, guidance, and modeling" (Scales, et al. xi).

In the Effective Christian Education Study (The Teaching Church, 1993) the Search Institute found only 20 percent of congregations adequately promoted intergenerational contact. And just 39 percent of youth say their churches do a good or excellent job of helping them get to know adults in the church.

In October 2003, the Search Institute conducted a field test survey in 15 U.S. congregations of their instrument, Building Assets, Strengthening Faith: An Intergenerational Survey for Congregations. While only a limited survey, it does provide a glimpse of the state of intergenerational programming in congregations. The adult and youth respondents rated their congregation as doing very or extremely well in the following intergenerational opportunities (note the low score for intergenerational relationship building and learning opportunities):

- 52%: having worship or prayer services that are spiritually uplifting for people of all ages;
- 42%: providing opportunities for children, youth, and adults to serve others together;
- 40%: helping people of all ages feel their gifts and talents are valued;
- 29%: having children and youth in leadership roles for the whole congregation;
- 29%: providing opportunities for children, youth, and adults to get to know each other;
- 29%: providing opportunities for children, youth, and adults to learn and study together.

Eugene Roehlkepartain, the report's author, emphasizes the need for intergenerational

relationships and learning. "Nurturing faith and building assets involves more that what the congregation does specifically for children, youth, and families. Faith and assets are strengthened through intergenerational relationships, programs, and activities, including the ones examined in this section of the survey. Together, these items help congregations understand the ways they are, truly, an intergenerational community. The invitation for congregations is to discover a balance between agespecific opportunities and intergenerational opportunities in a time when generations are, too often, isolated from each other" (Roehlkepartain, 11).

Intergenerational – Age-Specific Tension

One of the major congregational issues is the tension between intergenerational and homogenous-age education. The recent history of Christian education has been dominated by age-specific (and agesegregated) learning. There are obviously age-related differences in development and age-related learning needs that make age-specific education important. However, as Allan Harkness observes, "Open to debate is the extent to which these differences provide a valid rationale for restricting education in faith communities to contexts in which homogeneous-age groups can function, as in the traditional age-graded divisions of congregations" (Harkness 2000, 54). He goes on to say that there are legitimate reasons for age-group educational settings, but "What is not justifiable is when these reasons are presented as a rationale for exclusively homogeneous-age group settings" (55).

Harkness concludes that intergenerational and homogenous-age group educational strategies in faith communities should be considered complementary, but with an intergenerational approach taking primacy over the age-segregated approach.

For contemporary faith communities, especially those which seek to model themselves on the New Testament churches, application of these criteria, when based on broad foundations from theology, education, and the social sciences, will demonstrate that the preferred educational strategies will integrate both IG and homogeneous age strategies. In terms of the priority to be given the two strategies, however, accumulated evidence from the same broad foundations strongly endorses the perspective that we "must learn to do only those things in

separate groups which we cannot in all conscience do together.

If faith communities are to increase effectiveness in fulfilling their mandate to equip people for life and relevant mission, no longer can the widely used homogeneous-age group methodology go unquestioned. An IG component must be conceived as normative. (Harkness 2000, 63)

The Process of Intergenerational Faith Formation

James White identified four patterns of relationships that shape the four components of an IGRE learning experience. Briefly summarized, these patterns are:

In-Common Experiences. Intergenerational religious education begins with a multigenerational experience of the theme that all the generations share together. Incommon experiences of generations are usually less verbal and more observatory than in the other three elements. In this pattern there is something "out there" or "over there" for us to see or do, something that equalizes the ages. Thus, at the same time and place and in a similar manner, different-aged people listen to music or sing, make an art project, watch a video, hear a story, participate in a ritual, pray together, and so on. In-common experiences for the most part remain at what Jean Piaget calls the "concrete operational" level, where all can learn together.

Shared experiences are absolutely critical for building IGRE. They are the stuff by which other patterns of relationships are built. To the point, Fred Rogers, of television's Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, makes the case for what is prescribed here when he asks rhetorically, "How can older and younger people respond to each other if they have no experiences together?"

■ Parallel Learning. Parallel learning is the second major IG relational pattern. With it the generations are separated in order to work on the same topic or project, but in different ways at a "best fit" development, interest, or skill level. Some of the developmental levels we are talking about are cognitive, psychological, physical, moral,

valuational, and so on—all the ways that make people different and special.

Though age groups may be separated, each one is focusing on the same learning task or topic. One of the major criticisms of IGRE is "the tendency to view equality or persons across the age spectrum with uniformity of experience," with that experience only from the vantage point of the child. By engaging in parallel learning, however, this IGRE shortcoming is avoided.

■ Contributive-Occasions. The third pattern of learning is that of contributive-occasions. These occasions are often the step after parallel learning. What is involved is a coming together of different age groups or classes for the purpose of sharing what has been learned or created previously. The joining or rejoining becomes a contributive-occasion where separated pieces to a whole are added together for everyone's benefit.

Contributive-occasions are more participatory than the other three patterns. If the contributions come from a previous period of parallel learning, the last part of that parallel learning would have been concerned with how to communicate acquired insights or behaviors to other age groups. By engaging "in mutual contribution" to one another, IG learners discover that the educational whole is great than the sum of its parts.

Interactive Sharing. Interactive sharing is the fourth major pattern in IGRE relationships. It is a distinctive style or way of learning. Here persons are provided with an opportunity for interpersonal exchange, which may involve experiences or thoughts or feelings or actions. At its best, interactive sharing facilitates a "crossing over" to hear and respond to another's perspective.

In an ideal IGRE program or event, all four of the patterns of relationships will be enacted. People come together and have an in-common experience. Then they break to separately investigate the common subject at a level appropriate for their highest learning abilities. They come back together to present their insights and work in a shared program. Finally, different generations interact with one another, giving and receiving in the exchanges. In the latter case the participants are sharing, reflecting, debating, and

dreaming from the side of the other but for their own edification. (White, 26-30)

With my colleagues at the Center for Ministry Development (Mariette Martineau, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber), we developed a model of intergenerational learning based on White's four patterns, which is being used by Catholic parishes in the Generations of Faith Project and in the intergenerational sessions for the *People of Faith* series (Harcourt Religion). In this model IG is designed around a four movement learning process.

Welcome, community building and opening prayer

- 1. An All-Ages Learning Experience for the whole assembly that introduces the theme or topic for the program.
- 2. **In-Depth Learning Experiences** that probe the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) or for specific age-groups (families with children or children-only, adolescents, young adults, and adults), and conducted in one of three formats:
 - Whole Group Format: learning in small groups with the whole group assembled in one room (age-specific or all ages small groups);
 - Age Group Format: learning in separate, parallel groups organized by ages;
 - Learning Activity Center Format: learning at self-directed or facilitated activity centers (age-specific and/or all ages learning centers).
- 3. An All-Ages Contributive Learning
 Experience in which each generation teaches
 the other generations.
- 4. **Reflection** on the learning experience and interactive group sharing.

Closing prayer

Best Practices in Lifelong Faith Formation

As we have noted there is very little research on intergenerational faith formation. The best practice findings rely primarily on the *Generations of Faith Research Study* conducted in the Spring of 2005 by the Center for Ministry Development. The Center staff conducted a qualitative research study, using focus groups and in-depth interviews, of almost 100 parishes in eight dioceses across the U.S. who were participating in the Generations of Faith Project. Each parish in the study was conducting

intergenerational learning programs monthly or seasonally.

The findings from this study were then used to develop a quantitative survey involving over 400 parishes across the U.S. and Canada who were participating in the Generations of Faith Project. (A summary report of the findings is available online at www.lifelongfaith.com.)

Best Practice I. Intergenerational faith formation strengthens and creates new relationships and increases participation in church life.

The Generations of Faith Research Study (qualitative and quantitative research) found that the practice of intergenerational learning promotes relationship building and participation in church life. Specifically the study found:

- Intergenerational relationships are created as people of all ages learn from each other and grow in faith together.
- Intergenerational learning strengthens the faith community through relationship building and participation in church life; people take time to talk and share with each other.
- Participation in intergenerational learning leads to greater involvement in church life, including Sunday liturgy, church events, and church ministries.

The survey of 434 Catholic parishes asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Families benefit from intergenerational	4.06
learning through opportunities to pray,	
learn, and be together. Families are growing	
in ways that they share faith.	
Intergenerational learning strengthens the	4.0
parish community through relationship	
building and participation in parish life;	
people take time to talk and share with	
each other.	
Our parish is reaching new audiences, such	3.76
as adults and whole families, through	
intergenerational learning.	
Intergenerational relationships are created	3.73
through intergenerational learning, as	
people of all ages learn from each other and	
grow in faith together.	

Participation in GOF learning programs leads to greater involvement of participants in parish life, including Sunday Mass, sacraments, service projects, and in the ministries of the parish.

Holly Catterton Allen's research on an intergenerational small group model reinforces this finding. She writes,

Children who regularly participate in IG small groups have special opportunities for spiritual development. In a sense, they gain an extended family that is otherwise unavailable to most children today; they gain spiritual "aunts" and "uncles," "grandparents," and "cousins." They also see other role models for parenting. More importantly they participate in the spiritual lives of their parents. They learn the spiritual disciplines by watching and doing. They learn to share as they see their parents and others share their lives. They see others minister to one another and they begin to minister. They see their parents and others pray for concerns in their lives and they too begin to pray. (Allen, 270)

James White also reinforces this finding when he reports on the reflections of leaders from a church that had conducted intergenerational learning for ten years. He writes,

With the group of IG educators at All Saints, whom I called together for a ten-year evaluation, there was a strong sense among these people that the church had indeed become more of a community with wholeness. Several felt the IG programs over the years had "shot the magic bullet" which made us one across the ages. (White, 239)

The Effective Christian Education Study (The Teaching Church, 1993) also found that intergenerational contact helps young people grow in their faith. The study suggests several reasons for this:

- First, contact with older adults is more likely to give young people mentors with mature faith. This maturity can have a positive influence on teenagers' growth in faith.
- Second, it builds for young people a sense of community in the congregation. As young people get to know people of all ages, they feel more comfortable in the church and more like part of the family of God.

- Third, intergenerational contact can build mutual respect among the generations. As older adults get to know the youth, they will be less suspicious about innovations in the youth program. And as a result, the congregation as a whole is more likely to support youth education.
- Finally, intergenerational education is another way to build shared experiences for youth and parents, which can open doors for formal and informal faith conversations at home. Discovering ways to make intergenerational interaction beneficial for all generations can have a significant impact on young people's faith maturity, as well as on the life of the church (Roehlkepartain 1993, 145-46).

The Generations of Faith Research Study provides further insights on Best Practice 1 through the quotes of church leaders (pastors, religious education coordinators, youth ministry coordinators, et al.) involved in the qualitative study.

Relationship Building

I found in intergenerational learning a chance to find belonging, a sense of community, a sense of value and worth in a way that I can contribute to, and then just getting to know people of all ages in my community. As a newcomer it has been a wonderful experience

The older couples, they just talk to the kids. It's like a grandparent taking them on because their own grandparents aren't close. So it's very good to see that everybody is involved. Everybody feels comfortable being involved.

One of the changes I saw from the program is the relationship that now even the youngest children in this parish have with our senior citizens, which they did not have before because they were all in their isolated groups. I think this shows great respect for who our elders are, and that's why our first program was on the role of the elders.

We are so pleased to see all ages sitting and eating and conversing with one another. Parishioners who have never met are forging friendships and looking forward to seeing each other the following month. Confirmation students are doing most of their service hours during the sessions, and the parishioners notice it. Adults seem to really be interested in the sessions.

It's faith sharing. It's building community. It's bringing people together. It's opening doors. And they don't sit there in silence. They chatter all the time and they're happy to be there.

It's been a great way for our parish family to grow closer together by learning from each other. The adults seem to enjoy the interaction with the young people in our parish. It's hard to get everyone to break away from the meal segment to start the program! They are really enjoying just being together, and that is a gift.

The biggest thing that I see is community, community, community. You can see Church happening within the group, and you can see a mentoring that is unbelievable.

I see more people talking to each other after Mass or spending time together. As staff, we recognize people and they recognize us. It's just building relationships and community within a parish.

Involvement in Church Life

There has been an increase in liturgical attendance, and more families are volunteering to do faith formation together. The marginalized in the parish feel invited, and watching them grow has been wonderful.

More people are coming to intergenerational learning who I haven't seen at Mass before. They're participating more and seeing faith as more than just Sunday morning Mass.

We have seen such an increase in participation at church events. An unbelievable number of people came to participate in the Holy Thursday service, and that carried through to this year. Extremely well-attended.

Best Practice 2. Intergenerational faith formation engages all ages and the whole family in learning together.

The Generations of Faith Research Study found that intergenerational learning did, in fact, bring together people of all ages, including families, for learning. In particular many churches found that parents and adults began participating in faith formation because of intergenerational learning. Specifically the study found:

- There is involvement of all ages and generations in learning together: parents and children, teens, young adults, adults, older adults, and whole families.
- Intergenerational learning addresses a hunger that adults have to learn more about their faith and fill in the gaps in their formation. More middle-age and older adults are participating in faith formation.
- Families enjoy opportunities to pray, learn, and be together. Families are growing in the ways that they share faith. Parents are

participating in a learning program with their children, often for the first time, and are finding benefits in learning together as a family.

The survey asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Families benefit from intergenerational	4.06
learning through opportunities to pray,	
learn, and be together. Families are growing	
in ways that they share faith.	
Intergenerational learning addresses a	3.97
hunger that adults have to learn more about	
their faith.	
Families are growing in faith and developing	3.92
ways to share their faith through	
intergenerational learning.	
Our parish is reaching new audiences, such	3.76
as adults and whole families, through	
intergenerational learning.	
There has been an increase in the number of	3.57
adults participating in faith formation	
because of intergenerational learning.	

Quotes from church leaders involved in the *Generations of Faith Research Study* provide further insight into Best Practice 2.

All Ages

I see a great strength as bringing all age groups together to learn about their faith. That's been a real change for our people, and they are responding.

It's really helped me to appreciate the wisdom of our seniors, the energy and faithfulness and spirit of our children, the hunger of our parents, and the questioning of our young adults. We bring all that together in a community setting, and allow them to minister to each other and to help each other grow, and then bring it home with them.

Adult Involvement

I think the biggest change is that we have adults who are excited to come and learn and grow in their faith. And not just a few, but we have many adults who didn't have the opportunity before to participate and grow in their faith. That's very exciting.

We try to challenge adults—to stretch them a bit, even with the simplest things they may be ignorant of. There is a vast need for religious formation and education out there. I think there's just a hunger for spirituality out there. I think people are looking for something and we're filling in that gap.

Family Involvement

What gives me hope is that I see families being transformed, that we're empowering people to talk about their faith in a whole different way.

For the families who have participated, their lives have changed: their relationship with one another, their relationship with God, and their relationship with the church—total transformation.

I think another big change has been that we've empowered parents to pass on the faith to their children. We've done that in a way in which we are teaching them about their faith and they're learning, so that when they get into the car and drive home they can share the topic with their kids. They know what they are talking about and they feel empowered because they're able to do what they promised at Baptism; that is, to pass their faith on to the children.

With the parents there, the whole family can participate and have something to talk about based on the subject presented at the learning session.

This is what we've been looking for: bringing families together to do this and to be involved together instead of fracturing them into different components.

I know one of the things they love about it is that they get to do this as a family. They say "I liked being together with my family."

Best Practice 3. Intergenerational faith formation creates a conducive environment for all ages to learn, and utilizes a variety of learning activities to address the diversity of learning styles and developmental needs.

The Generations of Faith Research Study found that intergenerational learning creates a learning environment—one of warmth, trust, acceptance, and care—conducive to all ages, that promotes group participation, activities, and discussion.

Intergenerational learning programs incorporate a variety of experiential, multi-sensory, and interactive learning experiences to foster all-ages learning, as well address the developmental needs and abilities of the different age groups. Specifically the study found:

- Intergenerational learning creates an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.
- Intergenerational learning engages the participants in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multi-sensory, and interactive. Faith sharing and personal experience are an important element of intergenerational learning.
- Intergenerational learning is exciting; the enthusiasm, joy, and energy are attractive and contagious.

The Generations of Faith survey asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Intergenerational learning engages participants in a variety of learning activities that are experiential, multisensory, interactive, and involve faith sharing.	4.26
Intergenerational learning provides an environment in which participants feel safe to learn, ask questions, and grow in faith on a deeper level.	3.98

The survey also asked parish leaders to rate the effectiveness of intergenerational learning using a rating from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

How would <u>adults</u> rate the overall	3.95
quality and experience of the	
intergenerational learning programs?	
How would <u>families with children</u> rate	3.84
the overall quality and experience of the	
intergenerational learning programs?	
How would middle school and high	3.06
school youth rate the overall quality and	
experience of intergenerational learning	
programs?	

The Effective Christian Education Study found that, in order for intergenerational learning to be effective, it must allow for differences in development and abilities. Experiential learning is often most appropriate since it begins with a shared experience in which all can participate. (Roehlkepartain 1993, 146)

Allan G. Harkness' (1998) review of the impact of intergenerational learning reinforces this finding when he writes about the factors that enhance intergenerational involvement. People of different ages and temperaments learn best in a variety of ways, and identifies factors that encourage greater enjoyment and involvement by people of all ages in IG events:

- Build in variety: Plan for a variety of experiences to provide a means for both exploring and responding. Variety may be in the range of teaching/learning experiences used, whether people respond together or individually, the choice of music, how the Bible is used, a balance of silence and sound, cognitive and affective focus, and so on.
- **Encourage participation:** The active involvement of all participants is important, while at the same time ensuring that people are not coerced into situations in which they feel too high a level of discomfort. There will need to be a balance between activities based on cognitive/abstract thought processes on one hand and affective/"concrete" processes on the other. Plan also throughout each program for meaningful, nonthreatening interaction between people across the generational barriers. A key to enjoyable participation is providing a balance of activities, for while movement and action are especially important for some age groups, and stillness and quiet reflection provide significant learning environments for others, there is potential for all to learn by drawing on the strengths of approaches they are less familiar with.
- Each of our senses can provide a means of experiencing the world and so encourage "whole of life" learning. Children do this with intuitive ease, but older people can be helped to reverse their conditioning and rediscover that learning consistent with the quality of life we seek to bring to spiritual growth can be enhanced if more than one of the senses is engaged; this process is often easier in a relaxed intergenerational context. Thus sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell can all be used to good effect. (Harkness 1998, 443-444)

Intergenerational learning incorporates a variety of methods and approaches that actively engage people in the learning process and respond to their different learning styles. Specifically, intergenerational learning programs:

- Incorporate real-life application of learning by engaging people in the life of the community and helping people apply their learning to daily living as Christians. During the sessions participants experience new ways to practice their faith that promote the transfer of learning from the session to their daily lives as individuals and families.
- Utilize participants' experience and prior knowledge. Participants bring relevant religious knowledge and experiences to the session. Participants need the opportunity to build on their knowledge, as well as to learn from each other.
- Respect the variety of learning styles among the participants with a diversity of learning experiences, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, hands-on, concrete experiences, some through reflective observation, some through an exploration and analysis of knowledge, theories, and concepts, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices. (For further information see: Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development, by David Kolb. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984.)
- Recognize the multiple intelligences (linguistic, spatial, musical, logical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist) among the participants, and design learning methods and activities that address the variety of intelligences in the group. (For further information see the work of Howard Gardner and the book 7 Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Many Intelligences, revised edition, by Thomas Armstrong. New York: Plume Books, 1999.)

Quotes from church leaders involved in the *Generations of Faith Research Study* provide further insight into Best Practice 3.

Environment

I think adults are seeing that it's OK to continue their learning. It's OK not to know everything. This is a safe environment for them to come in and share and listen. I think this environment has made it more welcoming and comfortable for some people to continue exploring their faith.

One by one they came up and they just shared the faith in their lives in an amazing way. They just got it! That there was a sharing, there was a trust; when we broke, people weren't talking about the weather, they were talking about faith.

One of the reasons I love intergenerational learning is because it's a very non-threatening environment in which to get updated, with the result that people begin sharing faith more in their homes.

When the adults met together the sharing was phenomenal. It was people, one-on-one, just opening up and really sharing. They also expressed a desire for more.

Learning

I've seen a change in adults, from simply memorizing their faith to understanding their faith. They have a deep desire to understand more than just what is in the catechism, and they want to know "Why?": "Why are we doing this?" "Why is this so important to us?" I think people are grasping the fact that it's OK to question their faith—that, I believe, is the key to understanding it. And that's one of the things I reiterate constantly: it's all right to question.

It's experiential. People are doing something: they're singing, they're praying, they're watching an event. It's happening in their midst, around them; it's not all up on the stage. It's very interactive.

We had four people get up and give witness to their experience of having celebrated the sacrament. It was powerful and amazing, just four regular people of different generations.

It was more exciting that just being in the regular classroom, and I think the kids are a little more excited with the activities and the skits and some of the fun things we do in the beginning.

For me, it's the excitement and the energy of the people that come to intergenerational learning and the interaction we have with them. I look forward to that energy and enthusiasm.

You really experience enthusiasm that's significantly noticeable, a real positive atmosphere that was contagious, a real excitement; people are charged. I think they feel really excited about it.

Best Practice 4. Intergenerational faith formation requires a diversity of leaders who embrace a collaborative and empowering style of leadership.

The Generations of Faith Research Study found that the practice of intergenerational learning requires a collaborative and empowering style of leadership. This style of leadership needs to be exercised not just by the pastor or religious education coordinator but also by the entire leadership team for intergenerational learning. Teamwork and collaboration are essential for effective planning and implementation of intergenerational learning. Specifically the study found:

- Intergenerational learning requires a coordinator who fully understands the vision and can work with others to implement it.
- Intergenerational learning requires a team approach, leadership teams with a shared vision for implementation and that practice teamwork and collaboration.
- Intergenerational learning requires committed volunteer leaders who are engaged in a variety of roles in lifelong faith formation: planning, teaching, organizing, and supporting.
- Intergenerational learning requires volunteer leaders who are empowered and trusted to take responsibility for key aspects of the implementation of lifelong faith formation.
- Through their participation as leaders in intergenerational learning, leaders feel closer to God, and grow in their knowledge of the faith and their confidence in sharing it with others.

The intergenerational learning team includes people who are directly involved in the organization and facilitation of intergenerational learning, and people who will be involved in administrative and support roles. A typical intergenerational learning program will involve a variety of leaders, including:

- 1. An intergenerational program facilitator
- Teachers/facilitators for age-appropriate learning groups: families with children or children only, adolescents, young adults, and adults
- 3. Table group facilitators for age-appropriate learning groups, where necessary
- 4. Assistants to help with activities
- 5. Prayer leaders for opening and closing prayer
- 6. Music leader and/or music team for prayer and activities
- 7. Hospitality team

- 8. Set-up and clean-up team
- 9. Food preparation team
- 10. Creative arts people
- 11. Promotion and registration staff

The survey asked parish leaders to rate the impact of intergenerational learning by indicating the parish's degree of agreement with each statement (rating: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Through their involvement in	4.21
intergenerational learning, volunteer	
leaders grow in their knowledge of the faith	
and their sharing it with others.	
Leadership teams share a common vision	4.17
for intergenerational learning and its	
implementation in the parish.	
Through their involvement in	3.92
intergenerational learning, volunteer	
leaders feel closer to God.	

The survey also asked parish leaders to rate the effectiveness of intergenerational learning using a rating from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

How would you rate the quality of	3.87
collaboration and teamwork among the	
GOF leadership teams?	
How would you rate your parish's efforts in	3.37
equipping (training, resources) leaders for	
their roles in GOF and trusting them to	
take responsibility for GOF?	
How your rate your parish's efforts in	3.10
developing a variety of leaders necessary for	
the effective implementation of GOF?	

Quotes from church leaders involved in the Generations of Faith Research Study provide further insight into Best Practice 4.

Coordinator

We were fortunate to have a person who spearheaded the whole thing, who coordinated everything, a person who had the vision, understood the process and what was involved, and was able to pull people together, keep them on track, and keep it moving forward. I think that was a great, great plus.

I have to say a big part of the success of the program has been the coordinator's leadership and her understanding of the curriculum. She was always there. It seemed like her whole ten years of experience kind of built her up for this, so it was really, really, helpful.

The coordinator has a lot of competency and experience. She's very personable. She deals with people first. She has a theological background; it's nice to have someone oversee things who has a good spirit about it.

Teamwork

It's been a wonderful affirmation for me personally and professionally of collaborative ministry, and how alive and powerful that can be.

One of the things that certainly impressed me was the fact that we had a team that came together to plan for the event and the celebration. Some of these people would not have ever seen themselves as being creative or having any good ideas. All of a sudden around a table they began to think together, and we came up with some really nice ideas. There was a real spirited collaboration happening.

Committed Volunteer Leaders

I think there's a real sense of teamwork and confidence in one another.

We're getting more volunteers, people stepping forward to help. We have volunteers from the edges stepping in, people who've never offered to help. It's a different spirit than before.

I don't think we could have thought about doing this process if we weren't aware of the quality of people we have. This parish is blessed in having many talented and eager people who have had some very positive experiences and the gift of being able to share; this was there beforehand. We have some great sources to draw from.

Leaders Growing Spiritually

God is here when these people are here. You can feel his presence. It's beautiful being involved with it, and very rewarding.

I think the Holy Spirit has been a part of our parish and been involved in this program; that is really what has made it happen.

It keeps me fresh, it invigorates me, it gives me life. I love it.

It's probably helped me be stronger in my faith. I've gained a lot more knowledge about Catholicism.

I think it pushes you to develop a deeper understanding of things. When I gave a presentation, I looked at the materials and used them, but I wanted more. I wanted to give more because I wanted them to understand more.

My faith has just blossomed.

Conclusion

Intergenerational learning provides a new model of learning that produces important benefits for individuals, families, and the whole community. There is a need for more research into the best practices in intergenerational learning. This research needs to happen together with new congregational initiatives in intergenerational learning, and new resources to support congregations. There is a foundation to build upon.

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Practice Ideas

Designing Intergenerational Faith Formation

Welcoming Participants Meal

Depending on the time of day, a meal begins the program. Use the meal time to introduce people into the theme of the learning program, build community among the participants, do table activities (especially for children) or model at-home practices, such as prayer or a table ritual.

Part I. Gathering and Opening Prayer

Welcome people to the program, provide an overview, and lead the opening prayer service.

Part 2. All-Ages Learning Experience

Conduct an All-Ages Learning Experience to introduce the whole assembly to the theme/content of the program. Select or design learning activities that will engage all ages. Examples of all-ages learning activities include:

- ritual or extended prayer service
- dramatic presentation of a Scripture passage or real life story
- storytelling or retelling a Scripture passage with contemporary examples
- witness presentations by church members (of all ages)
- learning games or TV game show formats
- film or media presentation using art/photos and music
- table group activity and discussion in intergenerational, family and/or agegroups.

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experience

Conduct learning activities that explore the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) or for specific age-groups (families with children or children-only, adolescents, young adults, and adults), and developed in one of three formats.

- 1. Whole Group Format: learning in small groups with the whole group assembled in one room in one of two ways:
 - age-specific groupings
 - intergenerational groupings
- 2. Learning Activity Center Format: learning at self-directed or facilitated activity centers targeted to specific age groups, or organized by family and/or all age:
 - age-specific learning centers
 - family-centered learning centers
 - intergenerational learning centers
- 3. **Age Group Format:** learning in separate, parallel groups organized by ages:
 - pre-school children <u>or</u> parents with young children (ages 3-5)
 - parents with children (grades 1-5)
 - young adolescents (middle school)
 - older adolescents (high school)
 - young adults
 - adults

Part 4. All-Ages Contributive Learning

(Sharing Reflections and Home Application)

Determine what each participants will bring back from their In-Depth Learning Experience to share/teach the whole assembly or their small group. This can include reports from each age group, presentation of a project or skit, small group sharing, and so on.

After the presentations, engage small groups in sharing reflections on the learning experience.

Explain the home resources that will extend the learning from the session and demonstrate how people can use them in their daily lives.

Part 5. Closing Prayer

Practice Ideas

Examples: Intergenerational Programs on Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ, Son of God Intergenerational Program

(From "Jesus, Son of God" in *Professing Our Faith*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Religion, 2006)

Theme: Divinity of Christ Format: Intergenerational Activity Centers

Part I. Gathering and Opening Prayer

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Who Do You Say That I Am?

 Conduct the learning activity to help participants name who Jesus is for them.

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experience: Experiencing the Son of God through Gospel Stories

- 1. The focus of the activity centers is to discover the qualities of God by exploring a variety of Gospel stories that present the words and actions of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
- 2. Each learning activity center provides an interactive and experiential way for people to explore one aspect of Jesus' divinity through Gospel stories.
- 3. Activity centers will engage participants in presentations, discussions, and activities. Several centers include dramatic presentations, while others engage participants in creative arts or prayer or a ritual activity. One center includes a film presentation. There is even one that includes eating. If the children get tired, there is a storytelling center just for them.
- 4. Each center is staffed by a team who guides participants through the learning activities.
- 5. Each center is designed for all ages, participants can select the centers that interest them the most. Families with children stay together.

Activity Centers

- 1. Jesus is Born (Infancy Narratives)
- 2. Jesus is God's Beloved Son (Baptism of the Lord and Transfiguration)
- 3. Jesus Teaches Parables of the Kingdom of God
- 4. Jesus Heals People
- 5. Jesus Forgives Sin
- 6. Jesus Raises People from the Dead
- 7. Jesus Feeds People
- 8. Stories of Jesus (Storytelling Center)

Part 4. Sharing Learning Experiences and Home Application

Part 5. Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, Death and Resurrection Intergenerational Program

(From: "Jesus Christ, Death and Resurrection" in Professing Our Faith, Orlando: Harcourt Religion, 2006)

Theme: Paschal Mystery Format: Whole Group

Part I. Gathering and Opening Prayer

 People are organized into intergenerational table groups for the whole program

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Triduum Quiz

• Test everyone's knowledge of the Triduum through an activity that matches symbols, ritual actions, and events from the Lectionary readings with the correct Triduum liturgy.

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experience A. Guided Tour of Holy Thursday

- Present the Gospel story of the Last Supper from Matthew, Mark, or Luke in word, drama, and/or visuals (artwork or the film, Jesus of Nazareth).
- Guide people in reflecting on the story. Provide commentary on the reading.
- Celebrate a table ritual modeled on the Last Supper.
- Present the Gospel story of the Last Supper from John in word, drama, and/or visuals.
- Guide people in reflecting on the story. Provide commentary on the reading.
- Celebrate a table ritual modeled on the washing of feet with people washing each other's hands.

B. Guided Tour of Good Friday

- Present Gospel excerpts of the Passion of Christ in word, drama, and/or visuals.
- Guide people in reflecting on the Passion; provide commentary.
- Explain intercessory prayer and pray together intercessions modeled on the Good Friday liturgy.

- Explain the tradition of the veneration of the cross and process with the cross in the meeting room while people pray and sing.
- Guide people in making their own cross for their home.

C. Guided Tour of the Easter Vigil

- Provide a brief overview of the major elements of the Easter Vigil liturgy.
- Celebrate a Service of Light modeled on the Easter Vigil. Use the prayers from the Easter Vigil liturgy. Lead the group through the ritual and explanation of the symbols on the Easter Candle. Light individual candles and sing an appropriate song.
- Present selected Lectionary readings with accompanying prayers from the Easter Vigil liturgy, for example: Genesis 1:1—2:2, Exodus 14:15—15:1 (consider showing the crossing of the Red Sea scene from *The Prince of Egypt*), Romans 6:3-11, and the Gospel reading from the current liturgical year in word, drama, dramatic reading with visuals, or film (*Jesus of Nazareth*).
- Introduce the sacrament of Baptism as central to the Easter Vigil liturgy and to how your church initiates new members every Easter. Guide people through the initiation rite: pray a short version of the Litany of the Saints, bless the bottles of water at each table, explain the celebration of Baptism and Confirmation, renew the baptismal profession of faith, sprinkle the people with holy water, and sing an appropriate song.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Experiences and Home Application

Part 5. Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, Resurrection & New Life Intergenerational Program

("New Life in Christ" in *Following Jesus*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Religion, 2005)

Theme: New Life in Christ Format: Age Group

Part I. Gathering

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Scenes from the Easter Season—Prayer Experience

 Lead a prayer service focusing on the impact of the resurrection on the disciples and their conversion and commitment to Jesus. The prayer service incorporates scenes from the Easter Season Lectionary using a freeze-frame approach to dramatizing the scenes. Create the props for each scene and ask the actors to dress for their parts in the stories. For each Gospel reading: present the freeze-action, read the Gospel, and respond in prayer.

- Scene 1. Empty Tomb: Matthew 28:1-10
- Scene 2. Closed Doors: John 20:19-31
- Scene 3. Eating: John 21:9-17, 19
- Scene 4. Commissioning: Matthew 28:16-20

Part 3. In-Depth Learning Experience

• Families with Children

- Part 1. Read and discuss each of the four Easter Gospel stories.
- Part 2. Create an Easter Banner with key Scripture verses from the Easter readings, Easter symbols, and ideas for living the Easter season.
- Part 3. Decorate a Family Easter Candle for the table at home with symbols of the Easter season and short prayers for the family meal.

• Adolescents

- Part 1. Adolescents explore the Gospel readings of the Easter Season and discuss theological reflections on the readings.
- Part 2. Adolescents are engaged in one or more creative activities to bring the meaning of resurrection alive for them through a magazine story, a television report, a presentation, an advertisement, top ten list of reasons we know Jesus rose from the dead, and/or a debate on the importance of the resurrection.
- Part 3. Learning activity on the Emmaus Story

Adults

- Part 1. Adults reflect on their own understanding of the resurrection, and explore and discuss Christian tradition and theological reflections on the significance of the resurrection for their faith.
- Part 2. Adults explore the meaning of the Emmaus Story and use the story to reflect on their own relationship with Jesus.
- Part 3. Adults develop ways they can live the Easter season in their lives.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Experiences and Home Application

Part 5. Closing Prayer



Best Practices in Family Faith Formation

John Roberto

s church leaders and educators, we all recognize that the family is the first community of faith and the most powerful influence on the faith of children and teenagers. We also recognize that parents are the first educators of their children, providing the foundation for a spiritual and religious life. We know that the family needs to be a vital part of the process of lifelong faith formation at all stages of faith development, and that parents need help to assume their roles in fostering faith and a deeper spirituality within their homes. We are aware of the tremendous changes family life has undergone in the past forty years, and the present day diversity in family forms and structures.

We know that families are stretched and stressed in new and challenging ways, putting new demands on family life and congregational ministry. We know that family time and shared family activities, such as the daily meal, have suffered because of work demands, busy schedules, and a rise in individual activities. We are sadly aware of the decline in family religious practice at home and participation in the life of the congregation. Busy schedules often push religious activities—at home or in church—off the calendar. We also know that parents increasingly feel ill prepared for the task of sharing religious traditions with their children.

Unfortunately many congregations have contributed to the situation by over-emphasizing age-segregated programming, which further divides families, and over-programming family members. Oftentimes there is little to no programming that engages the entire family as a family, or that empowers and equips parents for their task as the primary religious teachers of their children and teens. Sadly, many churches blame parents for the situation or have given up on families, "because they don't come to Sunday worship or the programs we offer, so why bother."

This article seeks to provide church leaders and educators with a review of the literature on family faith practices and their implications for congregational ministry. The research studies we have consulted explored family faith practice among religiously committed families. These studies will help us answer five questions.

- 1. How does family religious involvement benefit children, teens, and adults, and strengthen the family?
- 2. What is the impact of parental faith on children and teens?
- 3. How do families practice their faith at home?
- 4. What are the core family faith practices?
- 5. How can congregations engage in family faith formation?

I. How does family religious involvement benefit children, teens, and adults, and strengthen the family?

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that a family's religious involvement directly benefits children, teens, and adults in a variety of very significant ways. In their survey of the research literature, David Dollahite and Jennifer Thatcher found the following benefits of a family's religious involvement:

- Divorce rates are lower and marital satisfaction and quality scores highest among religiously involved couples.
- Religious practices are linked with family satisfaction, closer father-child relationships, and closer parent-child relationships.
- There is less domestic violence among more religious couples, and religious parents are less likely to abuse or yell at their children.
- Religious involvement promotes involved and responsible fathering and is associated with more involved mothering.
- Greater religiosity in parents and youth is associated with a variety of protective factors for adolescents. Adolescent religiosity is inversely related with many high-risk behaviors, all of which have potential to greatly influence the adolescents' current and future family relationship.

They conclude, "Since many studies now show the beneficial consequences of religious belief, practice, and community support on health, mental health, and relationships, it appears that one of the most important things parents can do for their children is spiritual and religious experience and community" (Dollahite and Thatcher, 10)

Impact of Family Religiosity

The Effective Christian Education Study by the Search Institute found that family religiousness was the most important factor in faith maturity.

Of the two strongest connections to faith maturity, family religiousness is slightly more important than lifetime exposure to Christian education. The particular family experiences that are most tied to greater faith maturity are the frequency with which an adolescent talked with mother and faith about faith, the frequency

of family devotions, and the frequency with which parents and children together were involved in efforts, formal or informal, to help other people. Each of these family experiences is more powerful than frequency with which an adolescent sees his or her parents engage in religious behavior like church attendance. (Benson and Eklin, 38)

The *Effective Christian Education Study* found that families that express faith do the following things:

- often talk about religious faith;
- often have family devotions, prayer, or Bible reading at home; and
- often have family projects to help other people.

The study also found that youth in families that often express faith do the following things *twice* as often as those families that do not express faith:

- read the Bible and prayer when alone;
- read and study about the Christian faith;
- are spiritually moved by the beauty of God's creation; and
- have often felt God's presence in their life.

Youth in families where faith is often expressed by a parent in word and deed are three times more likely to participate in family projects to help others and twice as likely to spend time helping other people than youth from families that did not express faith. Search Institute surveys of 217,000 sixth- to twelfth-grade youth in public schools (1999-2000) found that youth who say their parents "spent lots of time helping others" are almost twice as likely themselves to serve others. Among young people whose parents model helping, 61 percent volunteer at least one hour per week. Among those whose parents do not model helping, only 36 percent volunteer. People who live lives of service, justice, and advocacy often point to early experiences in their family as being normative.

Families that express faith also have an impact on participation in church life and service activities. Twice as many youth in families that express faith are involved in a church youth group, go to church programs or events that include children and adults, go to church camp or work camp, and regard a religious faith as a very or most important influence in life. Their attendance at worship services is almost 20 percent higher than youth from families that never express faith.

It is evident that youth who are most likely to mature in faith are those raised in homes where faith is part of the normal ebb and flow of family life. The *Effective Christian Education Study* provides convincing evidence of the power present in the religious practices of a home. Religious practices in

the home virtually *double* the probability of a congregation's youth entering into the life and mission of Christ's church.

Robert Wuthnow's research and analysis confirms the importance of family religiosity.

With statistical evidence, it is also possible to sort out the kinds of religious socialization that may have the strongest consequences for the behavior of adults. It might be expected that participating in a religious organization as a child would influence attendance at religious services as an adult most strongly, and to some extent this is true. People who were sent to Sunday school as children attend services more often as adults than those who were not sent. Yet it is religious training in the home that appears to matter most: family devotions as a child is the best predictor of adult attendance, followed by seeing one's parents read the Bible at home, and after that, by parents having read the Bible to the child. Saying table grace has a relatively weak effect on adult attendance, as does being sent to Sunday school. (Wuthnow 1996)

James Davidson and his colleagues have conducted research on Catholic generations every six years since 1987. In their 1997 book, *The Search for Common Ground*, they confirmed that the factor with the most impact on Catholics' religious beliefs and practices is childhood religiosity. "By childhood religiosity we mean the extent to which youngsters are subjectively and behaviorally involved in the Church. Subjective involvement refers to the salience they attach to religion (i.e., religion's importance in their lives). Behavioral involvement points to their participation in devotional activities such as prayer, and public rituals such as attendance at Mass."

Davidson and his colleagues identified the following influences of childhood religiosity.

- Childhood religiosity affects closeness to God.
 The more people learn to be religious as children, the more likely they are to report experiences of the holy later in life. In other words, the way young people are raised has long-term effects on their ability to experience God in their adult years.
- Childhood religiosity also fosters commitment to the Church. Catholics who learn to be religious when they are young find it relatively easy to claim their Catholic identity. They also come to appreciate the benefits of being Catholic.
- The more children participate in religious activities and develop a sense that religion is

- an important part of their lives, the more they are likely to have close personal relationships with God later in life and the more they are likely to learn about major developments such as Vatican II, both of which foster adherence to Church teaching. Childhood religiosity promotes Catholic identity and investment in the Church, which also make significant contributions to faith and morals. Early childhood religiosity does not guarantee faithfulness later on, but it sure improves the odds.
- The two most important influences on childhood religiosity are having parents who talked about religion and having religious educators and catechists who are effective in ministry. Young people learn how to be religious when their parents talk with them about religion and when they receive guidance from instructors who know how to nurture religiosity.

It seems that remaining active in one's childhood church is more attractive to those with strong family connections. Davidson and his colleagues conclude that if church leaders want to shape Catholics' views of faith and morals, they need to pay special attention to influences that take place very early in people's lives.

2. What is the impact of parental faith on children and teens?

One of the most significant and startling findings in the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) is the impact of parental faith and religiosity on the beliefs and practices of teenagers. Christian Smith writes, "Parents for whom religious faith is quite important are thus likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is quite important, while parents whose faith is not important are likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is also not important. The fit is not perfect. None of this is guaranteed or determined, and sometimes, in specific instances, things turn out otherwise. But the overall positive association is clean." (Smith, 57) Specifically NSYR found:

 Of parents who report that their faith is extremely important in their daily lives, 67 percent of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens

- report that faith is not very or not important in their lives.
- Of parents for whom faith is somewhat important in their daily lives, 61 percent of their teens also report that faith is somewhat or not at all important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens report that faith is extremely important in their lives.
- Of parents for whom faith is not at all important, 47 percent of their teens also report that religious faith is not at all important or not very important in their lives; only 2 percent report that faith is extremely important in their lives.
- In sum, therefore, we think that the best general rule of thumb is this: "We'll get what we are" (emphasis added). By normal processes of socialization, and unless other significant forces intervene, more than what parents might say they want as religious outcomes of their children, most parents most likely will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves are. (Smith, 57)

The importance of parental faith and practice on the lives of children and teens is clear. Smith concludes by saying:

Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misconceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents (emphasis added). Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives....the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents do look like. Parents and other adults most likely "will get what they are." This recognition may be empowering to parents, or alarming, or both. But it is a fact worth taking seriously in any case. (Smith, 261)

The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities (Smith, 267).

3. How do families practice their faith at home?

In his study *Growing Up Religious*, Robert Wuthnow explored the religious journeys of people who grew up religious and the role of the family.

Effective religious socialization comes about through embedded practices; that is, through specific, deliberate religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habits of family routines, of eating and sleeping, of having conversations, of adorning spaces in which people live, of celebrating the holidays, and of being part of a community. Compared with these practices, the formal teachings of religious leaders often pale in significance. Yet when such practices are present, formal teachings also become more important. (Wuthnow, xxxi-ii)

The prime source of faith for self-described "religious" people was the way faith permeated the daily life of their family. Time and again the people Wuthnow interviewed pointed to variations on several common family activities. "The daily household routine was marked by rituals of prayer, by conversations about God, and by sacred objects. Holidays provided special occasions for experiencing the warmth of family, friends, and fellow congregants. And going to services became the focal point of arduous preparations and one's public identity with the assembly of God's people." (Wuthnow, xl)

Several common in-home family activities continually surfaced in his research:

- eating together, especially the power of Sunday meals and holidays;
- praying: bedtime rituals and prayer, grace before meals, family Seder;
- having family conversations;
- displaying sacred objects and religious images, especially the Bible;
- celebrating holidays;
- providing moral instruction; and
- engaging in family devotions and reading the Bible.

Wuthnow found that spiritual practices were woven into the very fiber of people's being; it was a total immersion. For these people, being religious was a way of life. "The daily round of family activities must somehow be brought into the presence of God. Parents praying, families eating together, conversations focusing on what is proper and improper, and sacred artifacts are all important

ways in which family space is sacralized. They come together, forming an almost imperceptible mirage of experience." (Wuthnow, 8)

David Dollahite and Loren Marks have developed a research-based conceptual model that focuses on the processes at work in highly religious families as they strive to fulfill the sacred purposes suggested by their faith. Their model is based on an analysis of research studies and on their own ongoing research with 60 highly religious Jewish, Christian, and Muslim families. They discovered eight processes that families engage in as they seek to fulfill their sacred purposes by:

- 1. Turning to God for support, guidance and strength.
- Sanctifying the family by living religion at home
- Resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness.
- 4. Serving others in the family and faith community.
- Overcoming challenges and trials through shared faith.
- Abstaining from proscribed activities and substances.
- 7. Sacrificing time, money, comfort, and convenience for religious reasons.
- 8. Nurturing spiritual growth through example, teaching, and discussion, and encouraging spiritual development by teaching religious values. "Research, including our own, shows that parent teaching, example, and dialogue about religious matters are important predictors of whether children come to endorse the faith of their parents, a major sacred objective for most highly religious parents" (Dollahite and Marks, 537).

Diana R. Garland and Pamela A. Yankeelov conducted a research study on the family life of active Protestant church attenders by surveying 1977 people in 32 congregations in four denominations: National Baptists, Presbyterians (USA), Southern Baptists (SBC), and United Methodists. One part of the study examined faith practices, both individual and family. People were asked if the practice was important and if they actually lived the practice. The most important family faith activities were 1) caring for nature with the family, 2) daily chores and routines of family life, and 3) caring with the family for persons in need.

Garland and Yankeelov summarize their findings about family faith practice:

These church-attending families indicated that the worship and study experiences provided by the congregation and through private devotional lives are more central to their faith life than such experiences in the family. Nevertheless, three family activities ranked in the top seven as practices significant to the faith life of these respondents: "caring for nature with my family," "daily routines and chores of family life," and "caring with my family for persons in need." These families appear to be saying that the daily activities of family life are the canvas for experiencing and sharing their faith life with one another, and that activities that call them as a family beyond their own boundaries are also significant—the care of nature and care of others in need. (Garland and Yankeelov, 44)

Using the Church Census questionnaire, Diana R. Garland and Jo A. Edmonds surveyed 15 Baptist congregations with 3,393 attenders participating in the surveys and identified several key findings about family practice.

- The four most common activities engaged in on a *daily* basis with family were: 1) eat (74%), 2) prayer (54%), 3) forgive others (42%), and 4) encourage others (41%).
- The four most common activities engaged in on a weekly basis for families were: 1) worship (78%), 2) give money to church or charity (48%), 3) observe the Sabbath (56%), 4) do chores (31%), and 5) talk and listen to one another about deepest thoughts (32%).
- The four activities that families are most likely *never* to do together are: 1) study Christian doctrine (48%), 2) share the Christian story (29%), 3) study the Bible (26%), and 4) confess sins (24%).

4. What are the core family faith practices?

Research and pastoral practice point to a number of significant family faith practices that, consistently acted upon at home and nurtured and supported by congregations, would contribute to building families of faithful Christians and strengthening faith in daily life. In our review of research studies, we have seen a number of recurring themes. While each study used different language, there are a number of core family faith practices that appear in each study.

David Anderson and Paul Hill in Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation summarize much of the research on family faith practices in Four Keys: caring conversation, rituals and traditions, devotions, and service. The Youth and Family Institute uses the

Four Keys as the basis for helping congregations and families develop faith at home. To these Four Keys we will add one more family faith practice: the family meal.

As you read and utilize these insights, be sure to recognize that there is one overriding theme that is woven through all of the research: the integration faith and daily family life. To quote Diana Garland "the daily activities of family life are the canvas for experiencing and sharing their faith life with one another."

Core Practice I: Family Faith Conversations

Christian values and faith are passed on to the next generation through supportive conversation. Listening and responding to the daily concerns of family members make it easier to have meaningful conversations regarding the love of God, and are ways to express God's love to others. Hearing their parents "faith stories" is one of the most important influences on the faith of children and teenagers. "Caring conversations include more than simply telling our stories. At the heart of the communication recommended here is the sharing of faith, values, and the care of others. This can range from supportive listening, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with another, and simple praise and thanksgiving to challenging admonition, ethical discussions, and call to action on behalf of God's creatures and creation....The story of Jesus and our life stories are woven together as one fabric that brings forth endless variety of caring conversation." (Anderson and Hill, 112-113)

Core Practice 2: Family Devotions and Prayer

The Christian faith shapes the whole of our lives and involves a lifetime of study, reflection, and prayer. Family devotions and learning provide a way to learn more about the Bible and Christian tradition as a family, and apply the teachings to daily life as a follower of Jesus Christ. "... a devotional life is essentially a way of living in the world connected to the saving work and message of Jesus Christ, the intersection between the eternal and the mundane in a way that personalizes God's saving work and word. But one's devotional life is always connected to the larger body of Christ. This understanding of a devotional life includes, but is not limited to, public

worship, bedtime prayers, Bible reading and study, table grace, evening and morning prayers, and praying alone at any time of the day or night. All of these occasions are opportunities for the word of God to be "at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). (Anderson and Hill, 134)

Core Practice 3: Family Service

Engaging in service with one's family can be a powerful opportunity for growing in faith. Both children and adults are more likely to have a growing, strong faith when their family serves others together. "When parent and child/teen together perform service activities, the child/teen sees the parent's capability, faith, and values in action. The cross-generational bond takes place not only in the service event, but also in the retelling of the event through the years. . . . Most significantly, service is not merely a once a month outing....Service is the day-in and day-out lifestyle we lead that manifests the faith in us and involves our children in the faith. Parents and families can engage in this key every day. (Anderson and Hill, 151-152)

Core Practice 4: Family Rituals and Traditions

Families identify themselves and tell their family stories through daily routines, celebrations, and rituals. Rituals and traditions are those patterns of behavior that occur with regularity. They communicate meaning, values, and relationships that exist between people and with God (including God's created universe). Family rituals can take many forms from daily rituals such as mealtime, bedtime, leaving and returning; celebrations such as birthdays, anniversaries, and special achievements; church year rituals at home such as Advent and Lent; milestones such as births and deaths, first day of school and graduations, etc. Family rituals and traditions speak volumes about what the family values, believes and promotes, and how much the family values its faith. "Family rituals and tradition serve as a repository that preserves much of a family's history, beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams. ... All families, indeed all communities, have ritual words, gestures, actions, and traditions that are repeated periodically. The challenge for the church is to help families more consciously and meaningfully

participate in these significant rituals and traditions." (Anderson and Hill, 163)

Core Practice 5: Family Meal

Research has been accumulating demonstrating how eating together as a family five or more times a week is strongly linked to lower incidence of bad outcomes, such as teenage drug and alcohol use, and to good qualities like emotional stability, low levels of family stress, and good parent-child/teen relationships. Regularly eating together supports family members in staying more connected to their extended family, ethnic heritage, and community of faith. The things family members discuss at the supper table anchor children and teens more firmly in the world. The research is clear: regular family meals have a very positive impact on the family and its individual members. Good things can happen when family members gather together to eat.

So many of the family's faith practices happen around the family meal: having conversations, praying, reading the Bible, celebrating rituals and traditions, to name a few. The family meal is one of the few rituals that allow families to act out their concern for each other, and their need and desire to be together. The family meal is the time when family comes first, establishing, enjoying, and maintaining ties. Just as a meal was central to the ministry of Jesus, the family meal can be a central faith experience for family members, and the family as whole. It is a daily opportunity to discover Jesus' presence in the midst of family life.

5. How can congregations provide family faith formation?

How can congregations nurture the faith of families throughout life, and empower and equip them to learn and share the Christian faith, celebrate rituals and traditions, pray, serve others, and live their faith at home and in the world? How can congregations assist parents to develop the confidence, competence, and comfort to share the Christian faith with their children and teens? This concluding section offers congregations ideas and suggestions for making family faith formation central to their life and ministry.

Before we begin, Diana Garland and Pamela Yankeelov offer an important perspective, drawn from their research, that can be integrated into any congregational strategy. Congregations "can strengthen the faith of families less by trying to program it into their days as another activity (e.g., family worship) and more by a) helping them attend to, experience, and talk about faith as part of their daily family activities; and b) extend care beyond their own boundaries to others and to creation (Garland and Yankeelov, 44). This honors and respects the key insight from the research: the integration of faith and daily family life.

I. Make family faith formation a goal of congregational life and ministry.

The identification of the five core family faith practices, grounded in research on real families, points to an unmistakable conclusion: For the good of families and the whole Christian community, the church must provide opportunities to equip homes as centers of faith formation at every stage of life, and this needs to be a primary goal for congregational ministry. The five core practices provide the essential content and processes for nurturing the faith life of the home. These are five practices that congregations can incorporate into their life and ministry: worship, Christian education, Christian service, stewardship, evangelism, and other aspects of their corporate life. Congregations need to make family faith formation one focus of everything they do as a church community.

2. Utilize church ministries and programming to teach, model, and demonstrate family faith practices, and then provide the resources for families to live the practice at home.

There are multiple opportunities throughout the year where a congregation can add a "teaching and demonstration" activity to an existing ministry or program. This provides families with an *experience* of the family activity before they try it at home. It also develops the confidence and competence of the parent or adult, that he or she can lead the activity at home. Identify settings where the whole family is present or where you can gather parents while their children are engaged in other activities.

Weekly worship is an opportunity for families to experience prayer, a ritual, or insights into the Sunday Scripture readings—all of which can be extended into the home. Create or select home activities that will help families apply the Sunday Scripture to daily family living, prayers on a theme from worship, a ritual to enact at home, a symbol, family discussion questions, and so on. For example:

- On the Sunday when we hear about Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes, give each family a small loaf of bread with a table ritual/blessing for their Sunday meal.
- On the Sunday when we hear about the Rich Man and Lazarus, provide everyone with a reflection activity about the gospel, information about ways to help those in need—locally and globally—and/or an invitation to participate in a churchsponsored service project as a family.
- On the Sunday when we hear about the Prodigal Son, provide a family reconciliation ritual and a reconciliation prayer.

3. Build on practices families are already engaged in.

Garland and Edmonds suggest congregations would do well to strengthen practices that families already are engaged in, such as serving others in need, caring for the created world, offering hospitality, seeking more justice in the world, and stronger communities.

In other words, it is not in the areas where families are least engaged, but rather in the areas where they are *most* engaged in faith practices that they are asking for support—serving beyond their families, praying together, and talking with one another about the things that matter. These felt needs hold across the age groups, from teens to older adults. They also hold across families; even those who are most stressed by life circumstances want to be involved in meaningful ways in serving others and in caring for and seeking justice in the larger world. (Garland and Edmonds, 18-19)

4. Involve the whole family in congregational life, programs, and leadership roles.

Most ministry activities of congregations have involved persons as individuals, not as families. What is missing in current practice are more ways families can participate *together* in the mission, ministries, and programs of the church. Start with ministries and programs where at least one family member is already active and incorporate family or parent-child/teen participation. Assess all of the possibilities in your congregation to promote whole-family experiences. Without adding more

programming, congregations can involve the whole family. For example:

- Redesign child and adolescent Christian education programming or adult Bible study programs to incorporate family learning programs or parent-child/teen learning programs as an integral part of the program year.
- Involve the whole family in worship roles, such as reading the Scripture on Sunday, leading prayers, decorating the environment for worship, singing in the choir as a family, greeting people as they arrive for worship, collecting the offering, and so on.
- Redesign existing service projects for children, teens, and adults into whole-family service projects.
- Involve the whole family in congregational leadership, such as taking leadership roles in summer vacation Bible school or organizing the annual church festival.

5. Offer family and intergenerational learning programs.

Congregations can design programming that involves and engages the whole family in faith formation. In his report of the NSYR research (Soul Searching) Christian Smith observes, "Faith formation of children and teens would probably best be pursued in the larger context of family ministry, that parents should be viewed as indispensable partners in the religious formation of children and youth." Most congregations would do well to transform their overemphasis on age-group learning and incorporate family-centered learning programs or intergenerational learning programs, which involve the whole community: singles, couples, families with children/teens, empty nest families, and older adult families.

Family-centered and intergenerational learning programs provide a number of important benefits for families and for the whole congregation.

- They build-up the faith of the entire family and nurture the faith growth of grandparents, parents, and children/teens all at the same time. They build-up the confidence and ability of parents to share faith and values with their children.
- They provide a shared experienced of families learning together, sharing faith, praying together, and celebrating rituals and traditions.
- They model the faith practices and traditions that the church hopes families will adopt at

home. Families learn the knowledge and skills for sharing faith, celebrating traditions, and practicing the faith at home. When families learn together, they are empowered to continue to do so at home. It is easier to carry the learning home and incorporate new faith practices at home because parents are learning with their children/teens.

- They encourage family conversations. Families have the opportunity, language, and encouragement to discuss their faith in the sacred space of the congregation, as such conversation might never take place on its own at home. The structured learning experience can be a powerful catalyst for family conversation.
- They encourage conversations among families and other generations. Families benefit by talking about their experiences and hearing the experiences of other families as they attempt to live their faith in daily life and in their community. Learning programs can help connect what they have experienced with the great stories and themes of Christian faith.
- They provide resources to help families share, celebrate, and practice their faith at home.
- They encourage the family to participate more actively in church life, especially Sunday worship.

There are a number of possibilities for learning programs that involve the whole family and/or the whole community:

- monthly large group family or intergenerational learning programs (that can replace or be integrated with age-group programming)
- family workshops through the year focused on family faith practices, church year seasons, and/or family-focused topics
- family cluster or small group learning programs (at the church or in homes)
- family-centered (small group or large group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
- family-centered or intergenerational vacation Bible school
- family retreats and camps
- family Bible study
- family-centered sacramental/ritual preparation programs (baptism, first communion, confirmation)

One model for family/intergenerational learning that is being used in thousands of churches incorporates the following elements:

- 1. Welcome, community building and opening prayer
- 2. Part 1: An All-Ages Learning Experience for the whole assembly that introduces the theme or topic for the program.
- 3. Part 2: In-Depth Learning Experiences that probe the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) or for specific agegroups (families with children or childrenonly, adolescents, young adults, and adults), and conducted in one of three formats:
 - Whole Group Format: learning in small groups with the whole group assembled in one room (age-specific or all ages small groups);
 - Age Group Format: learning in separate, parallel groups organized by ages;
 - Learning Activity Center Format: learning at self-directed or facilitated activity centers (age-specific and/or all ages learning centers).
- 4. Part 3. An All-Ages Contributive Learning experience in which each generation teaches the other generations.
- 5. Part 4. Reflection on the learning experience and interactive group sharing.
- 6. Closing Prayer

(See "Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation" in this issue for a complete description of the process and program examples. Go to www.lifelongfaith.com for more information on intergenerational learning.)

6. Develop family faith formation around life-cycle milestones.

Milestones are significant moments in life's journey that provide the opportunity for children and their families to experience God's love, and grow in faith through sacred and ordinary events both in the life of the congregation and in daily life. Milestones faith formation uses four elements to shape a vital partnership between the congregation and the home.

- Naming the sacred and ordinary events that are recognized in the life of a congregation and those that take place in our daily lives—our beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, and rites of passage—creates rituals and traditions that shape our identities and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.
- Equipping brings the generations together, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and provides

- information. Opportunities are provided here to model faith practices for the home.
- Blessing the individual, and marking the
 occasion in a worship service and in the
 home, says that it is all about faith. God is
 present in all of daily life, making the
 ordinary sacred.
- Gifting offers a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. (Anderson and Staats, 6)

Many congregations organize faith formation for families across the entire life cycle around three types of faith milestones:

- Faith Community Milestones: baptism, baptism birthdays, receiving a first Bible, learning to pray, first communion, confirmation, a mission trip, wedding, funeral
- Life-cycle Milestones: birth/becoming a parent, start of school, driver's license, graduations, leaving home, career/first job, wedding, becoming a grandparent, retirement, death
- Rhythm of Life Milestones: birthdays, anniversaries, first day of school (annual), family gatherings and reunions, holidays and vacations, new home, separation and loss

The Youth and Family Institute (www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org) has pioneered the milestones approach to ministry. Their latest publication, *Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation* (The Youth and Family Institute, 2007), includes an intergenerational learning program, worship service, and home activities for 16 milestones, including baptism, anniversary of baptism, welcoming young children to worship, entering Sunday school, kids & money, blessing of the backpacks, First Communion, bible presentation and adventure, first time campers, sexuality, middle school, entering confirmation, confirmation, driver's license, and high school graduation.

Faith Inkubators (www.faithink.com) has created eight Faith Stepping Stones with parent and/or whole family educational sessions and home faith practices. The Faith Stepping Stones include: raising a healthy baby, raising a healthy preschool, entry into school, my Bible, "livin' forgiven," surviving adolescence, confirmation as ordination, and graduation blessing.

Milestones faith formation has both a congregational and home component. Activities and resources for the home component can be developed around the core family faith practices.

Church Components

- learning program for parents and/or whole family
- liturgy/ritual
- prayer/blessings
- connection to the parish community
- justice and service

Home Components

- family faith conversations
- family devotions and prayer
- family service
- family rituals and traditions
- family meal

Here is an example of milestones faith formation for birth and baptism.

Congregational Program and Activities

- 1. Gathered programs for parents: 1) baptism preparation workshop, 2) parenting for faith growth workshop.
- 2. Rite of welcoming several weeks prior to the baptism so that the faith community becomes aware of the forthcoming baptism.
- 3. Connection to the church community: 1) letters of welcome to baptismal families, 2) personally decorated baptismal candles, 3) prayer partners and circles of support for each baptismal candidate and their families, 4) faith chests for each newly baptized child with a variety of resources for the new child and family (see Youth and Family Institute).
- 4. Celebration of baptism: 1) include siblings and family members in preparation and celebration of the rite, 2) create a photo or video story of the baptism for the family, 3) create a "Book of Blessings" for family, friends and the congregation to contribute words of welcome, support, and/or hopes and dreams for the child.
- Reunion: host a reunion breakfast or dinner for families who have children baptized in the past six months.
- 6. Baptismal anniversaries: 1) celebrate baptismal anniversaries each month at Sunday worship with a special remembrance and blessing, 2) on the anniversary of the baptism send families a note of congratulations and a prayer ritual to renew baptismal promises.

Family Resources and Activities

1. Devotions and prayer: Scripture readings and reflections on baptism, Bible stories (print, music, film), bedtime and meal

- prayers, first book of prayers and devotions, table prayers for the anniversary of a baptism, table prayers for the symbols of baptism (water, light, oil).
- 2. Faith conversations: activities for families with young children, reading and talking about children's storybooks.
- 3. Rituals and traditions: symbols of baptism (a small cross, bottle of water, candle, bottle of oil), ideas for creating a home altar with baptism symbols and pictures, ritual for celebrating the anniversary of a baptism, first book of family rituals.
- 4. Family mealtime: activities for making mealtime special, grace before meals.
- Service: ideas and activities for living a stewardship lifestyle, service ideas for young families.

7. Offer a variety of developmentally appropriate family service projects.

Many of the research findings suggest that much more attention needs to be given to family service to the community and involvement in issues of environmental and social justice as the heart of ministry with families. Perhaps these families are telling us that the focus of church needs to be centered on ways families can minister to the world while in the world. Engagement in mission is family faith in action.

Eugene Roehlkepartain and Jenny Friedman offer a number of practical guidelines and suggestions for family service, which grew out of the Search Institute's research. They suggest the following guidelines for effective family service.

- Make the activities meaningful, so that every family member, regardless of age, can contribute in a significant way.
- Supply "mentor families" to other families that have had little or no experience in service.
- Offer various options to suit families with different ages, interests, time constraints, and locations.
- Include preparation and reflection as part of any church-sponsored service activity. (Roehlkepartain and Friedman, 141)

Their suggestions for integrating family service activities into congregational life include:

 Expand current service activities to specifically involve families.

- Make ongoing family volunteer opportunities available. Establish relationships with local agencies to provide ongoing opportunities for family service.
- Offer some simple "in-house" activities.
 Although some families are enthusiastic
 about and ready for community ministry,
 others may be more comfortable initially
 with simple service activities they can
 complete at the church.
- Organize regular family service days and events.
- Consider organizing a family mission trip. (Roehlkepartain and Friedman, 141-142)

They also suggest ways to encourage independent and family-initiated activities:

- Hold a family service fair.
- Provide resources for families, and include children's books that focus on caring for others.
- Becoming a clearinghouse for local opportunities.
- Celebrate what families are already doing. (Roehlkepartain and Friedman, 143)

8. Provide at-home resources for the core family faith practices.

Throughout the year, connected to educational programming or Sunday worship or events involving families, provide families of all ages with home kits that contain activities developed specifically around the core family faith practices. Resources can be developed in conjunction with church year themes, such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, or Easter; or on particular themes in the Scripture readings for a particular Sunday; or an event in the life of the congregation or community. Household resources can focus on a particular practice, or integrate all five core practices. These home kits can be designed intergenerationally, with activities for the entire household and with activities for particular age groups (children, teens, adults).

Here are examples of Advent-Christmas resources:

- 1. Devotions and Prayer
 - prayers for every day of Advent, table prayers for Advent and the Christmas season, weekly prayers for the Advent wreath
 - daily Scripture readings, Advent calendars with daily activities for children, teens, and adults; Advent

reflections booklets for the whole family, for teens, and for adults; a list of Advent-Christmas storybooks and DVDs/videos; a guide to reading and exploring the Advent and Christmas lectionary

- 2. Rituals and traditions: a blessing before the Christmas meal, a blessing for a Christmas crèche, a blessing for a Christmas tree, a blessing upon opening gifts
- 3. Service: a guide to Advent-Christmas service projects, alternative gift-giving suggestions, a list of organizations for making charitable donations
- 4. Faith conversations: family activities (family baking activities, making gifts), meal time activities for the Advent-Christmas season.

9. Use the Internet to resource and connect families.

Increasingly congregations are going to need to utilize the Internet and other new communication technologies to reach families with resources and encouragement, and to help families network to share faith with each other. The Pew Internet and American Life Project has conducted two surveys of Internet use. The April 2007 report, Faith Online, found:

- Sixty-four percent of the nation's 128 million Internet users have done things online that relate to religious or spiritual matters.
- Those who use the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes are more likely to be women, white, middle-aged, college educated, and relatively well to do.
- The "online faithful" are devout, and they use the Internet for personal spiritual matters more than for traditional religious functions or work related to their churches. But their faith activity online seems to augment their already strong commitments to their congregations.
- Twenty-six percent of the online faithful seek information about the religious faith of others. Most are doing this out of curiosity.
- The majority of online faithful describe themselves as "spiritual and religious."
- Evangelicals are among the most fervent Internet users for religious and spiritual purposes. (Faith Online)

The January 2006 report, The Strength of Internet Ties, found:

- E-mail and social networks: E-mail allows people to get help from their social networks, and the web lets them gather information and find support and information as they face important decisions. E-mail is more capable than in-person or phone communication of facilitating regular contact with large networks. E-mail does not seduce people away from in-person and phone contact. E-mail connects distant friends and relatives, yet it also connects those who live nearby.
- Internet and social networks: The Internet helps build social capital. It plays socially beneficial roles in a world moving towards "networked individualism." The Internet supports social networks. People use the Internet to put their social networks into motion when they need help with important issues in their lives.
- Internet and life decisions: About 60 million Americans say the Internet has played an important or crucial role in helping them deal with at least one major life decision in the past two years. The number of Americans relying on the Internet for major life decisions has increased by one-third since 2002. At major moments, some people say the Internet helps them connect with other people and experts who help them make choices. Others say that the web helps them get information and compare options as they face decisions. (The Strength of Internet Ties)

The success of resource-based websites, such as Real Simple (www.realsimple.com) and The Food Network (www.foodnetwork.com), and social networking web sites My Space and Facebook provide churches with examples for how to utilize the new abilities of the Internet to network families and to provide them with faith formation resources at home. What would it be like if churches invested time and energy in using the Internet (web sites, email) to deliver timely faith formation resources to the home, to provide social network among families to share faith stories and practices, and to provide support, resources, and networking for parents? The Internet will not replace congregational faith formation, but it can certainly enhance and expand what congregations are doing and provide new approaches for reaching and networking families.

10. Provide parent education, resources, support, and encouragement.

A recurring theme throughout the research is on the importance of parental faith and parents' role in faith formation. Recall Christian Smith's conclusions in the NSYR: "the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents" (Smith, 261); and "The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities" (Smith, 267). For ideas and strategies for parent faith formation see "Best Practices in Parent Faith Formation" in this issue, and Eugene and Jolene's article, "Making Parents a Priority," in Lifelong Faith 1.2 (Summer 2007).

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Family and Community Ministry: Empowering Through Faith

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Practice Ideas

Planning for Family Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding family faith formation in your congregation.

Strategy I. Make family faith formation a goal of congregational life and ministry.

- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> equip families at every stage of life as centers of faith formation through church ministries—worship, education, service, stewardship, evangelism and community life.
- Identify ways that your congregation can make family faith formation more central to the ministries and life of your church?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can undertake that would dramatically improve your efforts in family faith formation?

Strategy 2. Utilize church ministries and programming to teach, model, and demonstrate family faith practices, and then provide the resources for families to live the practice at home.

- How does your church <u>currently</u> equip families to live their faith at home? What types of resources does your church <u>currently</u> provide families to live their faith at home?
- What opportunities do you have in your congregation to add a "teaching and demonstration" activity to an existing ministry or program? Identify settings where the whole family is present or where you can gather parents while their children are engaged in other activities.
- How can your congregation utilize weekly worship to teach and resource families?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can undertake that would dramatically improve your efforts in teaching faith practices and providing resources for living the practices?

Strategy 3. Build on practices families are already engaged in.

- What faith practices are families already engaged in, such as praying, celebrating rituals, and serving?
- How can your congregation support families in their efforts and provide additional resources and opportunities to grow in their practice?

Strategy 4. Involve the whole family in congregational life, programs, and leadership roles.

- How are families already participating *together* in the ministries and programs of your church? Identify examples of where the whole family is engaged in a church ministry or program.
- How can your congregation expand the opportunities for the whole family to participate together in worship, education, service, outreach, stewardship, leadership, and other church activities?
- How can you redesign existing programs and activities so they involve the whole family?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can undertake that would dramatically improve your efforts at involving the family in congregational life, programs, and leadership?

Strategy 5. Offer family and intergenerational learning programs.

- What types of family and/or intergenerational learning programs does your congregation offer? When are they offered? What are the topics or themes addressed?
- How can your congregation expand the opportunities for the whole family to learn together? Consider the following program ideas:

monthly large group family or
intergenerational learning programs
family workshops through the year focused
on family faith practices, church year
seasons, and/or family-focused topics
family cluster or small group learning
programs
family-centered (small group or large
group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
family-centered or intergenerational
vacation Bible school
family retreats and camps
family Bible study
family-centered sacramental/ritual
preparation programs

Strategy 6. Develop family faith formation around life-cycle milestones.

- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> provide faith formation around milestone events in the lives of individuals and families? For example:
 - Faith Community Milestones: baptism, receiving a first Bible, learning to pray, first communion, confirmation, mission trip, wedding, funeral
 - Life-cycle Milestones: birth/becoming a parent, start of school, driver's license, graduations, leaving home, career/first job, becoming a grandparent, retirement, death
 - Rhythm of Life Milestones: birthdays, anniversaries, first day of school, family gatherings and reunions, holidays and vacations, new home, separation and loss
- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> 1) prepare people for a milestone, 2) celebrate or remember the milestone, and 3) provide follow-up after the milestone? How does your church provide congregational activities and home resources for each milestone?
- What does your congregation need to do to strengthen its current approach to milestones faith formation?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> milestones around which your church can develop faith formation?

Strategy 7. Offer a variety of developmentally-appropriate family service projects.

- What types of family service projects does your church <u>currently</u> offer?
- How can your congregation expand the opportunities for the whole family to be involved in service to those in need and in justice projects—locally and globally?
- How will you prepare families for service, guide them in reflecting upon the service, and support them in continuing their service involvements?

Strategy 8. Provide at-home resources for the core family faith practices.

- What types of resources does your congregation provide families throughout the year, such as resources connected to educational programming or Sunday worship or liturgical seasons?
- What opportunities already exist in your church to provide resources to families around the five core family faith practices?

Strategy 9. Use the Internet to resource and connect families.

- Does your church have a web site? What kinds of information is provided online? Does your church web site serve and reach families?
- How can you better utilize your church's web site to deliver timely faith formation resources to the home, provide social network among families to share faith stories and practices, and provide support, resources, and networking for parents?

Overall Reflections

- In what ways does your congregation promote the five core family faith practices?
- What are the most important ways your church can strengthen family faith formation around the five core faith practices by expanding current efforts or beginning new initiatives?



Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation

John Roberto and Katie Pfiffner

For the past century Christian churches have structured their faith formation programs for children around a classroom model. This approach brings together teachers and children for regular, planned teaching and learning, in settings where significant relationships take shape. Many churches still structure their children's program around the "traditional" classroom model, which looks and feels the same as it did decades ago. The books and materials have been updated, but the basic model remains. Children still sit at desks or around tables listening to a teacher, reading the Bible and/or a textbook, answering questions, and doing pencil-and-paper activities.

This model served churches in previous generations, but changes in families, society, and churches have accentuated its limitations. Consider the following well-documented limitations of children's faith formation based on a classroom model.

- Children's education remains "based on an understanding of learning as the process by which an individual mind accumulates and integrates information at the developmentally appropriate time for the mind to internalize it. Much of current practice sees learning as an activity that takes place within the individual mind of a child. In this theory learning is facilitated by some combination of input from a teacher and the teacher's arrangement of a learning environment that will cooperate with that individual child's internal cognitive processes." (Mercer, 163)
- Little pedagogical value is placed on children's experiences, and volunteer teachers are uncomfortable with children's honest discussion of difficult issues; yet children still try to engage in theological reflection on their experiences, despite these obstacles. Children are capable of theological reflection (in ways that vary according to their developmental age/stage), and adults could provide much greater support for this work through more intentional engagement with young people's experience and more deliberate provision of religious language, symbols, rituals, and other interpretive frameworks and skills. (Yust 2002)
- Children's education is structured in age-graded settings that segregate children from learning with their family and with the other generations in their faith community. Children have few opportunities to observe the next stage of development that will draw them forward and help them grow in their faith. They do not have an opportunity to see how their parents, teachers, and other significant adults express their faith through worship, service, prayer, and relationships. We know that the faith life of children is nurtured as they are embraced in a family of faith and a vital faith community.
- Children's education is "too often sequestered from the practices of the wider community of faith. Christian education is formation into identity, learned through participation in the church as a

'community of practice' that seeks to walk in the ways of Jesus and organizes its life and practices around the central symbol of the kin-dom of God, with its reordering of power and its transforming commitment to an alternative way of life" (Mercer, 163). Too often, there is little integration of children's education with the rest of congregational life.

Today, we know so much more about how children learn than we did fifty years ago, and the learning methods and activities that engage children today are unlike those of previous generations. We know that the world of their childhood has drastically changed, and adjustments are necessary to provide faith formation that forms the whole life of the child—head, heart, and soul. Churches that understand this shift have made fundamental changes in the way they do children's faith formation.

In Enduring Connections: Creating a Preschool and Children's Ministry, Janice Haywood describes this shift.

These (effective) churches are interested in more than activities and numbers. They want to make a significant difference in the spiritual lives of children, families, and the church, so they have moved beyond both mediocre programming and "edutainment" fads to embrace a ministry strategy that is both foundational and inviting to children and families. They have ministered to children who have grown into youth and adults as faithful Christ-followers. They have attracted, encouraged, and equipped families to be the faith nurturers of all of the family members. They have grown churches that embrace all members from the youngest to the oldest, and they have thrived.

Many churches are discovering that childhood ministry is deeply rooted in relationships. They are committed to proclaiming Bible truths and stories with integrity rather than simply providing programming that has a biblical theme. They recognize that childhood ministry is first and foremost family ministry. They have found ways to be inclusive of children in their congregational experiences rather than always providing a separate event just for children. They recognize that "family ministry" is not just providing activities for all ages of family members, but it includes providing experiences in which the whole family can participate together. (Haywood, 6)

This article explores several best practices that congregations are using to make this shift to more holistic and comprehensive faith formation for today's children. Best practices form an agenda for action that a congregation can use to re-imagine and reinvigorate faith formation with children. These best practices are not a definitive statement, but guideposts toward developing more vital and robust faith formation for children.

Best Practice I. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multisensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

The dramatic changes in our culture and new research into learning—brain-based learning, multiple intelligences, and styles of learning—are changing our understanding of how children learn. Congregations that are effective in childhood learning are using contemporary cultural trends and research to create and teach learning experiences that engage the whole child. At the heart of the most effective learning are these two components: creating an environment in which relationships among the children can flourish, and designing programs that are experiential, relevant, and engaging. These approaches have the following features.

- Incorporating learning activities that teach to the different *intelligences* of children. Embracing a "multiple intelligences" approach provides different ways for children to learn or "know" a particular concept, Bible story, or belief. While not every program can incorporate activities for all eight intelligences, having a greater variety of ways to learn promotes more effective learning and engages children more fully in the learning experience. The multiple intelligences identified by Howard Gardner include:
 - verbal-linguistic (word smart, book smart)
 - logical-mathematical (number smart, logic smart)
 - visual-spatial (art smart, picture smart)
 - bodily-kinesthetic (body smart, movement smart)

- musical-rhythmic (music smart, sound smart)
- naturalist (nature smart, environment smart)
- interpersonal (people smart, group smart)
- intrapersonal (self smart, introspection smart)
- Utilizing all of the **senses** in a learning experience where children can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
- Engaging the children in *practicing* and *performing* what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it.
- Having children work in small, noncompetitive groups (*collaborative learning*) to discuss and process together what they are learning, to work together on projects and activities, and to practice and present what they are learning. Children are engaged in meaningful group work that requires all members to be actively involved.
- Immersing children in *images* and the visual nature of learning. Children are growing up in an image-driven culture. They hear with their eyes. Images, art, and film are integral to effective learning today.

Best Practice 2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.

Effective faith formation in congregations weaves together stories from the Bible (and Christian tradition) and children's experiences so children discover that "this is my story about me, and it is our story about us." Karen-Marie Yust writes, "Each new generation of congregational leaders and parents must find ways to help children discover the transformative relevance of faith stories for contemporary lives. To do so, we need to understand the developmental capabilities of children at different ages, the social contexts in which they are

growing up, and the kinds of spiritual and ministry practices that contribute to faith formation. Children come to embody the gospel story through the interplay of these aspects of personal, communal, and religious life, and there is much that adults can do to shape this interplay so that children grow in faithfulness day by day" (Yust 2007, 4).

Karen-Marie Yust tells a story that embodies so many of the practices described in the first two best practices.

It's a Sunday morning, and fifteen children, ages two to twelve, are gathered in a classroom for religious education. They have been exploring the biblical story of Ruth, and they are enthusiastic participants in a quest to learn about this faithful woman of God.

The older children have spent two weeks researching the context of the story and its characters, and writing a script for the video they are about to shoot. For "homework" two weeks previous, they had consulted Bible dictionaries and multiple Bible translations to expand their knowledge about Ruth's cultural setting and the roles of women in her era. They also interviewed some adults after worship one Sunday to discover what others think about Ruth's life and faith.

The younger children have heard the story of Ruth's departure from her homeland and interactions with Boaz, and they have drawn storyboard murals and composed songs about Ruth's faith journey. They've selected costumes and props for the video drama, in consultation with the other members of the class.

The preschoolers in the group have also heard the story on numerous occasions, and have decorated large drawings of the central characters. They have imaginatively imitated Ruth's practice of gleaning wheat in Boaz's fields, examined actual stalks of wheat, and explored the connections between the popular story of the Little Red Hen and Ruth's story. Now the entire group is ready to recreate Ruth's life on tape.

Two fifth graders wield video cameras borrowed from members of the congregation. Children of all ages assume their previously agreed upon roles, and a sixth grader walks them through a practice run with the narrated script. Some of the younger children pantomime the joy felt at weddings, then the sadness felt by the three central female characters when their husbands die and they must figure out what to do next.

As the play begins, Ruth and Naomi trudge along the road to a place where they can set up a new home. Ruth goes out into a field full of gleaners (played by preschool children) and searches for scarce leftovers. Boaz directs the other gleaners to a different part of the field and encourages his field hands (a pair of second graders) to drop more stalks of wheat than usual in Ruth's section.

The drama continues through Ruth's flirtation with Boaz—an awkward moment for the two older elementary children in the roles, but an element they recognize as essential to the story. The wedding scene, with crowds of celebrating preschoolers and a beaming Naomi hugging Ruth, is a near-riot. But order is restored, and the birth of a child brings the children's videotaped version of this biblical tale to a close. The director yells, "Cut!" and the videographers turn off their cameras.

Next Sunday, the older children will use digital editing software to make a final cut of the video, while younger children design and decorate screening announcements with scenes from the story. They will invite the entire congregation to view their production after the worship service that morning. Following the screening, adults in attendance, with advance prompting from the pastor, will ask the cast and crew questions about their interpretation of Ruth's life and faithfulness.

When it is all over, the entire process will have deepened the children's engagement with the biblical narrative—and that of the adults involved as well. (Yust 2007, 3-4)

Best Practice 3. Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.

Children's faith formation is fundamentally about nurturing their relationships with God, and in all aspects of children's faith formation, we would do well to let children meet God face to face. Karen Marie Yust writes, "Adults cannot presume to mediate children's spiritual experiences by inserting themselves between God and children as informers, but must wonder with children about the relationship between children's personal spiritual experiences and the tradition's understanding of who God is and how God is present to us in all aspects of our lives" (Yust 2002, 15).

Effective faith formation with children provides a variety of ways for children to encounter God directly in prayer, Sunday worship, ritual and sacraments, and retreat experiences. Congregations involve children in ritual experiences—in age group, family, and congregational settings—especially involving them in Sunday worship and the celebration of liturgical seasons. Churches engage children in prayer experiences—in class, programs, and other settings—where they are praying themselves using a variety of prayer forms and techniques such as:

- silence and silent prayer
- centering prayer
- meditative prayer
- praying with poetry, art, or music
- guided meditation
- reading and meditating on Bible stories
- prayers of praise, confession, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving
- prayers of discipleship.

One model of children's formation, used around the world, that demonstrates how to create an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly is *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*. Created by Sofia Cavalletti, this is an approach to the religious formation of children that is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the educational principles of Maria Montessori. Children gather in an "atrium," a room prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful materials that they use. In the early church, the atrium was the place where the catechumens were prepared. For the child, the atrium is a place of preparation for involvement in the larger worshipping community.

In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking the material for that text and working with it—placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, setting sculpted apostles around a Last Supper table, or preparing a small altar with the furnishings used for the Eucharist. Older children who do read often copy parables from the Bible, lay in order written prayers from the rite of baptism, or label a long time line showing the history of the kingdom of God. (For more information go to: www.cgsusa.org.)

"If we want to help the child draw nearer to God, we should with patience and courage seek to go always closer to the vital nucleus of things. This requires study and prayer. The child will be our teacher if we know how to observe." (Sofia Cavalletti)

A second model that demonstrates how to create an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly is *Godly Play*. Developed by author, teacher and Episcopal priest, Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play* teaches children the art of using religious language—parable, sacred story, silence and liturgical action—helping them become more fully aware of the mystery of God's presence in their lives. (For more information go to: http://godlyplay.org.)

Best Practice 4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.

Milestones are significant moments in life's journey that provide the opportunity for children and their families to experience God's love, and grow in faith through sacred and ordinary events both in the life of the congregation and in daily life. Milestones faith formation uses four elements to shape a vital partnership between the congregation and the home.

- Naming the sacred and ordinary events that
 are recognized in the life of a congregation
 and those that take place in our daily lives—
 our beginnings, endings, transitions,
 achievements, failures, and rites of passage—
 creates rituals and traditions that shape our
 identities and give us a sense of belonging to
 the family of Jesus Christ.
- Equipping brings the generations together, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and provides information. Opportunities are provided here to model faith practices for the home.
- Blessing the individual, and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home, says that it is all about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred.
- Gifting offers a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. (Anderson and Staats, 6)

Through their work with congregations, the Youth and Family Institute has identified the benefits of milestones faith formation.

- Children and youth are supported in their faith through identified milestones in their lives.
- Parents and caretakers of children are encouraged through cross-generational enrichment events to grow in their own faith, and are equipped to be teachers of the faith even in their own homes.
- Elders are encouraged to share their stories and leave a legacy of faith for the next generation.
- Faith is practiced through the four keys of caring conversations, devotions, service, and rituals and traditions.
- Meaningful feedback is encouraged through the sharing of stories as a result of specific milestones. . . . As nurturing communities work together to help and support one another, over time the benefits of milestones ministry and the life of faith are maximized
- Supportive and prayerful accountability develops for one another. Milestone moments become an integral part of the faith journey, and sojourners along the way are encouraged to support, pray for, and discuss how the journey is going for a particular individual or family. (Anderson and Staats, 7-8)

Congregations develop children's faith formation around milestones such as:

- baptism
- anniversary of baptism
- welcoming young children to worship
- first day of school
- starting Sunday school
- First Communion
- presentation of the Bible.

Milestones faith formation is a partnership between the congregation and home with programs and resources appropriate to each setting:

Congregational Elements

- Learning program for parents and/or whole family
- Liturgy/ritual
- Prayer/blessings
- Connection to the community
- Justice and service

Home Components

- Faith conversations
- Devotions and prayer
- Service
- Rituals and traditions

For an example of baptism milestone faith formation, see the article "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation" in this issue. For more information on milestones faith formation see the resource list for Youth and Family Institute and Faith Inkubators.

Best Practice 5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.

There are a variety of ways congregations engage the whole family in learning together. These can be envisioned as a continuum from congregations that make family/intergenerational faith formation the primary model of learning, to congregations that integrate family learning opportunities throughout the year, to congregations that offer occasional or annual family learning programs. Here are several examples of family learning programs currently in use in congregations:

- monthly large group family or intergenerational learning programs
- monthly family cluster or small group learning programs (at the church or in homes)
- family-centered (small group or large group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
- family workshops throughout the year focused on family faith practices, church year seasons, and/or family-focused topics
- family-centered or intergenerational vacation Bible school
- family retreats and camps
- family Bible study
- family-centered sacramental/ritual preparation programs, such as baptism and First Communion

For a model of family/intergenerational learning that is being used in thousands of churches, see the article on "Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation" in this issue. Best Practice 6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.

Effective faith formation prepares children to participate in the life, ministry, and activities of the church according to their abilities. It involves children in learning settings that provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate with all their senses in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on. This practice of effective congregations restores the connection between learning and practice—precisely what is missing in the traditional model of classroom learning, where the material presented stands divorced from the practice of faith. It also overcomes the age segregation so prevalent in churches today.

Congregations connect learning and practice (i.e., community participation) when the content of the childhood curriculum is aligned with congregational life. For example, the children's program prepares children with an understanding of the theology, symbols, and rituals of the liturgical season, such as Advent or Lent, and then supports the active participation of children (and their families) in the liturgical life of the church. Children may be also prepared to take an active role in the actual liturgical celebrations of the season. The key is that what children are learning in their program is aligned with hands-on participation in congregational life, and does not replace it.

Many churches utilize a lectionary-based model of faith formation in which the content of the learning program is the Sunday Scripture readings. Here the connection is direct: what is learned in an educational program is experienced at Sunday worship. Connecting learning programs and congregational life can take many forms: liturgical seasons, Sunday lectionary readings, preparation for a congregation-wide service project, and so on.

Joyce Mercer reinforces the importance of this practice when she writes, "The central purpose of educating children for faith is the formation of identity among learners to enable their full participation in the mission and practices of the faith community. This identity includes their ability, in turn, to impact and transform the practices of that community toward ever-renewed and more adequate instantiations of good news" (Mercer, 197).

In addition to connecting learning and congregational life, children need to be recognized and accepted as full members of the congregation. There are many ways to engage children in congregational life.

- Sunday worship, where children are present, active, and have a role in the worship. Worship leaders can incorporate illustrations from children's experience in sermons, prayers that reference the lives of children, and hymns and songs that reflect all ages in the congregation, including children. Children (and their parents) can take on a variety liturgical roles, commensurate with their developmental abilities, such as reading the Scriptures, singing in the choir, presenting a biblical drama, decorating the worship space with art, greeting people, collecting the offering, and so on.
- Intergenerational learning, where children can engage in faith conversations and storytelling with more experienced members of the congregation, and learn from the Scriptures and the Christian tradition together with people of all ages.
- Community-wide service, in which children participate with adults in responding to those in need in the community, caring for the environment, visiting the sick or homebound, and so on; and congregational action for justice, in which children and adults raise money to support justice organizations or take a stand on an important social issue.
- *Teaching programs*, where older children can be engaged in teaching younger children, reading stories, leading activities, and so on.

Most often children are capable of taking on more responsibility than we are willing to give them. They can serve as ushers and greeters, welcoming people into the assembly and helping to take up the collection. They can sing in choirs, both children's choirs and other groups that help to lead music. A real sense of leadership can develop in older elementary-age children as they stand in front to sing with the adults they are so used to watching. This also helps foster the understanding that children aren't there to "perform" when they sing, but rather are there to help lead. Too, there are times

when a child's voice reading the welcome or prayers of petition would be a nice change.

Participation in a number of service areas allows for great opportunities of growth. At one church families signed up to cook and serve a meal at a Catholic Worker House in a nearby town during Lent. They gathered together, children and parents, to prepare the food, and then shared in the experience of serving and eating with those who were coming for a hot meal that evening. The children were not just bystanders watching their parents, but rather fully engaged according to their capabilities, sharing their gifts. This shared experience gave them a starting point for faith conversations about our responsibility to help those in need.

It is important to remember that "children are not only shaped by practices in which they participate. They also 'act back' on the community of practice, with new insights, ideas, and actions that can contribute to the transformation of those practices, and therefore, of the community. For example, children in one congregation mobilized their congregation to use fair trade coffee at the church after studying the situation of coffee producers alongside their reading and reflection on various prophetic texts concerned with justice and land. Adults changed their practice to hone the insights and wisdom of children" (Mercer 202).

It is essential that a community continually assess children's involvement in the congregation so as not to lose sight of this essential element of effective faith formation. Joyce Mercer suggests questions for congregational reflection.

- How are children participating?
- What can we do to better enable the participation of children? What kinds of reflection, instruction, and study in conjunction with this practice would best assist children of different ages and abilities to learn?
- And in evaluating practices as sites for learning, what did children's participation teach or contribute to the community's practice and understanding in this particular instance? How are we as a whole changed by the presence and participation of children? (Mercer 202)

A principal factor to the ongoing religious development of a child is that they feel a real sense of belonging as they are now, not for who they might become, and to know they are a treasured part of a faith community where learning and growing in relationship with God is a lifelong process.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that an essential practice for making the six best practices effective is that congregations dedicate significant resources—space, people, finances, programs—to a wide array of children's faith formation activities. Further, congregations must not limit the resources allocated to children's ministries to a single area, such as the purchase of educational materials, but instead supply resources for children's ministries throughout the life of the congregation. Not all of these resources are monetary. They also include the personal and communal commitments of time, skills, and energy invested in children and children's ministry.

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Web Sites

- www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org the web site for the Youth and Family Institute with resources for milestones ministry, training services, publications, and family and congregational resources.
- www.faithink.com the web site for Faith Inkubators with intergenerational and family programs, Stepping Stones milestones faith formation, and training services.
- www.cgsusa.org the web site for The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.
- www.childspirituality.org the web site for Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives with information about the Children's Spirituality conference, highlights from the conference, resources, and web links.
- www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org the web site for The Center for Spiritual Development (Search Institute) with news, research, and resources on the Center's global initiative on the research and practice of spiritual development.
- http://godlyplay.org the web site for Godly Play and The Center for the Theology of Childhood, which serves children and families directly through training and education of teachers in the Godly Play method. The Center participates in research and writing about the spirituality of children and maintains a membership network.

Coming in 2008

Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best **Practices**

Holly Catterton Allen, Editor

This collection of 23 essays from the 2006 Children's Spirituality Conference is organized into three sections:

Part One: Definitional, Historical, and Theological Issues Regarding Children's Spiritual Development

Part Two: Best Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Development

Part Three: Facing the Challenges for the Future

For more information about the book go to: http://childspirituality.org/conference/contents.htm

Practice Ideas

Planning for Children's Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Children's Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with children in your congregation.

Best Practice I. Effective faith formation with children respects the ways children learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for children to determine how well they utilize the characteristics of learning today.
 - ☐ Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of children.
 - verbal-linguistic
 - logical-mathematical
 - visual-spatial
 - bodily-kinesthetic
 - musical-rhythmic
 - naturalist
 - interpersonal
 - intrapersonal
 - ☐ Utilizing all of the senses in a learning experience where children can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
 - ☐ Engaging the children in practicing and performing what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience.
 - ☐ Having children work in collaborative learning groups to discuss and process together what they are learning, to work together on projects and activities, and to practice and present what they are learning.
 - ☐ Immersing children in images and the visual nature of learning.
- How can these programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to address the characteristics of effective learning today?

Best Practice 2. Effective faith formation with children provides opportunities for children to experience and imagine how their personal story is intertwined with the Bible and Christian tradition.

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for children to determine how well they weave together stories from the Bible (and Christian tradition) and children's experiences so children discover that "this is my story about me, and it is our story about us."
- How well do the educational programs and resources guide children in discovering the relevance of the faith stories for their lives?
- How can these programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to so that children make the faith story their story and see the relevance of the Christian faith for their lives today?

Best Practice 3. Faith formation with children provides an environment that allows children to encounter the living God directly.

■ How does your congregation and faith formation efforts let children meet God face to face? What types of spiritual experiences does your church provide for children (e.g., prayer, Sunday worship, liturgical seasons, ritual celebrations, retreats)?

How does your faith formation with children
engage them in practices and a variety of
prayer forms and techniques:
silence and silent prayer
□ centering prayer
☐ meditative prayer

praying with poetry, art, or music

guided meditation

- ☐ reading and meditating on Bible stories
 ☐ prayers of praise, confession, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving
- How can your congregation expand its current efforts or initiate new efforts to allow children to encounter the living God directly?

Best Practice 4. Effective faith formation with children embraces the lifecycle milestones as opportunities for nurturing the faith of children and their families in the congregation and at home.

- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> provide faith formation around milestone events in the lives of children and their families? For example: baptism, anniversary of baptism, welcoming young children to worship, first day of school, starting Sunday school, First Communion, and presentation of the Bible.
- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> 1) prepare children and their families for a milestone, 2) celebrate or remember the milestone, and 3) provide follow-up after the milestone? How does your church provide congregational activities and home resources for each milestone?
- What does your congregation need to do to strengthen its current approach to milestones faith formation?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> milestones around which your church can develop faith formation?

Best Practice 5. Effective faith formation engages children and their parents in programs that involve the whole family in learning together.

- What types of family and/or intergenerational learning programs does your congregation offer children and their families? When are they offered? What are the topics or themes addressed?
- How can your congregation expand the opportunities for the whole family to learn together?

monthly large group family or
intergenerational learning programs
family workshops through the year focused
on family faith practices, church year
seasons, and/or family-focused topics
family cluster or small group learning
programs
family-centered or intergenerational
vacation Bible school
family-centered (small group or large
group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
family retreats and camps
family Bible study
family-centered sacramental/ritual
preparation programs

Best Practice 6. Effective faith formation provides opportunities for children to practice their faith through hands-on participation in the life, ministries, and activities of the congregation.

- How and where are children <u>currently</u> participating in the life, ministries, and activities of the whole congregation? Identify the settings and ways they are already involved?
- How does your congregation recognize and accept children as full members of the congregation with roles and responsibilities?
- How do educational programs and resources for children provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate with all their senses in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on?
- How well does what children are learning in educational programs connect to hands-on participation in congregational life?
- What can your church and children's faith formation do to better enable the participation of children in congregational life? How can existing educational programs be re-designed to prepare children?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can develop to more fully involve children in congregational life, and prepare them for this participation?



Best Practices in Adolescent Faith Formation

John Roberto

aith formation with adolescents in a culture of choice provides a whole new set of challenges for congregations, unlike any that they have faced previously. Carol Lytch in her study of adolescents and church observes, "Passing on faith to the next generation is challenging today in a new way. In fact, 'passing on the faith' is no longer the task it used to be. Teens *choose* faith instead. American society has changed to favor individual choice of a highly personal religion that is less tethered to religious traditions and institutions." (Lytch, 13)

The best practices in adolescent faith formation described in this essay demonstrate that congregations can make a significant difference in the faith lives of young people—today and into their adult lives. "Even with a heightened sense of personal autonomy, even in these times when "believing and belonging" for many Americans means something individual, expressive, and noninstitutional, religious traditions attract and hold teens in new and powerful ways. Teens tend to choose faith when they live in families that "talk the walk" and 'walk the talk.' Moreover, church-related teens are most likely to 'grow up into Christ' when they belong to congregations that have learned to convey unchanging, eternal truths within a changing 'culture of choice.'"(Lytch, 14)

The National Study on Youth and Religion (see Soul Searching) confirms the impact of congregational efforts to nurture adolescent faith. "It appears that the greater the supply of religiously grounded relationships, activities, programs, opportunities, and challenges available to teenagers, other things being equal, the more likely teenagers will be religious engaged and invested. Religious congregations that prioritize ministry to youth and support for their parents, invest in trained and skilled youth group leaders, and make serious efforts to engage and teach adolescents seem much more likely to draw youth into their religious lives and to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their young members. ...when it comes to youth, religious congregations...generally "will get back what they invest" and normally not a lot more." (Smith, 261-62)

What should congregations do to promote the faith maturity of young people? This essay describes best practices for adolescent faith formation drawn primarily from three recent research studies on youth ministry and adolescent faith formation: Choosing Church (Carol Lytch), Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry (Thomas East, et al.), and the Exemplary Youth Ministry Project. We will also consult the research findings from the ten-year Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project (Mark Yaconelli) on contemplative youth ministry. Each study provides rich insights into adolescent faith life, congregations, and youth ministry, far too many to summarize in this article. For our purposes, we will examine best practices that focus specifically on faith formation.

Best Practice I. Effective adolescent faith formation involves two movements in the development of religious commitment in youth: socialization and religious experience.

Congregations that both teach youth the Christian way of life (socialization) and create conditions where teens feel they meet God (religious experience) tend to have large numbers of teens who predict that they will continue to be active in the church after they leave home. "The process of faith transmission goes two ways: congregations transmit faith to teens and teens transmit back a revised faith that prompts renegotiation about the faith tradition itself. In this renegotiation, the tradition is vitalized." (Lytch, 10)

Socialization is a social process—it happens as a person lives in the religious community. It "builds knowledge of the symbols, rituals, narratives, and it includes the habits—such as church attendance, praying, and Bible reading—that compromise the Christian life" (Lytch, 58). Socialization for young people occurs through the example and mentoring of others, education in the Bible and Christian tradition, Sunday worship, and youth meetings and activities.

Lytch notes that "teens with the most consistent exposure to the environment of the church—especially in the areas of church attendance, praying/Bible reading, and knowledge of the tradition—were the most likely to remain in the tradition. When this is coupled with meaningful religious experiences, the degree of religious loyalty increases even more" (emphasis added) (Lytch, 58). The five key variables that directly relate to nurturing young people's religious commitment are 1) church attendance, 2) praying and/or Bible reading, 3) knowledge of the religious tradition, 4) religious experience, and 5) religious ritual.

Religious Experience is an encounter with God. Lytch observes that "teens reported that they had religious experiences when the regular symbols and rhythms of life were disrupted, intensified, or accented in some way. . . Typically, these religious experiences happened in places that were geographically on the boundaries, in locations away from home—at camp, on retreats, and even in parking lots located literally on the boundaries of the church." (Lytch, 59)

Religious commitment is "fostered in a circular process by which socialization and religious experience mutually build on one another. Because youth have the symbols, stories, and practices to use to interpret their experiences as religious, they are enabled to name experiences of God as such. Congregations that both socialize youth into religious traditions and create conditions where teens feel they experience God tend to have teens who exhibit religious commitment." (Lytch, 198) In fact, young people with the highest degree of commitment to the religious tradition ("unshakable loyalists") had both religious experience and consistent socialization.

Lytch makes special note throughout her book of the importance of faith formation with seniors in high school. She found that senior year is a pivotal time for religious commitment. "High school seniors are fortified in their religious commitment when churches encourage them to use the symbols of their tradition to fashion rites of passage to give definition and religious significance to this ambiguous time. When teens reappropriate traditional practices to represent and deepen their personal experiences of God, the tradition is remade and vitalized. Religious loyalty for contemporary teens is a blending of enduring processes (socialization and religious experience) with new emphasis on personal autonomy and choice." (Lytch, 84)

Best Practice 2. Effective adolescent faith formation offers teens a sense of belonging that ties them into the fellowship of their church, a sense of the comprehensive meaning of the whole of life that is based in religious truth, and opportunities to develop various competencies that assist them as they cross the threshold into adult roles and institutions.

When congregations address three fundamental conditions of human nature—belonging, believing (a sense of meaning), and achieving competence (opportunities to develop competence), they not only attract young people but keep them engaged. "When churches' ministries with youth include these three components, teens will restructure their time and attention to participate in them. . . Teens participated at highest levels in their churches when they perceived them to offer all three of these components." (Lytch, 25-26)

Congregations facilitate a sense of **belonging** by building intergenerational relationships in the congregation and peer relationships in youth groups. "The sense of belonging, more than interesting activities, attracted and held teens in the church. The friendship factor" along with the structures that support it, are the key variables in teen attachment to their churches." (Lytch, 35)

Congregations help adolescents make meaning out of the various segments of their life experience by "pointing to a 'ground of being' (God) on which all other understandings are built. My research finds that when religious institutions seriously address the questions of meaning, teens are attracted to them." (Lytch, 37) Helping teens make meaning of the whole of life can be woven into teaching, small group discussion, worship, and service projects.

Congregations offer teens the challenge and opportunities to develop competence. "Teens were attracted to high goals, standards of excellence, demands worthy of their attention and energy, and rites of passage marking steps toward their adulthood" (Lytch, 37). Opportunities to develop competence include: leadership training, leadership roles in the congregation and youth program, planning programs, speaking in front of a group, and being mentor.

Best Practice 3. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the spiritual life of teenagers and the adults who minister with them through spiritual disciplines and contemplative practices.

Mark Yaconelli, Michael Hryniuk, and their colleagues at The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project have been developing approaches and tools for developing the spiritual life of young people through spiritual disciples and contemplative practices. Through retreats, resources, and mentoring they have worked with congregations to implement a contemplative approach to youth ministry.

The contemplative approach responds directly to the tremendous hunger in young people today for spiritual guides or mentors.

Youth, seeking to enter adulthood, are looking for guides or mentors, who can show them adult forms of life that radiate with the love of Christ. Youth are not simply looking for information about religion—they're looking for how ideas are embodied, how faith is lived out, how following Jesus impacts an adult's perspective and actions. They're looking for adults who embody and

practice their theology with a particular way of life—a way that mirrors the freedom and passion of Jesus Christ. (Yaconelli, 30-31)

Seven Principles of Contemplative Youth Ministry

The project developed seven principles, and their corresponding practices, to describe a contemplative approach to youth ministry that guides the spiritual development of youth. (For a complete description of the seven principles see Chapter 4 in *Growing Souls* by Mark Yaconelli.)

- 1. Sabbath. A contemplative approach to youth ministry is grounded in a Christian community committed to the sacred balance between work and rest. A life that honors Sabbath rest helps us to be more in touch with our heart and soul, more aware of the Spirit of God and more available for relationships of love.
- 2. Prayer. A contemplative approach to youth ministry is rooted in desire for intimacy with God in Christ through a life of prayer. We practice and teach many forms of prayer but are particularly committed to regular periods of contemplative prayer in order to be healed, inspired and guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. (People) commit to practice contemplative prayer with scripture each day as well as at regular times with their community.
- 3. Covenant Community. A contemplative approach to youth ministry is practiced within a covenant community of Christian disciples. . . . we encourage, support and practice small covenant groups who sense a common call to spiritual growth through Christian living and ministry to young people. (People) commit to meeting regularly in covenant communities for sharing, prayer, Scripture study and discernment in the service of their ministry to young people.
- 4. Accompaniment. A contemplative approach to youth ministry is focused on discipleship through the accompaniment of young people. . . . we seek to initiate young persons into mature Christian faith through relationships with elders who join them in living the way of authentic discipleship. . . They offer youth friendship, guidance and

- listening hearts as they make the passage through adolescence into spiritual maturity, "to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).
- 5. Discernment. A contemplative approach to youth ministry is guided by discernment. We practice and teach the disciplines of individual and group discernment so as to be fully available and responsive to the movement of God's grace in our covenant communities, allowing anxiety-driven youth ministry to become Spirit-led youth ministry. (People) seek to learn and practice the spiritual disciplines of discernment as the basis for opening, listening and responding to God's call in youth ministry.
- 6. **Hospitality.** A contemplative approach to youth ministry seeks to welcome, bless and joyfully integrate all young people into the whole church community. . . . we seek the full inclusion of young people and the many gifts they bring into every dimension of church life: worship, teaching, proclamation, fellowship and service.
- 7. Authentic Action. A contemplative approach to youth ministry seeks to engage youth and adults in authentic actions that reflect God's mercy, justice and peace. Communal practices of Sabbath, prayer, discernment and accompaniment find their fulfillment in actions with youth that make visible the gifts of the Holy Spirit. (Yaconelli, 83-86)

Strategies

While there is a great diversity in the ways congregations nurture the spiritual development of young people through the seven principles, there are at least three strategies that shape a congregation's basic approach.

1. Infuse a Contemplative Approach:
Congregations infuse spirituality and
contemplation into everything they do:
youth meetings, retreats, service projects,
and so on. Here are several examples from
congregations involved in The Youth

Ministry and Spirituality Project:

 Offering a special weekly "Sabbathliving" youth meeting with a simple format: conducive meeting room, candles, extended personal sharing,

- contemplative prayer (usually lectio divina)
- Introducing prayer, silence, and a slower pace to youth group meeting and other youth programs.
- Teaching specific prayer exercises (nature prayers, breath prayers, lectio divina, centering prayer) as part of regular youth meetings or specially designed programs such as retreats.
- Creating a prayer labyrinth that is walked in silence. In one congregation the high school students constructed the labyrinth in the church courtyard and taught it to the rest of the congregation.
- Offering regular spiritual development/ prayer retreats, such as an annual Lenten retreat experience.
- Teaching a seven-step process known as a liturgy of discernment (see below), a meeting process that leaves space for groups to listen for God's voice through prayerful attention to God's Word and to the life of each group member. The liturgy is a form of prayer as well as a decision-making tool that enables groups to discern God's call in their ministry to one another and to the community.
- Offering justice immersion trips and extended service projects that incorporate prayer practices, contemplation, reflection, and discernment.
- 2. Develop Adult Mentors: Congregations nurture adults who model discipleship and contemplation, and who serve as mentors or guides for young people on the spiritual journey. Adult mentors, one-on-one or in small groups, offer youth friendship, guidance and listening hearts. An essential part of The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project is a retreat experience for adult leaders focused on their spiritual life and creating a community of adult mentors who meet regular for sharing, prayer, Scripture study and discernment in the service of their ministry to young people.
- 3. Teach Prayer Practices: Congregations deliberately and intentionally teach young people practices from the Christian tradition to develop their spiritual lives. The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project emphasized four prayer practices.

- Lectio Divina
- Centering Prayer
- The Awareness Examen: A Prayer of Discernment
- Liturgy for Discernment—involving seven movements: ritual, relating, receiving, ruminating, reflecting, responding, and returning

(For descriptions of each practice see the Appendix in *Growing Souls* by Mark Yaconelli.)

Impact

What is the impact of a contemplative approach on adults, youth, and the congregation? In his review of their research on congregations from The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, Mark Yaconelli writes about uncovering the hunger for God in adults and youth.

Perhaps the most unanticipated, encouraging, and even heartbreaking discovery was the deep longing for life in the Spirit. It was revealed in the number of youth leaders longing to listen for God; the many youth surprised and delighted to have their souls addressed; the pastors and church elders yearning for someone to give them permission to attend to their own experiences of God. The great secret we uncovered within our work was that youth leaders and youth have souls, and despite the conventional wisdom, these leaders and youth don't need Christian rock bands, or amusement parks, or clever curricula. The secret we discovered is that what they need and desire is God. (Yaconelli, 258)

Through their evaluations and interviews, Yaconelli and his colleagues discovered the impact of a contemplative approach on youth and adults.

- When youth leaders practice the presence of God within their ministries, lives are changed. (Yaconelli, 258)
- When youth ministries pray and attend to God, there is greater patience, generosity, kindness, self-discipline, hope, joy, and love, as well as other fruits of the Spirit. (Yaconelli, 258)
- With regular exposure to spiritual exercises youth began to notice their youth programs felt more centered on God and the spiritual life, and less focused on social and recreational activities. One student commented, "Youth group feels

- different...Before it was about friends, not it seems to be about God." (Yaconelli, 33)
- The most frequent comment by young people on the contemplative approach to youth ministry was the transformation in how adults related to them. Young people noticed a new emphasis on hospitality and relationship within their youth ministry programs that invited greater trust in both the congregation and the Christian life. Young people spoke of the adults within their youth ministry as being particularly alive and attentive in a different way than most other adults with whom they came in contact. It was these relationships with "elders" within their faith community that kept young people involved, interested, and even forgiving of their congregations. What seemed most important to young people was feeling welcomed and affirmed by the adults in their churches in a way that allowed a mutual respect and spiritual seeking to emerge. (Yaconelli, 33)
- In evaluating the young people's experience of silence, solitude, and contemplative prayer, a majority of students within the project expressed a desire for continual growth in prayer and spiritual practice. (Yaconelli, 34)
- Young people remarked about the lack of open time and space in their lives and were surprised by the "holy leisure" they encountered in the project's contemplative retreats and in their youth groups.

 (Yaconelli, 34)
- Other young people felt affirmed by the diversity of prayer within the Christian tradition and found the different forms of prayer encouraging to their own spiritual growth. (Yaconelli, 34)
- There was a widespread desire among youth in our participating churches to integrate spiritual practices into daily life, such as using workout times as times for prayer and meditation, journaling, and setting aside time in the early morning or before bed to practice silent prayer. (Yaconelli, 34)

Best Practice 4. Effective adolescent faith formation equips and engages young people to participate in the life, ministries, and practices of the congregation; and to assume leadership in congregational and youth activities.

A recurring theme in the three research studies is the impact of the congregation upon the faith life of young people and the willingness of the congregation to involve young people as full members of the community. The *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry* (EPDYM) study describes it this way:

A parish must be willing to experience the change that comes with being a community with active youth members. This insight is very descriptive of the parish communities that were studied in this project. They were willing to let the young people in their midst become full members in the community. They were willing to put their energy and resources into developing youth ministry. They were willing to let youth be leaders and share in ministries side by side with adults. Most of all, they were willing to truly be in relationship with the youth in their midst. Through this relationship, the community changed and grew. (East, et al., 9)

Specifically the EPDYM study identified the following characteristics of congregations:

- Youth feel at home in the parish are genuinely known and liked by parish members.
- Youth are integrated into the full life of the parish. This involvement of youth in parish ministries and parish activities is planned for, encouraged, and affirmed.
- Youth share in leadership and decisionmaking in parish committees, ministries, and organizations.
- Youth have opportunities to witness to their faith with peers, children, and adults.
- Parish staff and leadership are supportive of youth ministry and youth involvement.

Adult leaders, parish staff members, and youth, interviewed in the EPDYM study, repeatedly describe their parish as a home for youth, using images like "second home," "part of the fabric," and "heart of the parish." "They describe in glowing

terms their parish's feeling about young people and their parish's support for youth ministry. The leaders in these parish communities have a common vision for youth ministry and work together on behalf of youth. . . These communities care deeply for the youth in their midst, and—as in all healthy relationships—this affection is mutual. Youth care about the parish and feel connected with adults in the community. One powerful image that leaders used to describe their community is a web of relationships: youth to youth, youth to adults, youth ministry leaders to parents, parents to youth, youth to the parish as a whole. Through this web, youth are served, included, and empowered." (East, et al., 15)

Strategies

How can a congregation equip and engage young people in the life, ministries, and practices of the congregation?

- 1. Congregations can examine their activities—
 from worship to education to social events—
 to determine if they are welcoming and
 involving of young people. Consider
 questions such as the following in examining
 the role of young people in the congregation:
 - How and where are adolescents already participating in church life?
 - What can we do to better enable the participation of adolescents?
 - What can we do to prepare young people more fully for participation in the community? What can we do to prepare adults to accept young people in the life and ministries of the congregation.
 - How will adolescents' participation contribute to the community's life, ministries, and/or practices?
- 2. Create a youth program or task form to analyze youth involvement in the parish or community, using the questions above. For example: organize the young people into teams and give them 1-2 months to explore the life and ministries of the parish. Tell them to interview people, take photos or video, and create a report on youth involvement in parish life for young people, for the church staff and leadership, and for the community.
- 3. Congregations can raise the profile of young people in the faith community by making them more visible at parish gatherings,

recognizing their presence in the community, and affirming their contributions to the parish and the wider community. Congregations can also pray for youth events, such as service trips or retreats, and for important milestones in the lives of young people, such as graduations and other accomplishments.

- Faith formation with adolescents can connect learning and community participation so that the content of faith formation program is aligned with congregational life, thereby preparing teens for participation in the life of the church. For example, learning programs can prepare teens with an understanding of the theology, symbols, rituals, and meaning of Holy Week, and then support their active participation in Holy Week service of the church. Young people can be involved the preparation and leadership of Holy Week services by utilizing their talents in art, drama, music, leading prayer, and so on. Other examples include study and reflection on the Sunday Scripture readings in preparation for worship and preparation for a community-wide service project. The key is that what youth are learning in their program is aligned with hands-on participation in congregational life.
- Faith formation with adolescents can offer intergenerational programming to build relationships and faith sharing between young people and other generations. For example, conducting seasonal intergenerational faith formation programs to prepare the community for participation in church events, liturgical seasons, etc.; transforming a youth-only program to include other generations, such as redesigning a youth service program into an intergenerational service program; incorporating intergenerational dialogues into youth programming; and developing mentoring relationships between youth and adults for prayer, spiritual direction, service involvement, and confirmation. (For more on intergenerational learning see the article on "Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation" in this issue.)

It is important to remember that adolescents are not only shaped by practices in which they participate, they also "act back" on the community with new insights, ideas, and actions that can contribute to the transformation of the community. In many congregations young people who participate in a summer service/immersion program share their experiences (stories, photos, video) with the whole congregation at Sunday worship or through presentations to the whole community. For many congregations this has been the catalyst for getting the whole congregation involved in the work of justice and service. In this case young people have led the congregation into a new practice and ministry.

Equipping for Leadership

A hallmark of effective congregations and youth ministry is that young people are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational and youth activities. Both the Exemplary Youth Ministry and the Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry studies identified this as a best practice. Through their preparation for and involvement in leadership roles, young people grow in the knowledge and practice of their faith.

Developing youth as leaders is an excellent opportunity for faith formation in which young people are equipped and apprenticed into congregational and youth ministry leadership roles in worship, music, witness, and service ministries of the congregations. Because their personal gifts and skills are matched with avenues of service and ministry, the youth respond in enthusiastic ways. They rise to the occasion. When adults expect much of the youth, and help them match gifts with opportunities for service, they experience God at work in their lives.

EPDYM found that in parishes with effective youth ministry, youth are active in and have ownership in the parish's youth ministry. They are not just passive recipients of ministry by adults. Youth share leadership for visioning and implementing programs and strategies. They witness to their faith with their peers. The opportunities for youth leadership roles are varied: youth mentoring younger youth, peer leaders on retreats, planning programs, leading team meetings, leading or coleading small faith sharing groups, and preparing worship.

How can a congregation equip and involve youth as leaders in congregation?

 Identify ways to integrate youth into existing congregational leadership roles.
 Identify all of the possibilities for leadership in the ministries, programs, and activities of the church: councils and committees, ministries and programs (liturgy, justice and service, social activities, education). Identify specific roles for adolescents such as teachers in children's faith formation or as readers, greeters, musicians, artists for Sunday worship.

- 2. Establish an apprenticeship program for youth leadership which includes formation in leadership (skills workshops, a spiritual formation retreat, regular support gatherings) and an adult mentor already involved in church leadership and ministry, who can guide and support the young person. For leadership in youth ministry the mentor can be older an older teen.
- Create new leadership roles for youth which draw upon some of their unique and special gifts that can benefit the entire community, such as web site design, video productions, drama productions, music (instrumental and voice), and art.
- 4. Offer an annual youth leadership training course, camp, or retreat to develop the leadership spirituality, skills, and practices of young people.

Best Practice 5. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the faith of parents and the whole family, and equips, resources, and supports parents in sharing faith with teens.

One of the most significant and startling findings in the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) is the impact of parental faith and religiosity on the beliefs and practices of teenagers. NSYR found: "of parents who report that their faith is *extremely* important in their daily lives, 67 percent of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents' teens report that faith is not very or not important in their lives" (Smith, 57). The opposite is also true: parents for whom faith is somewhat or not at all important have teens who believe the same thing. Smith concludes, "In sum, therefore, we think that the best general rule of thumb is this" "We'll get what we are" (emphasis added). By normal processes of socialization, and unless other significant forces intervene, more than what parents might say they want as religious outcomes of their children,

most parents most likely will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves are." (Smith, 57)

The importance of parental faith and practice on the lives of children and teens is clear. Smith concludes by saying:

"Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misconceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents (emphasis added). Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives. ...the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents do look like. Parents and other adults most likely "will get what they are." This recognition may be empowering to parents, or alarming, or both. But it is a fact worth taking seriously in any case." (Smith, 261)

Smith and Denton conclude: "The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities" (emphasis added) (Smith, 267).

It is clear from the research that parents are the most influential factor in faith transmission, but how do parents influence their teen's religious loyalty. In her study Carol Lytch found that is very important for parents to link teens to their churches, the primary place were they develop religious commitment through socialization and religious experience.

- First, the early religious nurture of parents in linking the child to the church and teaching the child the stories, symbols, and practices of their faith is the source for many of the enduring traits of identity, religious experience, and patterns of thought and action
- Second, the parents' role of linking the child to the church continues to be important in the teen years. Parents influence teens in what they believe and how they practice their faith by maintaining a church attendance rule even into the teen years.
- Third, one of the most important things parents do is choose a church that is

attractive to teens. If parents choose a church that attracts teens by the sense of belonging, meaning, and competencies that it offers, parents facilitate the link between the teen and the church that is crucial for developing religious loyalty. (Lytch, 199)

The Exemplary Youth Ministry Study confirms the important of parents and the family. The study discovered five family assets that promote faith maturity in young people. The first three focus on life within the family, the other two describe what the congregation is doing to support parents.

- 1. Strong Parental Faith: Parent(s) possess and practice a vital and informed faith.
- Family Faith Practices: Parents engage youth and family in conversations, prayer, bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life
- 3. Family Harmony: Family expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.
- 4. Congregations Equip Parents: Congregations offer instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equips parents for nurturing faith at home.
- Congregations Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships: Congregations offer parentyouth activities that strengthen parentyouth relationships.

Strategies

How can a congregation nurture the faith of parents and the whole family?

- 1. Equip parents of teenagers for their parenting roles and sharing faith with teens through classes, workshops, retreats, and/or support groups. These could include such things as parenting classes, parent-youth discussion times, parent support groups, seminars for parents of younger youth as they enter adolescence, seminars for parents of older youth as they provide for college, and so forth. Give parents the opportunity to meet and socialize with other parents of teens.
- 2. Plan programs for parents and teens on common areas of interest and need, such as parent-teen community, making vocational decisions, cultural/media influences, social issues, and so on. Plan activities where teens and parents do something together, such as a parent-teen service program.

- Plan specific programs (learning, service, social, worship) for the whole family and/or re-design an existing youth program to include the whole family as a regular part of the annual calendar of youth programming.
- Provide parent information and resources for developing the faith life of teenagers. This information can take many forms: print, audio, video, and/or web-based.
- 5. Involve parents in leadership roles and in the planning processes for youth ministry. Seek the input of parents in the programming and scheduling of activities. Develop a youth ministry council that includes parent representatives to bring a family perspectives to programs and activities, and their scheduling.

(See also the articles on "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation" and "Best Practices in Parent Faith Formation" for more ideas and strategies.)

Best Practice 6. Effective adolescent faith formation utilizes a variety of program models to develop the faith maturity of young people.

The Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry and Exemplary Youth Ministry studies conclude that there is no one best program model for adolescent faith formation. The most effective congregations utilize a variety of program models in their faith formation efforts. The Exemplary Youth Ministry found that effective youth programming is characterized by the following factors:

- A Caring Environment: providing multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging
- Quality Relationships: developing authentic relationships among youth and adults establishing an environment of presence and life engagement
- Focus on Jesus Christ: the life and ministry of Jesus inspires the ministry's mission, practices, and relationships
- Life Issues: the full range of young people's lives is valued and addressed
- Well Organized: engaging participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation, and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations

Effective congregations integrate a variety of approaches to provide young people with engaging and varied learning opportunities.

- Retreats. Youth retreats have a unique ability to touch the hearts of young people. Retreat experiences help build communities of faith, help youth grow closer to God, and draw them back into active involvement in parish life. Simply put, retreats have the power to change the lives of young people, calling them more deeply into discipleship. (EPDYM)
- **Service.** Participating in Christian service has a powerful impact in the faith life of teens. Christian service experiences make faith real and alive for young people. These experiences foster growth in faith and often change the lives of young people, sometimes dramatically. Some of the changes in the lives of young people include young people's perspective on the poor, awareness of the causes of social justice, empathy for others, and feeling valuable because they can make a difference. (EPDYM) The most effective service programming combines hands-on action with preparation for service through a course or workshop and the reflection upon the service experience.

Milestones and Life Transitions.

- Confirmation, receiving a driver's license, graduation from high school moments of sickness (personal, family, friends), the death of a loved one, and life decisions are all important milestones or life transitions that provide an excellent opportunity for adolescent faith formation. Congregations would do well to carefully plan 1) the preparation for marking a milestone, 2) the experience of the celebration or remembrance of the milestone, and 3) follow-up after the milestone. A milestones plan includes congregational activities and individual/home activities. (See the article on "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation" for a description and example of milestones faith formation.)
- Weekly Youth Meetings. Weekly youth meetings of 1½-2 hours provide a setting for teaching specific faith themes and life issues in combination with other program components, such as community building and prayer.

■ Small Faith Communities or Cell Groups.

Young people are organized into small groups of ten to twelve members that meet weekly or bi-weekly with adult mentors at the church or in homes. One type of small groups focuses on discipleship or faith sharing: Bible study, faith theme or issue-oriented, or Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing. Another type of small group focuses on practices such as prayer, service/faith in action, leadership, or ministry. This small group setting is extremely good at building an environment for faith sharing and relationship building, as well as involving youth in leading discussions and activities.

- Monthly Youth Gathering. Many congregations organize their youth programs on a monthly basis with a integrated approach of community building, meal, prayer or liturgy, social activities, and teaching. Each monthly gathering addresses a specific faith theme as part of the overall program.
- Courses and Workshops. Increasingly faith formation programs with adolescents focuses on short-term learning opportunities, such as a four or six-week courses or one-day workshops that provide focused learning on a particular faith theme, life issue, book of the Bible and other content areas.

■ Intergenerational Faith Formation.

- Intergenerational learning provides a format in which young people learn with all ages, as well as with their peers in a learning model that includes community-building, prayer, faith sharing, small group discussion, and experiential learning activities. Many times young people have a leadership role in intergenerational learning, such as presenting a drama or video presentation to the whole group. (For more on intergenerational faith formation see the article on "Best Practices in Intergenerational Faith Formation.")
- Independent Learning. With the increasing number and variety of audio and video podcasts and online learning resources, independent learning offers a 24/7 approach to faith formation of busy teens. Examples of independent learning include: magazines (print or online), podcasts/audio learning, video podcasts and video-based learning, online bible studies, and online learning

centers, such as Disciples Now (www.disciplesnow.com) and Spirit and Song (www.spiritandsong.com).

Best Practice 7. Effective faith formation with adolescents respects the ways teenagers learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multisensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

The dramatic changes in our culture and new research into learning, such as brain-based learning, multiple intelligence, and styles of learning, are changing the way we understand how adolescents learn. Congregations are using contemporary cultural trends and research to create and teach learning experiences that engage the whole teenager. At the heart of the most effective learning is creating an environment in which relationships among the teens can flourish and designing programs that are experiential, relevant, and engaging.

The Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry study found that effective faith formation:

- begins with real-life issues and connects faith to life:
- is facilitated by open-minded, authentic, and faith-filled adults;
- includes community building;
- includes peer sharing, peer witness, and youth leadership;
- teaches about religious identity;
- is experiential, active, and innovative; and
- doesn't feel like school—doesn't involve long lectures or too much focus on textbooks

The most effective congregations are using research and contemporary cultural trends to design and teach learning experiences for today's adolescents that several key features.

Incorporating learning activities that teach to the different *intelligences* of adolescents. Embracing a "multiple intelligences" approach provides different ways for teens to learn or "know" a particular concept, Bible story or belief. While not every program can incorporate activities for all eight intelligences, having a greater variety of ways to learn promotes more effective learning and engages teens more fully in the learning experience. The multiple

intelligences identified by Howard Gardner include:

- verbal-linguistic (word smart, book smart)
- logical-mathematical (number smart, logic smart)
- visual-spatial (art smart, picture smart)
- bodily-kinesthetic (body smart, movement smart)
- musical-rhythmic (music smart, sound smart)
- naturalist (nature smart, environment smart)
- interpersonal (people smart, group smart)
- intrapersonal (self smart, introspection smart)
- Respecting the variety of *learning styles* among young people by incorporating a diversity of learning activities and methods in a learning experience, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, handson, concrete experiences, some through reflective observation, some through an exploration and analysis of knowledge, theories, and concepts, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices. (For further information see: *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, by David Kolb. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984.)
- Incorporating small group participation as an essential component of all learning so that young people discuss and process together what they are learning, reflect on their faith and life experience, have the opportunity to question, and envision ways to live or practice their faith. Group participation requires creating an environment that is safe, caring, accepting, and trustworthy so that young people feel free to share, discuss, question, and apply.
- Utilizing all of the **senses** in a learning experience where adolescents can taste, smell, touch, and hear things related to the topic of the session.
- Immersing adolescents in *images* and the visual nature of learning. Teenagers are growing up in an image-driven culture. They "hear with their eyes." Images, art, and film are integral to effective learning today.

- Participating in *collaborative learning*, in non-competitive groups, where they can learn-by-doing: working together to research a faith theme or life issue, developing a creative project (video, drama, art, demonstration, web site) that integrates what they are learning, and practicing and presenting their project.
- Engaging adolescents in *practicing* and *performing* what they are learning by incorporating real-life application activities in the learning experience. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it.

Conclusion

As with all effective congregational ministries, leadership is essential in adolescent faith formation. As an integral element of congregation's overall ministry with youth, leadership for adolescent faith formation is part of the leadership structure of youth ministry. The Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry (EPDYM) and Exemplary Youth Ministry (EYM) studies identified the leadership roles—pastor, youth minister, youth ministry team, and adult/youth leaders—and qualities that make for an effective congregational youth ministry.

A critically important element in effective adolescent faith formation is the adult teacher or mentor. Teachers possess and practice a vital and informed faith (EYM). An adult of mature faith lies at the foundation of all good teaching of young people. Teachers are models for teens. They manifest the presence of God in their lives. Their continuing growth in faith and active discipleship offer living examples for teens. They share their own faith story as they transmit the faith story of the Christian tradition.

Teachers foster authentic relationships and effective practices with youth within a clear vision strengthened by training and support (EYM). "Adults who work with youth must be genuine and real. They must have a passion for youth and be faith-filled. They are willing to be present to youth where they are: in the context of their lives. These adult volunteers build positive relationships with young people that are based in faith." In the conclusion to Soul Searching, Christian Smith reminds us "Adults should be aware that better adult teaching of youth will require stronger adult relationships with youth. More important in the effective religious teaching of teens than, say, pedagogical techniques will be the building of sustained, meaningful adult relationships with the

teens they teach. This will require investments of time, attention, and readiness to be open and vulnerable with teens." (Smith, 267)

Teachers know contemporary educational theory and methods for teaching adolescents today. They function more as a facilitator of learning, shifting their role from the "teacher-as-expert" to the "teacher-as-resource-for-learning." While transmitting the faith tradition is important, teachers guide young people in developing practices for living the Christian faith, and create space for the young people to find their own voice as disciples.

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Web Sites on the Research Studies

- www.exemplarym.com the web site for the Exemplary Youth Project contains research summaries, profiles of exemplary congregations in the study, and conference papers and presentations from the 2005 national conference.
- www.youthandreligion.org the web site for the National Study on Youth and Religion contains news on the project, research findings, and research reports on selected topics from the study
- www.ymsp.org the web site for the Youth and Spirituality Project contains an overview and news about the project, articles, and resources
- www.cmdnet.org the web site for the Center for Ministry Development has additional information on the EPDYM study by going to the "Youth Ministry" section of the web site

Practice Ideas

Planning for Adolescent Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Adolescent Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with adolescents in your congregation.

Best Practice I. Effective adolescent faith formation involves two movements in the development of religious commitment in youth: socialization and religious experience.

- How does your congregation provide for the socialization of young people into the Christian way of life? What are your congregation's strengths and weaknesses in providing socialization for youth?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can develop to enhance or expand its socialization efforts?
- How does your congregation provide opportunities for religious experiences where teens can meet God face to face? What are your congregation's strengths and weaknesses in providing religious experiences for youth?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can develop to enhance or expand religious experience opportunities for youth?

Best Practice 2. Effective adolescent faith formation offers teens a sense of belonging that ties them into the fellowship of their church, a sense of the comprehensive meaning of the whole of life that is based in religious truth, and opportunities to develop various competencies that assist them as they cross the threshold into adult roles and institutions.

■ How does your congregation facilitate a sense of **belonging** among young people? Identify specific ways this happens in the congregation and in youth ministry.

- How can your congregation strengthen the sense of belonging young people feel?
- How does your church help teens make meaning out of the various segments of their life experience in the context of the Christian faith?
- How can your congregation provide new ways for young people to make meaning out of their life in light of the Christian faith?
- What opportunities does your congregation offer teens to develop **competence**? What is the content of these programs and opportunities?
- How can your congregation provide new ways for young people to develop competence?

Best Practice 3. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the spiritual life of teenagers and the adults who minister with them through spiritual disciplines and contemplative practices.

- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> nurture the spiritual life of young people? Identify the settings, programs, and/or activities.
- What are the ways that your church **infuses** spiritual development and a contemplative approach into youth programs and activities? What specific things do you do?
- How can strengthen or expand your efforts, as well as initiate new projects and activities? (See the article for ideas.)
- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> nurture the spiritual life of adult leaders and mentors? Is there a community of adult mentors? Identify the settings, programs, and/or activities.

- How can your congregation strengthen or expand efforts to nurture the spiritual life of adult mentors?
- What are the ways that your congregation teaches spiritual practices and disciplines?
 What specific spiritual development programs and activities do you offer? What is the content of these programs?
- How can your congregation strengthen or expand efforts, as well as initiate new programs and activities? (See the article for ideas.)

Best Practice 4. Effective adolescent faith formation equips and engages young people to participate in the life, ministries, and practices of the congregation; and to assume leadership in congregational and youth activities.

- How and where are youth <u>currently</u> participating in the life, ministries, and activities of the whole congregation? Identify the settings and ways they are already involved?
- How does your congregation recognize and accept youth as full members of the congregation with roles and responsibilities?
- How do educational programs and resources for teenagers provide them with resources—language, practices, rituals, habits—that enable them to participate fully in the life of the community through worship, prayer, service, learning, relationships, leadership, and so on?
- How well does what young people are learning in educational programs connect to hands-on participation in congregational life?
- What can your congregation do to better enable the participation of youth in congregational life? What can we do to prepare young people more fully for participation in the community? What can we do to prepare adults to accept young people in the life and ministries of the congregation?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can develop to more fully involve teenagers in congregational life, and prepare them for this participation?

- How and where are youth <u>currently</u> involved in leadership in the congregation and youth ministry?
- How are young people currently prepared for leadership?
- How can your congregation create more opportunities for youth to be involved in leadership? (See the article for ideas.)

Best Practice 5. Effective adolescent faith formation nurtures the faith of parents and the whole family, and equips, resources, and supports parents in sharing faith with teens.

- What are the ways that your church 1) offers opportunities for nurturing parental faith, 2) supports parents' efforts in practicing faith at home (prayer, devotions, service, caring conversations), and 3) provides them with resources to develop faith at home?
- What <u>new</u> initiatives can you implement that will involve the parents of teenagers? For example:
 - ☐ Equip parents of teenagers for their parenting roles and sharing faith with teens through classes, workshops, retreats, and/or support groups.
 - ☐ Plan programs for parents and teens on common areas of interest.
 - Plan programs (learning, service, social, worship) for the whole family and/or redesign an existing youth program to include the whole family.
 - ☐ Provide parent information and resources for developing the faith life of teenagers.
 - ☐ Involve parents in leadership roles and in the planning processes for youth ministry.

Best Practice 6. Effective adolescent faith formation utilizes a variety of program models to develop the faith maturity of young people.

Which of the following program models is your

congregation currently using in adolescent faith

formation? What are the strengths and

weaknesses of your current models?		
	Retreats	
	Service programming	
	Milestones and life transitions faith	
	formation	
	Weekly youth meetings with teaching	
	Small faith communities or cell groups	
	Monthly youth gathering with teaching	
	Courses and workshops.	
	Intergenerational faith formation	
	Independent learning	
	1 0	

What are one or two <u>new</u> program models that your church can introduce to strengthen faith formation with adolescents and attract more teens?

Best Practice 7. Effective faith formation with adolescents respects the ways teenagers learn today by offering learning activities that are experiential, image-rich, multi-sensory, interactive, engaging, and varied in learning style.

- Examine each of your congregation's educational programs and resources for adolescents to determine how well they utilize the characteristics of learning today.
 - ☐ Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of teenagers.
 - verbal-linguistic
 - logical-mathematical
 - visual-spatial
 - bodily-kinesthetic
 - musical-rhythmic
 - naturalist
 - interpersonal
 - intrapersonal
 - ☐ Respecting the variety of learning styles among young people by incorporating a diversity of learning activities and methods in a learning experience.

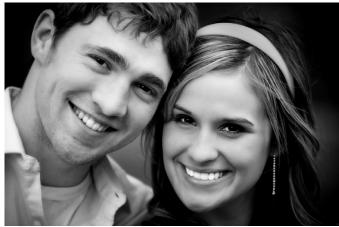
Incorporating small group participation as
an essential component of all learning so
that young people discuss and process
together what they are learning, reflect on
their faith and life experience, have the
opportunity to question, and envision ways
to live or practice their faith.
Utilizing all of the senses in a learning
experience where teens can taste, smell,
touch, and hear things related to the topic
of the session.
Immersing teens in images and the visual
nature of learning.
Participating in collaborative learning,
where teens can learn-by-doing: working
together to research a faith theme or life
issue, developing a creative project that
integrates what they are learning, and
practicing and presenting their project

☐ Engaging adolescents in practicing and performing what they are learning by incorporating real life application activities in the learning experience.

■ How can adolescent faith formation programs and resources be strengthened and/or redesigned to address the characteristics of effective learning today?

Action Strategies





Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation

John Roberto and Mike Hayes

Most people involved in faith formation would agree that ministry with young adults is filled with much uncertainty and angst. In this present day and age, we all must grapple with a new and evolving technological age in which a thirst for instant gratification is always in the foreground. These aspects of our American culture are well on the minds of many ministry professionals as they attempt to evangelize and serve the needs of young adults in their ministry. At the same time the diverse needs of the two generations that now fall within the classification of young adulthood—Generation X (born 1964-1979) and the Millennial Generation (born post 1980)—have caused a chasm in the focus of this ministry. This is not necessarily a new occurrence, but rather something that can be explained by comparing recent trends in the development of young adults.

Young Adults and Religion

In Gen X Religion, Richard Flory analyzes fifteen congregational case studies of churches who minister to young adults, and identifies five major characteristics of Generation X religion.

- 1. Generation X religion emphasizes the sensual and experiential, combining the sacred and the profane and incorporating text, image, music, dance, and the body as venues for the expression of religious beliefs.
- Generation X religion is entrepreneurial in finding cultural and institutional space to create new religious expressions based on their existing lifestyle interests.
- 3. Generation X religion is, on the one hand, similar to Baby Boomer religion in that it emphasizes personal identity, religious experience, and spiritual seeking; but it differs in that it roots the quest for religious identity in community, rather than a more purely personal spiritual quest.
- 4. Race, ethnic, and gender diversity and inclusiveness is an explicit goal of Generation X religion.
- 5. There is an insistence on an "authentic" religious experience in Generation X religion, both on the part of the individual and as found in the religious communities that GenXers choose to join, that acknowledges the ambiguities, trials, and successes of life. (Flory, 234-235)

Robert Wuthnow, in his study of research on younger adults (20s through mid-40s), After the Baby Boomers, describes the young adult approach to religion and spirituality as spiritual tinkering, which he finds quite common among young adults today, and predicts as much for the future. He describes a tinkerer as a person who "puts together a life from whatever skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand. . . Their approach to life is practical. They get things done, and usually this happens by improvising, by piecing together an idea from here, a skill from there, and a contact from somewhere else (Wuthnow, 13).

Spiritual tinkering is a reflection of the pluralistic religious society in which we live, the freedom we permit ourselves in making choices about faith, and the necessity of making those choices in the face of uprootedness and change that most young adults experience. It involves piecing together ideas about spirituality from many sources, especially through conversations with one's friends. Spiritual tinkering involves a large minority of young adults in church shopping and church hopping. It also takes the form of searching for answers to the perennial existential questions in venues that go beyond religious traditions, and in expressing spiritual interests through music and art as well as through prayer and devotional ready. (Wuthnow, 135)

Tinkering is evident among the large number of young adults who believe in God, life after death, and the divinity of Jesus, for instance, but who seldom attend religious services. Their beliefs lend continuity with the past—with the Bible stories they probably learned as children—and their behavior lets them adapt to the demands of the present. Spending a weekend with friends, buying groceries and doing the laundry, or getting ready for a hectic week at work takes precedence over spending yet another Sunday morning at worship. Tinkering is equally evident in the quest to update one's beliefs about spirituality. The core holds steady, persuading one that the Bible is still a valuable source of moral insight, for example, but the core is amended almost continuously through conversations with friends, reflections about unusual experiences on vacation or at work, or from a popular song. (Wuthnow, 215)

Young Adult Participation in Church Life

Decline in Church Participation

The historical lack of young adult presence—including the gifts and talents that young adults offer the church—at Sunday worship have been heartbreaking losses for churches since the turn of the new millennium. Truly, it is a tragedy that too often this generation has been written off as unreachable. Even worse have been the attitudes of both clerical and lay ministers that assume young adults will return to the church as they mature or

gain more life experience or simply marry and rear children. The sad truth is that this has not been true for at least the past decade. Research conducted by Dean Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson and Juan Gonzalez in 2001 states it simply: "Growing older by itself has no overall effect in pushing basic values in one direction or another. We should not expect that today's young people will come to resemble today's older adults when they mature" (Hoge et al., 60-61).

Many Catholic young adults continue to identify themselves as Catholic, and as Hoge and his colleagues point out, they "cannot imagine being anything other than Catholic" (Hoge, et al., 218). Yet,

the evidence suggests that young adults are only loosely tethered to the Church. Barely half say they would never leave the Church. Only four in ten say the Church is the most important part—or one of the most important parts—of their lives. Only one-fourth goes to Mass on a weekly basis. Less than half believe that the teaching authority claimed by the Vatican is very important...And if a sizable number of young adults report that they do not understand their faith well enough to explain it to their own children, they have a problem, and so does the Church. (D'Antonio, et al., 83)

According to a survey conducted by LifeWay Research, seven in ten Protestants—both evangelical and mainline—ages 18 to 30, who went to church regularly in high school, said they quit attending by age 23; and 34 percent of those said they had not returned, even sporadically, by age 30. That means about one in four Protestant young adults have left the church. Interestingly, the survey found that those who stayed with or returned to church grew up with both parents committed to the church, pastors whose sermons were relevant and engaging, and church members who invested in their spiritual development.

There are plentiful opportunities for young adults to reconnect with the church. Yet utilizing these opportunities requires an understanding that the disconnect stems from several different sources, including an expectation of immediate gratification, high mobility, the demands of the world eclipsing those of spiritual needs, and a failure to capitalize on young adults moments of return to the church (marriage, a child's baptism, or death of a parent). Additionally, the rise of terrorism and violence in a world that seems to have gone mad has harshly marked the Millennial generation's religious landscape. A quick glance at current events in their

lives over the course of their late teens and early adult years paints a tragic picture: Columbine, September 11, 2001, the Indian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and the shootings at Virginia Tech, among others. Combine the horror of living in this precarious time with the fact that this was the most watched over generation in recent history, and there's no surprise that a need for certainty emerges.

Their Gen X counterparts, who are at the upper age range of today's young adults, often do not share the Millenials' views on the importance of certainty. Gen Xers, already at an age where they have formed and re-formed their sense of whether the world is a relatively safe place or not, have been able to more appropriately navigate the ambiguity of the recent tragedies. Moreover, they often depend on their friends and close mentors to help them muck through the tough times of these events. Because Gen Xers were the first latchkey kids and often, children of divorce, the world has always been a rather harsh and unfriendly world. For many the attitude that nothing or no one can be trusted has always existed. Their lack of affiliation with any institutional church (or any institution, in general) has always been a hallmark for them. Institutions, be they familial, civic, or religious, are always looked on with suspicion.

In the study, Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation, Belzer, Flory, Roumani, and Loskota make it clear that

Organized religion in the United States is on the threshold of a seismic shift. Today, religious and community leaders are witnessing a crisis in the transmission of religious memory, practice, and tradition to the next generation. In major urban centers across the United States, there is a generalized perception that individuals in the twenties and early thirties constitute a "black hole" in congregational life. Members of the young adult population are simply missing from most churches, synagogues, and mosques. Religious and community leaders are given to lamenting about the throngs of young people who are "spiritual but not religious" as a way to explain young people's absence from organized religious life. (Belzer et al., 103)

Who Does Participate?

The decline in young adult involvement in church life is well documented. But who does participate? From an analysis of research studies we know that:

- Young adults are less likely to participate in religious services than they were a generation ago.
- Church attenders between age 21 and 45 are disproportionately female (66%).
- Young adults in their twenties are poorly represented among regular church attenders.
- Those who do populate the pews are an increasingly skewed cross-section of young adults. They are married (60%), whereas the unmarried scarcely frequent congregations at all. Currently the typical church attender is married and has children, while the typical non-attender is single and does not have children (Wuthnow, 68).

In Young Adult Catholics, Hoge, Dinges, Johnson, and Gonzales developed a profile of the most involved Catholic young adults who go to Mass weekly and are active in parish life. The parishinvolved Catholic young adult (8% of all the young adults studied) not only is involved in parish life, but also religious in every other way. "These people are higher in belief in traditional doctrine, more loyal to the Catholic Church, more likely to take part in Scripture study groups and prayer groups, more likely to have private devotional practices, and more likely to go for private confession" (Hoge, et al., 75). The research uncovered several key practices or behaviors of involved Catholic young adults. They

- participate in a Scripture study group (36% in the past year);
- participate in a prayer group (36% in the past year);
- pray daily (62%);
- have three or more of their five closest friends in the same parish (33%);
- made a retreat or day of recollection (46% in the past two years);
- participated in private confession (64% in the past two years); and
- read the Bible at home (73% in the past two years) (Hoge, et al., 76).

These young adults have also been involved in a parish ministry in the past six months; the largest portion were working in the religious education program or on a parish committee.

How Do Young Adults Choose a Congregation?

In the study Congregations That Get It the researchers found that young adults "exercised typical American individualism as they decided about associating with religious communities, sometimes participating in more than one simultaneously" (Belzer, et al., 106). The research team identified the following factors influencing young adult's participation in a faith community.

- choosing a specific community, rather than committing to a larger denomination;
- making choices based on a number of factors, such as interpersonal relationships, worship style, geographic location, opportunities for involvement, and accessibility of leadership;
- deciding how often to attend and the extent of their participation;
- choosing how much of the official teachings to accept and how much ritual observance to practice;
- balancing their individual authority with their identity as members of a community and religious tradition;
- seeking a community where there is both flexibility and structure;
- being experientially engaged as opposed to a "show up and watch" style of religious participation; and
- building interpersonal relationships with people who express and explore their religious identities in similar ways; relationship building was a fundamental aspect of young adults' congregational experience (Belzer, et al., p. 106-107).

The LifeWay research affirms many of the same findings. Young adults are longing for community and fellowship with peers, looking for ways to reach people in need, and circling the church but not always finding a home in it.

- Connection is the key. Community with other young adults is extremely important in their lives.
- Young adults seek authentic answers in the Bible and Christian tradition, best learned through participation in small group meetings.
- Making a difference is essential by having the opportunity to meet the needs of others on a regular basis. Social action is cited as the major reason uninvolved young adults would consider being part of a church.

Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation

While there is very little research on best practices in young adult faith formation, this article will draw on the recent research study, Congregations That Get It: Understanding Religious Identities in the Next Generation, and pastoral experience to identify best practices that can guide congregations in the development and/or expansion of young adult faith formation. The Congregations That Get It study focuses on fifteen Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim congregations who are engaging young adults in congregational life. While they differ organizationally, they share numerous characteristics in terms of approach. In this section we report the major findings. In the final section of the article we suggest practical strategies for the faith formation of young adults.

Best Practice I. Congregations recognize that young adults make an important contribution to congregational life.

Research Finding: Young adults want to feel that their presence is valued.

Those who are interested in congregational life are aware that they are exceptional—they know that the majority of young adults are not interested in religious affiliation. As such, those who participate want to be acknowledged for their unusual commitment and interest.

Practices: What do congregations do?

- Congregations facilitate regular intergenerational communication between congregational members, staff, and leadership.
- Congregations provide physical space within the place of worship for young adult programs.
- Congregations specifically designate funding for young adult ministry, underwriting activities or reducing fees for activities and not turning away anyone for lack of funds, thus acknowledging the importance of young adult participation.
- Congregations hire a specific staff person to coordinate young adult programming.
- Congregations regularly and frequently show appreciation for young lay leaders.

Best Practice 2. Congregations engender a sense of ownership by enabling young adult congregants to create and plan their own events, and by making leadership positions—both within their peer group and within the larger congregation—available to young adults.

Research Finding: Young adults want a sense of ownership in their congregations.

They value opportunities to assume leadership roles within their peer group and welcome chances to move into leadership in the larger congregation.

Practices: What do congregations do?

- Congregations frequently recognize the contributions of young adults and encourage their continued involvement.
- Congregations also purposely engage, and even hire, young adults to serve as staff members and educators as a way to engage them in numerous aspects of congregational life.
- Congregations organize committees that are led by young adults.

Best Practice 3. Congregations offer multiple points of entry and numerous arenas for young adults to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.

Research Finding: Young adults' interests in religion are multifaceted.

For some, their deep sense of belonging comes from being a part of a community. They want to connect with others who are also articulating a sense of self. Some young adults desire emotional support and guidance. Some want their religious group to be a place where they can develop their professional and support networks. Many single young adults participate in congregations in the hope of meeting a life partner.

Many young adults want to learn about increasing their practice of tradition and rituals. Some seek to deepen their relationship with God.

Some approach religion through the intellectual study of modern socio-historical texts or the religious canon. Others value the opportunity to effect social change with a group of people who share their values. Still other young adults seek a space for creative religious expression through music, art, writing, or dance.

Practices: What do congregations do?

- Congregations offer learning opportunities directed specifically to young adults.
- Congregations organize affinity groups so that the young adults can find like-minded peers.
- Congregations offer opportunities where young adults can sometimes engage as participants, and other times take on the responsibilities of leading.
- Congregations offer multiple points of entry: social, educational, spiritual, cultural, emotional, and theological.

Best Practice 4. Congregations take young adults' differing commitments to religious observance and levels of religious education into account.

Research Finding: Young adults thrive when they are "met where they are."

Young adults do not want to be judged for their level of religious practice or knowledge, nor feel ashamed by their lack of knowledge or practice. They want to approach religious practice focused on meaning and intention. While respecting the religious standards of the congregation and their religion at large, many took pride in making their own choices based on personal factors such as level of knowledge, peer group, and religious upbringing.

Best Practice 5. Congregations engage young adults emotionally and interactively in both peer- and clergy-led worship services.

Research Finding: Young adults welcome opportunities to feel emotionally affected.

Young adults want to feel moved by music, a connection to their history, a sense of cultural heritage, and nostalgia. They want to be emotionally

engaged and feel like a participant, not an audience member, at worship services.

Practices: What do congregations do?

Religious leaders cultivate an atmosphere during worship services that enables young adults to be participants instead of audience members.

Best Practice 6. Congregations provide an environment that encourages questioning and provides learning opportunities for young adults who are seeking religious relevance in their daily lives.

Best Practice 7. Congregations encourage young adults to think critically and analytically about religious tradition and to articulate similarities and differences among traditions, so that they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith tradition.

Research Finding: Young adults respond to a theoretical and practical balance between the particular and the universal.

Every individual interviewed acknowledged that there are many ways to believe in God and to live a religious life. Young adults appreciate an acknowledgement of the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. They do not want to feel cloistered from the outside world. Instead, they want to be able to share their spiritual interests with peers of different faiths. Through the articulation of similarities and differences, they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith.

Practices: What do congregations do?

■ Congregations create balance between the particular and the universal by focusing on the thoughtful transmission of the theology and tradition of the particular congregation, not on theological debates (especially those that

- disparage other religious traditions or denominations).
- Congregations create balance between the particular and the universal by creating an atmosphere that is self-consciously open and analytical, acknowledging the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Congregations create balance between the particular and the universal by facilitating interfaith and interdenominational exchange.

Best Practice 8. Congregational leaders are accessible and engaging, serve as role models for young adults, provide personal and religious guidance to young adults, and show genuine interest in young adults as individuals.

Strategies for Young Adult Faith Formation

The following strategies flow from the research and eight best practices, and can serve as guide for developing, expanding, and/or enriching faith formation with young adults. They are illustrative and descriptive of the possibilities for faith formation with young adults, and are offered to stimulate your congregation's vision and practice.

For many congregations the thought of incorporating the best practices and strategies for young adult ministry into a faith formation program may be overwhelming. In this regard it is important to recognize that many congregations partner with neighboring churches to plan and implement programs that no one church could undertake alone. In fact, one of the first steps in developing effective faith formation for young adults may be to find partners to collaborate with: to begin planning together, promoting each other's programs, and implementing joint programs to serve all of the young adults in the area.

I. Integrate young adults fully into the ministries and leadership roles of the congregation.

One strategy that every congregation can undertake is to invite young adults into ministry and leadership positions in the congregation, and provide the appropriate formation and training necessary for these roles. It is essential that the invitation is personal and matches the interests and talents of young adults with ministry/leadership opportunities. Begin by developing an inventory of possibilities, then a strategy for invitation and involvement. Consider all of the church's ministries—liturgy, education, justice and service/outreach, and so onas well as the variety of groups, such as support groups, small faith sharing groups, and enrichment groups (marriage, family). In addition to congregational leadership roles, young adults should be encouraged to take on leadership roles in young adult groups and programs.

Make sure that before any involvement with ministry or leadership, there is an opportunity for formation and training. This can provide a study-action model to prepare young adults for their particular ministry or leadership role through study (e.g., workshops, courses, or small group learning) accompanied by actual involvement in their ministry or leadership role. This type of learning involves a continuous cycle of study-action-study-action, as the young adults' involvement in action generates new needs for learning.

2. Offer opportunities specifically designed for young adults to study the Bible and Christian tradition, then apply it to life in an environment that promotes relationship building and encourages questioning.

To reach the diversity of young adults and their learning needs, congregations can offer a variety of learning models, including independent learning, small group learning, and large group learning. (For three additional learning models, see the descriptions of milestone faith formation, spiritual formation, and service/study-action.)

■ Independent Learning. Independent learning provides maximum flexibility for the learner: when to learn, how to learn, where to learn, and what to learn. With the increasing

number and variety of audio and video podcasts and online learning courses and resources, independent learning offers a 24/7 approach to religious education for busy young adults. Congregations can serve as guide to helping adults find the best learning format and content to address their learning needs. Examples of independent learning include:

- 1. Reading (such as a book-of-the-month club)
- 2. Magazines (print or online)
- 3. Podcasts/audio learning (delivered via a congregation's web site or other reputable site)
 - audio presentations from conferences, workshops, or a speaker series
 - Sunday sermons
 - audiobooks on tape/CD or at iTunes
 - studying the Bible on CD (e.g., *The Bible Experience* from Zondervan)
 - podcasts on iTunes and religious web sites
 - iTunes University: audio presentations of university courses
- 4. Video podcasts and video-based learning
 - feature films and documentaries
 - iTunes University: video presentations of university courses
- 5. Online courses
 - online courses (e.g., C21 Online at Boston College: www.bc.edu/sites/ c21online; STEP Online Theology at University of Notre Dame: http://step.nd.edu)
 - e-courses (e.g., spirituality courses at www.spiritualityandpractice.com)
- 6. Online learning centers
 - religious resource websites with articles, practices, activities, etc. (a great example of a religious web site focused on young adults is www.BustedHalo.com.).
- Small Group Learning. Probably the most popular young adult learning process, small group learning formats provide an excellent way to address the diversity of young adult learning needs by organizing a variety of small groups with each one targeted to a particular learning need or topic. Small group learning formats also provide lots of flexibility in schedule and location. Groups can meet at times and places that best fit their lives, such as weekly breakfast at a

local restaurant or for coffee at a local Starbucks. Small groups create an accepting environment in which new relationships can be formed.

It is not always necessary for the congregation to sponsor small group programs. Congregational leaders can provide resources, support, and training for leaders, thereby enabling adults to organize their own small groups. Small group learning can take many different forms, including:

- Discipleship or faith sharing groups or study groups (utilizing print, audio, video, and/or online resources)
 - Bible study groups
 - theological formation study groups
 - theme or issue-oriented study groups
 - Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing groups
 - book study club
- 2. Practice-focused groups
 - prayer
 - service/faith in action
 - parenting
- 3. Special interest groups
 - support groups (e.g., single women, newly married couples, cancer survivors)
- 4. Ministry groups
 - groups engaged in leadership and ministry within the congregation or to the community of which study is a part of their work

Small "missional communities," formed in neighborhoods and apartment complexes, are at the heart of Axis, which is the name of Willowcreek Community Church's young adult ministry. These groups seek to build community by bringing God's love, compassion, justice, and service to the world around them. Here, young adults connect with one another and delve deeper into the concept of community at weekly table experiences, where they share a meal with their neighbors, study Scripture, and pray together. Axis groups are also involved in regular service to those in need. Small groups connect monthly at the Axis Experience, worshipping God within community through their own unique expression, especially through the arts. The Axis community sits together at Saturday evening worship and usually hangs out afterwards for a movie, dinner, etc.

The "God Talk" Book Club (Basilica of Saint Mary, Minneapolis) offers an opportunity for learning and discussion about theology and life in a context that is always mindful of who God is. This group allows young adults to engage in dialogue about the topics of the day while asking the question: "Does this reflect our theology of God?" Young adults explore a variety of themes related to their understanding of God and their relationship with God, and the implications of that relationship in their larger life experience. While participants are encouraged to read the books, all are invited to come share some wine and conversation while discussing their thoughts about God and life today.

- Large Group Learning. Large group learning formats provide a way to serve a large number of adults around learning needs and topics that appeal to a wide audience. Large group learning programs can be offered jointly with other churches. Here is a sampling of large group learning formats:
 - Multi-session programs (e.g., offering multi-week courses on theological themes, books of the Bible, youth adult life issues)
 - 2. One-session program (e.g., offering a monthly session on theological or spiritual formation)
 - 3. Speaker series (e.g., offering multievening or multi-week program focused around a particular theological themes, Christian practices, young adult life issues, or current events)
 - 4. Round table discussions after Sunday worship (e.g., exploring the Sunday Scripture readings in age groups or intergenerational groups with refreshments)
 - 5. Workshops (e.g., offering one day programs targeted to specific life issues, such as relationships, work, career, transitions)
 - 6. Film festivals (e.g., exploring key themes in movies, such as relationships, social issues, and meaning in life, with a Christian perspective)
 - 7. Conferences (e.g., participating in regional church-sponsored conferences)

Theology on Tap is one of the most popular young adult faith formation programs in the Catholic Church today. Begun in Chicago and now offered through the country, Theology on Tap is a four-week summer

program for young adults—women and men in their 20s and 30s, married or single. It features a speaker and open discussion, and is usually held in an outside venue such as a restaurant or club. The purpose of Theology on Tap is threefold:

- to find and invite young adults to gather with their peers for a great experience of Catholicism (evangelization)
- to share the rich traditions of our faith with this generation (catechesis)
- to create a forum for young adults to address and discuss their issues, questions, and concerns (faith formation, spiritual growth, and community building)

For more information about Theology on Tap, go to: www.yamchicago.org or RENEW International: www.renewintl.org.

Sunday Night Live at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis strives to nourish Catholics in their 20s and 30s by inviting them to seek a meaningful connection with a spiritual community of peers. Monthly gatherings are held after the 6:30 p.m. Sunday Mass and explore in a discussion format various issues regarding faith and everyday life, such as "Materialism and God," "Making the Invisible Visible: Sacramental Exploration," "Separated at Birth: A Deeper Look into Islam," and "This Ain't No Garden of Eden: Environmental Issues."

3. Develop faith formation around young adult milestones and life transitions.

Marriage, baptism, moments of sickness (personal, family, friends), the death of a loved one, and life decisions are all important milestones or life transitions that provide an excellent opportunity for young adult faith formation. Very often these are "moments of return" when young adults who have not been involved in church life for a while return to the church for a ritual experience, family celebration, religious perspective on life's transitions, encouragement, and/or comfort and support. This is a great opportunity to nurture the faith of young adults and welcome them back into the life of the faith community.

Congregations would do well to carefully plan: 1. the preparation for marking a milestone, 2. the experience of the milestone, and 3. follow-up after the milestone. A milestones plan includes congregational activities and individual/home activities. For example, developing a milestones plan for marriage could include the following elements:

- 1. Education: marriage course or workshop (theology, life skills, faith practices)
- 2. Ritual: preparation for the marriage ritual
- 3. Connection to the community: prayers at Sunday worship for the married couple (before and after the ceremony); a "Book of Blessings" from the congregation to the married couple with prayers and words of support and encouragement
- 4. Continued support: monthly married couples small group meeting; online resources for married couples at the parish web site, a free magazine subscription for the first year of marriage, monthly e-newsletter for married couples
- Reunion: a reunion breakfast or dinner for newly married couples every six months for the first several years of marriage
- 6. Anniversary: celebrating marriage anniversaries each month at Sunday worship with a special remembrance and blessing; sending a note of congratulations and a prayer on the anniversary of marriage
- 7. Resources: Bible readings and reflections for married couples, prayers for a new couple, suggestions for starting a faith-filled home life, ways to be involved in the faith community, ways to be involved in service and justice ministries as a couple

For an example of baptism milestones faith formation plan see "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation" in this issue.

4. Provide a variety of retreat and spiritual formation experiences.

Retreats and/or spiritual formation programs are specialized programs that nurture the spiritual life of young adults. While spiritual formation can utilize individualized, small group, or large group learning models, there are several formats that are particular to spiritual formation, for example:

- Online spiritual formation (www.sacredspace.ie, www.taize.fr, www.upperroom.org)
- 2. Mentoring with a spiritual director
- 3. Prayer group
- 4. Prayer breakfast
- Church-based retreats: evenings, one-day, weekend

- 6. Advent and Lent retreat experiences
- 7. Retreat programs at local retreat houses.

Retreats are certainly one of the most popular and important formats for faith formation of young adults. Many congregations have weekend retreats for young adults once or twice a year as an integral element of their ministry with young adults. Retreat topics can address a wide range of young adult concerns and issues. Here are three descriptions of retreat programs:

Life in the Balance

(Marble Collegiate Church, New York City)
Do you work too much? Do you eat enough
vegetables? How much time do you spend
watching TV on the couch compared to
praying and expanding your spiritual
life? Our annual retreat will be a time to
explore how we prioritize our lives and
investigate the choices we make. We're going
to dedicate time to helping balance every
part of our being—mind, body, and soul—
through directed activities and discussions.

Prayer in Daily Life Retreat

Many find it difficult to go away for a few days. Taking place amid one's daily activities, this retreat offers participants the chance to reflect, pray, and converse with a spiritual director. The directed prayer experience begins on a Sunday afternoon or evening with a gathering of all the participants. Then, during the week, everyone commits to pray for one half-hour daily (guidance provided!) and to meet with a director for one half-hour daily to talk about this experience of prayer. All the participants gather again on Friday evening to conclude the retreat.

Come to the Quiet Retreat (Charis Ministries, Chicago)

The Charis silent, individually-directed weekend retreat is for young adults, married or single, seeking to deepen their relationship with God. Young adults meet each other on Friday evening before spending much of Saturday into Sunday in silent reflection. Young adults spend time one-on-one with a spiritual director to listen to where God's Spirit is moving in their prayer and in their life. As a group, they explore new ways to pray in the Ignatian tradition. Solitary and contemplative prayer time includes journaling, reading, scripture, walking the

grounds, art, music, listening to your own thoughts and resting in your private room.

Spiritual formation is also available online. Websites like the Irish Jesuit's www.sacredspace.ie provides a quick ten-minute guided meditation based on the Ignatian *Examen* that young adults can do online. BustedHalo.com gives young adults one new article a day and speaks about merging everyday experience with an experience of spirituality.

5. Engage young adults in short-term and long-term social justice and service projects, locally, nationally and globally.

Social justice and service are essential, and very often life transforming, features of young adult faith and spirituality. Justice is an essential element of the Christian tradition that even the least religiously active young adult approves of. Success stories about young adults merging their faith with social action are found in all Christian churches.

Congregations can provide opportunities for young adults to serve others, whether with other young adults or with the whole congregation, as well engaging young adults locally, nationally, and internationally. Many organizations and churches sponsor immersion or extended action projects for young adults, either nationally or internationally. In every young adult service project, it is important to combine service and action with an understanding of social justice so that young adults see the structural dimensions of social issues.

- Works of service: responding to people in need. Begin by surveying your community to find local service opportunities, and by identifying places where young adults are already involved. Work with local agencies involved with feeding people, housing people, collecting food and clothing, visiting prisoners, tutoring children, etc. Identify national and international opportunities for service, such as building homes with Habitat for Humanity.
- Works of justice: addressing the root causes of social problems. Justice focuses on the rights of individuals, families, and all creation. It engages young adults in analyzing social situations or social structures, working for long-term social change, and addressing the underlying social

causes of individual problems. Working for justice includes writing letters to key people about important social issues and legislation, working with groups to change legislation or budget priorities, and supporting organizations that work for justice. Identify organizations that you can partner with to address justice issues, such as Bread for the World (hunger), the Children's Defense Fund (children's issues), and the ONE Campaign (poverty).

6. Develop an online presence.

The Internet is often the first place that young adults look for anything today. Those ministries that have a presence on the Internet not only have the distinct advantage of being more present to young adults who are anonymously searching for a spiritual message or home, but also have the advantage of providing solid informational sound bytes to feed this generation's need for quick information. To establish an online presence, congregations would be wise to engage young adults in developing and maintaining a web site.

- Internet ministry. Simply put, if you do not have a parish website, you do not exist in the minds of young adults. What would it be like if a congregation invested time and energy in developing and maintaining its own web site as a center for young adults? A church web site and e-mail can:
 - Post worship times and a listing of events
 - List the faith formation programs and opportunities both in the congregation and in other churches
 - Provide online small groups, courses, and reading groups (e.g., a book-of-themonth club)
 - Link young adults to faith formation offerings on other web sites, such as online courses
 - Deliver timely faith formation resources for young adults on a wide variety of topics and interests that can be targeted to the diversity of the young adult population
 - Provide social networking among other young adults who are taking courses or participating in small group learning
 - Deliver a daily Bible study to every young adult via the web or e-mail
 - Provide audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers, and link to

- other sources such as iTunes (and iTunes University)
- Answer questions by providing a place on the web site for people to ask anonymous questions and have theological experts answer them (see the BustedHalo.com "Question Box" for an example.).

Every church can start a simple blog, which can be developed in the course of 15 minutes, that certainly can suffice as a simple parish web page (Blogger or Wordpress are two favorite software packages). On the front page of your site put the address and worship times of your church and at least the pastor's name, along with a picture of the church in some form.

A church web site will not replace face-to-face faith formation, but it can certainly enhance and expand what congregations are doing and provide new approaches for delivering faith formation to involved and not-yet-involved young adults.

Podcasting. The iPod has become a must-have gadget for all young adults, and now they can listen to you on it if you produce a podcast, which is a short-form radio show that is released on the Internet to subscribers. Podcasts are relatively simple to produce and are fairly low budget items as well, unless you want bells and whistles. Fr. Dave Dwyer wrote an easy to read guide to producing a podcast: find it on www.bustedhalo.com/features/HowToPodcast.ht m. One church streamed their Sunday worship live for about a month. In doing so they found that many young adults first viewed the service online, then decided that the church was so vibrant and expressive that they wanted to come and experience the worship service in person.

Conclusion

The research that we have examined has pointed to at least three imperatives for young adult faith formation in congregations:

- 1. Successful religious programming for young adults offers community and spirituality in the context of a clearly defined faith tradition.
- 2. Successful religious programming responds to young adults' felt needs for empowerment, leadership opportunities, responsibility, and

- accountability, as well as authenticity and accessibility.
- A lack of specificity does not facilitate
 pluralism and understanding for people of
 other faiths. Individuals who know who they
 are and what they believe are able to
 honestly encounter differences and explore
 areas of mutuality.

The challenges of young adult faith formation are daunting, but the future depends on how we respond today.

End Notes

¹ The Congregations that Get It study by Tobin Belzer, Richard W. Flory, Nadia Roumani, and Brie Loskota explores the experiences and attitudes of young adults who are actively participating in congregational life. Fifteen congregations were studied from the Jewish, Christian (Protestant and Catholic), and Muslim traditions. To analyze the intergenerational transmission of faith, the researchers analyzed individuals within an institutional context and the institutions themselves. The research team visited congregations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington, DC. The team spent several weeks collecting data at each congregation. They conducted approximately 100 interviews with congregational leaders, lay leaders, and young adults in fifteen congregations. (The research project was based at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, in connection with Hebrew Union College, the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, and the Omar Ibn Al Khattab Foundation. It was generously supported by the Lilly Endowment.)

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Web Sites for Resources

- www.bustedalo.com BustedHalo.com is an online magazine for spiritual seekers in their 20s and 30s.
- www.ncyama.org the web site for the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Associate with a section on examples of best practices in young adult ministry. (See the "young adult ministry" section.)
- www.elca.org/youngadults the web site for the ELCA young adult ministry with a variety of resources and program ideas.
- www.gbod.org/ministries/youngadults the web site for the United Methodist Church young adult ministry with articles, resources, and program ideas.
- http://youngadults.ag.org the web site for the Assemblies of God young adult ministries with resources, podcasts, articles, program ideas, and a newsletter
- www.pcusa.org/youngadult the web site for the Presbyterian Church USA young adult ministry with articles and resources
- www.episcopalchurch.org/49662_48944_ENG_HT M.htm?menupage=50539 the web site for the Episcopal Church young adult ministry with resources and articles.
- www.generationaxis.com the web site for Willow Creek Community Church ministry with young adults

Practice Ideas

Planning for Young Adult Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with young adults in your congregation.

Young Adults & the Congregation

Best Practice I. Congregations recognize that young adults make an important contribution to congregational life.

Best Practice 8. Congregational leaders are accessible and engaging, serve as role models for young adults, provide personal and religious guidance to young adults, and show genuine interest in young adults as individuals.

- How does your congregations recognize the importance of young adults?
 - ☐ Facilitate regular intergenerational communication between young adults and church leadership
 - ☐ Provide space in the church for young adult programs
 - ☐ Designate funding for young adult ministry
 - ☐ Have a staff person with responsibility to coordinate young adult programming
 - ☐ Show appreciation for young lay leaders
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can develop to more recognize the importance of young adults in congregational life?

Young Adults & Leadership

Best Practice 2. Congregations engender a sense of ownership by enabling young adult congregants to create and plan their own events, and by making leadership positions—both within their peer group and within the larger congregation—available to young adults.

- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> integrate young adults into the ministries and leadership roles of the congregation? Identify the leadership roles and committees that young adults are currently involved in.
- How does your congregation engage young adults in leadership roles in young adult groups and programs?
- How can your congregation invite young adults into ministry and leadership positions in the congregation and young adult ministry, and provide the appropriate formation and training necessary for these roles?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives that your church can develop to more fully involve youth adults in congregational and young adult ministry leadership?

Young Adults & Worship

Best Practice 5. Congregations engage young adults emotionally and interactively in both peer- and clergy-led worship services.

- How does Sunday worship emotionally engage young adults? Identify specific ways that Sunday worship connects with young adults on an emotional level.
- What does your congregation do to engage and involve young adults in Sunday worship as active participants?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> ways that your congregation can enhance young adult's experience of and participation in Sunday worship?

Young Adults & Learning

Best Practice 3. Congregations offer multiple points of entry and numerous arenas for young adults to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.

Best Practice 4. Congregations take young adults' differing commitments to religious observance and levels of religious education into account.

Best Practice 6. Congregations provide an environment that encourages questioning and provides learning opportunities for young adults who are seeking religious relevance in their daily lives.

Best Practice 7. Congregations encourage young adults to think critically and analytically about religious tradition and to articulate similarities and differences among traditions, so that they deepen a sense of self as a member of their own faith tradition.

- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> engage young adults in exploring/studying the Bible, theology, and Christian tradition? Identify specific programs, activities, and/or settings in which learning is offered.
- What types of learning opportunities does your congregation offer for young adults to learn with their peers?
- Does your congregation offer young adults the opportunity to share their spiritual interests with peers of different faiths? Identify the programs, activities, and/or settings where young adults across religious traditions gather for learning and sharing.
- Which of the following learning models is your congregation currently using in young adult faith formation? What are the strengths and weaknesses of your current models?

	reading, podcasts and audio learning, vid podcasts and video-based learning, online courses, online learning centers)
	Small Group Learning Opportunities (e.g., discipleship or faith sharing groups, Bible study groups, topical study groups, practice-focused groups, special interest groups, ministry groups)
	Large Group Learning Opportunities (e.g., multi-session courses, one-session program speaker series, round table discussions, workshops, film festivals, conferences)
lea enş	hat <u>new</u> opportunities for young adult rning can your congregation introduce to gage more young adults in religious learning

- Does your congregation provide faith formation around young adult milestones and life transitions (e.g., marriage, baptism, moments of sickness, the death of a loved one, life decisions)? Which milestones?
- Does your congregational plan for each milestone include: 1. the preparation for marking a milestone, 2. the experience of the milestone, and 3. follow-up after the milestone? What's included? What's missing?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> milestones that your congregation can build young adult faith formation around?

Young Adults & Spiritual Formation

- What types of retreats and spiritual formation experiences does your congregation <u>currently</u> offer young adults?
- How can your congregation strengthen the spiritual formation opportunities for young adults? What are one or two <u>new</u> retreat or spiritual formation experiences that your congregation can offer young adults?

Young Adults & Service

- What types of short-term and long-term social justice and service projects (locally, nationally and globally) does your congregation <u>currently</u> offer young adults (sponsored by the church or offered by other organizations)?
- How does your congregation prepare young adults for justice and service involvements, and help them to reflect upon their experience in light of the Christian faith?
- How can you congregation strengthen or expand justice and service involvement opportunities for young adults? What are one or two new projects—locally, nationally, or globally—that your congregation can organize or adopt to engage young adults in action?

Young Adults & the Web

- Does your church have a web site with a special section targeted to young adults?
- Does your church web site provide podcasts directed at young adults (e.g., Sunday worship service, sermons, and presentations by guest speakers)?
- Does your congregation utilize e-mail to communicate and stay in-touch with young adults? Does your congregation send an e-newsletter to young adults?

ı	WŁ	What features does your congregation		
	inc	orporate on the web site? For example:		
		worship times and a listing of events congregational faith formation programs		
		for young adults and online learning		
		courses and activities		
		online small groups, courses, and reading		
		groups (e.g., a book-of-the-month club)		
		formation resources for young adults on a		
		wide variety of topics and interests		
		social networking among other young		
		adults who are taking courses or		
		participating in small group learning		
		daily Bible study (on the web or e-mailed to		
		young adults)		
		audio and video podcasts of sermons and		
		guest speakers, and link to other sources		
		such as iTunes (and iTunes University)		
		question and answer box		
Action Strategies				
		-		



Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation

John Roberto and Cathy Minkiewicz

ver the past 25 years we have become a society of lifelong learners. At many American universities, the largest program is the school of continuing education. Twenty years ago Elderhostel was a small program for older adults; today it is an international program involving millions of older adults in a wide variety of activities and learning programs. The practice of adult education has expanded considerably in the past several decades. No longer is adult learning limited to courses or guest speakers. Adults today continue their learning, professionally and personally, through courses, workshops, retreats, volunteerism, reading, books on cassette, films and DVDs, online learning courses and resources, to name a few popular formats. Adult education is a growth industry across North America.

Many factors have influenced the growth and importance of adult education today; these factors also provide a positive environment for congregational adult faith formation.

- 1. People are living longer and healthier lives.
- 2. Because of a rapidly changing social climate, adults today are expected—even encouraged—to see the adult years as a time when change is both acceptable and beneficial.
- 3. In terms of cognitive capacity, researchers have found that, barring health problems, an individual's ability to learn and retain new ideas and information continues throughout the adult years.
- 4. America is a "learning society" in which education is considered beneficial and desirable for every age group....As adults engage more in new learning activities, they begin to see themselves as lifelong learners. Moreover it has been found that the more adults learn, the more they want to learn.
- 5. Adults who are in the process of ongoing change and learning tend to broaden their sense of purpose and diversify the sources of meaning in their lives....Although adults continue to do much of their generative work in occupational and family settings, there is new evidence that people find many ways to "leave their mark" often through creative, altruistic, or spiritual pursuits.
- 6. In recent years, a new appreciation has emerged with respect to the diversity of adult experience within every segment of the population....(However) many adults seek a "sense of tribe" and look for homogeneous group experiences in which they can reaffirm personal values, find support, and develop a sense of community. (Schuster 1999, 17-18)

We know that involvement in adult faith formation has tremendous benefits for the faith growth of the individual adult and for the whole congregation. The *Effective Christian Education Study* (Search Institute) found that "the amount of involvement in Christian education is strongly tried to greater faith maturity" (Benson and Eklin, 38). *Effective adult Christian education programs are associated not only with greater faith maturity, but also with greater loyalty to congregation and denomination* (Benson and Eklin, 54).

We know that congregational life is critical to effective adult faith formation. Adults learn in structured educational settings and in the very life and rhythm of the parish. The Effective Christian Education Study

found "Growth in faith maturity seems to correlate positively with the kind of congregation in which education is planned for, cared about, valued as seen in its climate, its work, and its worship. (Christian education) cannot stand alone. It is an integral part of the total life of the congregation. A caring, serving congregation promotes growth in faith....For adult respondents, a "thinking" climate contributes even more to faith maturity and denominational loyalty that does "warmth" (Little, 101).

Yet, many (if not most) congregations find it difficult to provide quality adult faith formation that engages and involves adults. Congregations have made adult faith formation a priority for their community, but find it difficult to implement in practice. Despite the explosion of programs and resources to nurture adult faith growth—courses, workshops, small faith sharing groups, Bible study programs, books and study groups, video and audio programs, and online learning—adult faith formation is often the weakest link in a congregation's faith formation offerings.

What have we learned from research and pastoral practice over the last two decades that can help churches develop adult faith formation that nurtures adult faith and engages and involves adults? This article draws on a number of studies and sources to identify nine practices that contribute to effectiveness in adult faith formation, and how these practices can be used to design and implement adult faith formation in congregations. There is no a definitive list of best practices. This essay seeks to identify and clarify what we do know.

As we begin this survey of best practices, it is important to remember than adult faith formation is more than a program to attend, even though a congregational best practice is offering a variety of programs tailored to the diversity of adult life situations. As Diana Butler Bass writes, churches "are communities of transformation—places where people come to encounter God and know God more deeply....Adult formation is the gathering and strengthening place for learning to be a Christian, for mentoring others in faith, and for practicing faith corporately. It is the heartbeat of churchgoing in the twenty-first century" (Bass, 15).

Best Practice I. Adult faith formation pays attention to what is going on in the lives of adults and listens very carefully to what adults are talking about.

In the Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study (BPAFF) this was the number one factor responsible for success of adult faith formation efforts. "Paying attention to what is on the hearts and minds of adults, what is going on in their lives, is crucial and cannot be overstated. This happens in numerous ways both formally and informally. It is not about what we think they need but rather what they say they need" (BPAFF, 28).

Listening carefully means tuning into the predictable learning needs in the lives of adults that we draw from adult developmental research, as well as the transitions and milestones in adult lives, such as becoming an empty nest household, retirement, and geographic relocation. It also means being aware of current events and important social, political, religious, and moral issues affecting the lives of adults.

The Effective Christian Education Study found that "effective content blends biblical knowledge and insight with significant engagement in the major life issues each age group faces. To a certain extent, these life issues have a value component in which one is called upon to make decisions. For adults, they include global, political, and social issues, and issues related to cultural diversity." (Benson and Eklin, 54) The study found that effective adult Christian education "emphasizes life experiences as occasion for spiritual insight" and "the natural unfolding of faith and recognizes each person's faith journey as unique" (Benson and Eklin, 55).

It is important that congregations use multiple methods of discovering the needs and interests of adults, such as surveys, interest finders, focus groups, and interviews. "It is important to listen carefully to adults' concerns, heartaches, and joys. Where is their energy? What puzzles them and leads them to ask ultimate questions of meaning? This is data that simply cannot be gathered in any objective way. It comes out of the shared matrix of relationships." (BPAFF 24)

Best Practice 2. Adult faith formation targets the times of transitions and change in the lives of adults.

The field of adult development provides important insights into the kinds of transitions, developmental tasks, and changes in personal meaning that mark the journey of adulthood. Understanding the many ways adults change and grow alerts adult educators to the dynamics of adult Christian growth. As Diane Tickton Schuster observes,

Adulthood is filled with transitions: geographic relocations, family formation and re-formation, career changes, empty nests, unanticipated illness, divorce, and the loss of loved ones. In times of transition, most people experience feelings of disorientation and tend to question personal priorities; they may seek to "finish unfinished business" or develop new dimensions of their lives. More often than not, adults in transition perceive educational institutions as important resources during times of change. They look to education to acquire new meaning perspectives and frameworks that can help them regain "order and stability" in their lives. (Schuster 2003b, 10)

Addressing the needs of people in transition provides important opportunities for adult faith formation by bringing a faith perspective to the transitions adults are experiencing. "Recognize that these transitions may prompt a hunger for learning and provide study opportunities that are responsive to immediate concerns. As adults begin to study, their new learning may lead them to new questioning and unanticipated changes in the views of self and world. Offer to sustain people through these times of upheaval by provide a steady presence in the lives" (Schuster 2003a, 37).

A challenge for congregations and adult religious educators is to be on the lookout for adults who are experiencing transition and change and offer to help them chart a course of learning that can help them find meaning in their lives. This means helping learners assess what they want and need to know, and showing them where to find programs, support, and resources for their Christian growth.

Best Practice 3. Adult faith formation is centered on spiritual growth processes in the lives of adults.

Spiritual growth is at the heart of effective adult faith formation. Adult faith formation utilizes life experiences as occasions for spiritual insight. The Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study reports that

(Adults) want to see and feel God active in their lives. If we focus our efforts to help adults grow in their spiritual lives they will participate. While learning about the faith tradition plays a role in this process, it is not the most fundamental reason that adults are part of church. They will learn about the tradition to

the extent that it helps them in their journey with God. Adults seem to want to look *through* the tradition as a lens for seeing their life, more that to look *at* it. (BPAFF, 27)

Adults respond to faith formation offerings that nurture their spiritual lives and increase their understanding of their faith. Adults are hungry to grow in their relationship with God and that, given the right setting and topic, they will participate in these kinds of programming efforts. Programs in spirituality were the most frequently mentioned and presumably the most desired by adults. (BPAFF, 18)

Some of the most popular adult faith formation programs focus on spiritual growth, including small faith sharing groups, Bible study, retreats, and spiritual reflection opportunities.

Best Practice 4. Adult faith formation connects with the motivations and interests of adults.

Research studies on adult learning and adult faith formation point to motivation as a key factor in determining whether or not adults will participate in an adult faith formation offering. The research tells us to be aware of the variety of adult motivations and design programs that recognize these motivational factors.

- Adults are motivated to learn when facing life transitions. They seek learning and support to cope with changes in their lives that give rise to new developmental tasks, e.g., raising children, aging parents, financial matters, job changes, divorce, etc.
- Adults are motivated by appealing to personal and spiritual growth and/or personal benefits.
- 3. Adults are motivated to learn when they feel the need to learn and have input into what, why, and how they will learn. Pre-program assessment is important.
- 4. Adults are motivated to learn when the benefits of a learning experience outweigh their resistance.
- 5. Adults are motivated to attend adult learning programs that are enjoyable and enriching.
- Adults are motivated to learn when they have the opportunity to do something they could not do before.
- 7. Adults are motivated to learn by settings that have a natural, interactive, communal feel. They

- want to be treated and seated as adults in the physical settings where they gather. (BPAFF)
- 8. Adults are motivated to learn when programs are sensitive to their time constraints by keeping commitments short in terms of duration and offering choices of times for participation.

 (BPAFF)

The Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study found that churches created synergy among a number of factors that motivated adults to participate. "Planners need to find ways to orchestrate some of these factors in their planning and marketing efforts. Fun, food, teacher, topic, timing all must work together to capture the interest of today's busy adults." (BPAFF, 28)

Best Practice 5. Adult faith formation programs are guided by learning goals and measure the outcomes of programs.

The congregations most successful in adult faith formation articulate what they hope to accomplish by their efforts, what difference adult faith formation will make in the lives of adults. These congregations have a clear set of expectations and criteria for success. They develop learning outcomes that incorporate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains—engaging the head, heart, and lifestyle of adults. Effective adult faith formation empowers people to live the Gospel and to call others to do the same. (BPAFF, 21)

Effective adult faith formation programs design concrete empirical methods by which to measure the stated outcomes, so that leaders know if they have accomplished what they set out to do. Congregations measure learning outcomes as well as satisfaction outcomes, discovering how people enjoyed the program and what they learned from it. They also use a variety of written and verbal methods to gather feedback on a program's effectiveness. (BPAFF, 21)

Best Practice 6. Adult faith formation utilizes a variety of program models to address the diversity of adult backgrounds, faith maturity, interests, and learning needs.

Adult faith formation in each congregation is highly contextual. It takes into account the societal and economic situations that surround it, and the diversity of the adult population. There is no one program model or resource that can address the diversity of the adult members of a congregation. And no program model or resource will be effective if it is not customized to the congregational culture as well as the life situations and needs of adults. Adult learners will chose a program that best fits their learning needs, preferred mode of learning, and time constraints.

Adult faith formation offerings can be aimed at the entire adult population in a congregation or targeted to particular adults. In the Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation Study the vast majority of programs were designed for the entire adult population. Yet there are numerous examples and opportunities for congregations to design programs that meet the needs of a segment of the adult population, such as an adult life stage, a life transition (e.g., retirement), a common learning need (e.g., a contemporary social issue), or a time schedule (e.g., an early morning Bible study group).

As important as the variety of program models is, the *quantity* of programming is not a key factor in effectiveness. The *Effective Christian Education Study* found "that effective Christian education can be transmitted through a small number of programs and events, as long as, in combination, they have effective leadership, processes, and content. Accordingly, what matters is how things are done rather than numbers of range of programs. This finding should be especially encouraging to the small congregation" (Benson and Eklin, 54).

The variety of congregational adult faith formation programs can be categorized into five families of program models. Congregations with effective adult faith formation offer adults multiple models for learning. (In addition to these models be sure to review the models suggested in this issue's articles on best practices in parent education, family faith formation, and intergenerational faith formation, all of which involve adults in learning settings.)

■ Independent Learning: Independent learning provides maximum flexibility for the learner—when to learn, how to learn, where to learn, and what to learn. With the increasing number and variety of audio and video podcasts and online learning courses and resources, independent learning offers a 24/7 approach to religious learning for busy adults. Congregations can serve as guide to helping adults find the best learning format

and content to address their learning needs. Examples of independent learning include:

- 1. Reading
 - book-of-the-month or book club
 - article or insert in the church bulletin
 - topical booklets
- 2. Magazine subscriptions
- 3. Podcasts/audio learning
 - audio presentations from conferences, workshops, speaker series
 - Sunday sermons
 - audiobooks on tape/CD or at iTunes
 - Bible on CD (e.g., *The Bible Experience* from Zondervan)
 - podcasts on iTunes and religious web sites
 - iTunes University: audio presentations of university courses
- 4. Video podcasts and video-based learning
 - feature films and documentaries
 - iTunes University: video presentations of university courses
- 5. Online Courses
 - learning sites
 - online courses (e.g., C21 Online at Boston College: www.bc.edu/sites/ c21online; STEP Online Theology at University of Notre Dame: http://step.nd.edu)
 - e-courses (e.g., spirituality courses at www.spiritualityandpractice.com)
- 6. Online Learning Centers
 - religious resource websites with articles, practices, activities, etc. (e.g., www.myjewishlearning.com)
- Small Group Learning: Small group learning formats provide an excellent way to address the diversity of adult learning needs by organizing a variety of small groups with each one targeted to a particular learning need or topic. Small group learning formats also provide lots of flexibility in schedule and location. Groups can meet at times and places that best fit their lives, such as group that meets for breakfast weekly at the local restaurant or for coffee at a local Starbucks. Small groups create an accepting environment in which new relationships can be formed. It is not always necessary for the congregation to sponsor small group programs. Congregational leaders can provide resources, support, and training for leaders, thereby enabling adults to organize their own small groups. Small group learning

can take many different forms. Examples of small learning include:

- Discipleship or faith sharing groups or study groups (utilizing print, audio, video, and/or online resources)
 - Bible study groups
 - theological formation study groups
 - theme or issue oriented study groups
 - Sunday lectionary-based faith sharing groups
 - book study club
- 2. Practice-focused groups
 - prayer
 - service/faith in action
 - parenting
- 3. Special interest groups
 - support groups e.g., for mothers with young children, cancer survivors)
- 4. Ministry groups
 - groups engaged in leadership and ministry within the congregation or to the community of which study is a part of their work
- Large Group Learning: Large group learning formats provide a way to serve a large number of adults with learning needs and topics that appeal to a wide audience. Large group learning programs can be offered jointly with other churches. Here is a sampling of large group learning formats:
 - 1. Multi-session programs (e.g., offering multi-week courses on theological themes, books of the Bible, parenting at particular stages of family life, adult life issues)
 - 2. One-session program (e.g., offering a monthly session on theological or spiritual formation)
 - 3. Speaker series (e.g., offering multievening or multi-week program focused around a particular theological themes, Christian practices, current events, or the time of the church year)
 - 4. Roundtable discussions after Sunday worship (e.g., exploring the Sunday Scripture readings in age groups or intergenerational groups with refreshments)
 - 5. Parent parallel learning program (e.g., offering parent sessions at the same time as their children's sessions)
 - 6. Workshops (e.g., offering one day programs targeted to specific life issues,

- such as parenting, mid-life issues, and aging)
- 7. Film festivals (e.g., exploring key themes in movies, such as relationships, social issues, and meaning in life, with a Christian perspective)
- 8. Conferences (e.g., participating in regional church-sponsored conferences)
- 9. Field trips (e.g., visiting an art museum or attending a musical or theatrical performance, and exploring faith themes in art or music or drama)
- 10. Intergenerational programs
- 11. Dinner with a speaker.
- Spiritual Formation: Retreats and/or spiritual formation programs are specialized programs that nurture the spiritual life of adults. While spiritual formation can utilize individualized, small group, or large group learning models, there are several formats that are particular to spiritual formation, for example:
 - Online spiritual formation (www.sacredspace.ie, www.taize.fr, www.upperroom.org)
 - 2. Mentoring with a spiritual director
 - 3. Prayer group
 - 4. Prayer breakfast
 - 5. Church-based retreats: evenings, oneday, weekend
 - 6. Advent and Lent retreat experiences
 - 7. Retreat programs at local retreat houses
- Study-Action Projects: Combining study with an experiential hands-on action project provides another model for adult learning. One type of study-action model focuses on engaging adults in the ministry of justice and service. An excellent example of a program that weaves study, small group learning, retreat experiences, and action projects is JustFaith (www.justfaith.org). JustFaith is a thirty-week justice formation process with a focus on poverty. Meeting weekly, small groups employ books, videos, lecture, discussion, prayer, retreats and hands-on service experiences.

A second type of study-action model involves church ministry/leadership groups that prepare for their particular ministry or leadership role through study (e.g., workshops, courses, or small group learning) accompanied by actual involvement in their ministry or leadership role. This type of

learning involves a continuous cycle of study-action-study-action, as the adults' involvement in action generates new learning needs.

- Online Learning: Online learning has already been identified as an example within the other learning models, but over the past several years it has taken on increased importance as its own learning model. Online learning is an integral component of a congregation's adult faith formation and provides vast resources for congregations to utilize. The April 2007 report Faith Online (Pew Internet and American Life Project), reported on the widespread use of the Internet for religious purposes.
 - 64% of the nation's 128 million Internet users have done things online that relate to religious or spiritual matters.
 - Those who use the Internet for religious or spiritual purposes are more likely to be women, white, middle-aged, college educated, and relatively well-to-do.
 - The "online faithful" are devout, and they use the Internet for personal spiritual matters more than for traditional religious functions or work related to their churches. But their faith-activity online seems to augment their already strong commitments to their congregations.
 - The majority of online faithful describe themselves as "spiritual and religious."
 - Evangelicals are among the most fervent Internet users for religious and spiritual purposes. (Faith Online)

At the center of its online strategy is the congregation's own web site. What would it be like if a congregation invested time and energy in developing and maintaining their own web site as a center for adult learning? A church web site and e-mail can:

- list the adult faith formation programs and opportunities in the congregation and ecumenically in other churches;
- provide a setting for online small groups, courses, and/or reading groups (e.g., a book of the month club);
- link adults to faith formation offerings on other web sites, such as online course offerings;

- deliver timely faith formation resources to adults on a wide variety of topics and interests that can be targeted to the diversity of the adult population;
- provide social networking among adults who are taking courses or participating in small group learning;
- deliver a daily Bible study to every member of the congregation;
- provide audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers and link to other sources such as iTunes (and iTunes University).

A church web site will not replace face-toface faith formation, but it can certainly enhance and expand what congregations are doing and provide new approaches for delivering faith formation to involved and "not yet involved" adults.

Best Practice 7. Adult faith formation is designed using a variety of learning methods that respect the diversity of learning styles of adults.

The literature on the characteristics of adult learners provides rich insight to what matters to adults when they engage in learning activities. As learners, adults strive to become independent, self-directing, and competent; they thrive in learning environments that help them to transform their perspective and feel empowered to effect change in their lives. Adult learners are diverse and require learning programs that accommodate the full spectrum of learning needs, styles, and preferences.

- 1. Utilize adults' experience and prior knowledge. Adults learn best from their own experiences. Adults bring relevant religious knowledge and life experiences to a learning program. They need the opportunity to build on their knowledge, as well as to learn from each other. Adults use their knowledge from years of experience as a filter for new information that can function as a catalyst or barrier to learning something new.
- 2. Respect the variety of learning styles among adult participants with a diversity of learning experiences, recognizing that some people learn best through direct, hands-on, concrete experiences, some through reflective observation, some through an exploration and analysis of knowledge, theories, and

- concepts, and others through active experimentation with the new knowledge and practices. (For further information see: Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development, by David Kolb. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984.)
- 3. Recognize the multiple intelligences (linguistic, spatial, musical, logical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist) among the adult participants, and design learning methods and activities that address the variety of intelligences in the group. (For further information see the work of Howard Gardner and the book 7 Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Many Intelligences, revised edition, by Thomas Armstrong New York: Plume Books, 1999.)
- Incorporate learning activities that are realistic and that involve, stimulate thinking, and challenge the adults.
- 5. Incorporate real-life application of learning. Practice is a part of the learning process, not the result of it. Providing ways for adults to practice what they are learning promotes the transfer of learning from the session to their daily lives.
- 6. Incorporate a variety of features into the learning experience. Adults enjoy learning experiences that combine eating, praying, sharing, discussion, and receiving new information about their faith. They like sessions that allow them to physically move and even change rooms. (BPAFF)

One of the central conclusions on adult faith maturing in the Effective Christian Education Study affirms these insights: "The importance of educational process, in tandem with educational content, suggests that the effective program not only teaches in the classical sense of transmitting insight and knowledge, but also allows insight to emerge from the crucible of experience. (Experience can be fostered either by reflection and interpretation of personal religious experience, or by involvement in the faith stories of others.) Both ways of learning are powerful, and the two combinations produce stronger growth in faith than either one alone." (Benson and Eklin, 54)

Best Practice 8. Adult faith formation programs create hospitable learning environments and build relationships among adults.

Adults are more willing to share their faith with one another in settings that are friendly, hospitable, and conducive to building relationships. The *Effective Christian Education Study* affirms the most effective adult faith formation created sense of community in which people help each other develop faith and values.

Adults learn best in a safe and comfortable environment, characterized by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences. Adults learn best when they are in conversation with other adults about things that matter. Effective adult faith formation "creates learning environments that are friendly, flexible, and informal. Adults are motivated by settings that have a natural, interactive, communal feel" (BPAFF). They want to be together in natural, comfortable, inviting settings.

Effective congregations provide "opportunities for adults to build relationships with one another. Adults want to be part of a community of caring and that those relationships with others are part of their relationships with God. They like to learn in settings where they can share their experiences. Eating is an important way that adults gather. Thus having food available and even a meal is an attractive component of adult formation venues. Hospitality and a welcoming spirit ranked very high among critical success factors. The power of the group also helps to bring people together. The more people associate with one another, and feel a sense of belonging, the more compelling the group is in their lives" (BPAFF).

Best Practice 9. Adult faith formation requires effective leadership in a variety of roles: pastors, a faith formation leadership team, and teachers.

1. Pastors are committed and involved.

The Effective Christian Education Study found three ways the pastor positively influenced the effectiveness of adult faith formation:

- The pastor has high commitment to educational programs for adults.
- The pastor devotes significant hours to adult Christian education programs.
- The pastor knows educational theory and practice of Christian education for adults.

Mary Hughes and Diane Hymans, in a study of adult faith formation programs in congregations, found that each pastor had a high commitment to adult education and is a teacher and educator. The role of each pastor differs, however. Some do almost all the teaching themselves; some are engaged in teaching and planning, and others empowering laity to respond. Each pastor found effective ways to be a leader in adult education, however, and that commitment showed (Hughes and Hymans, 167).

2. Congregations have a coordinator and leadership team that plans, implements, and coordinates adult faith formation.

A coordinator and a leadership team are essential for the effectiveness of a congregation's faith formation efforts. The *Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation* study found:

- Having a paid staff member responsible for coordinating, planning, and implementing adult faith formation is more likely to yield successful efforts. Most coordinators have other responsibilities, as well. It seems crucial that there be someone who is accountable for adult faith formation in a permanent role.
- Parishes that are successful in adult faith formation have an adult faith formation team that 1) listens to the needs, concerns, interests, and issues of adults in the congregation; 2) engages in planning and implementing adult faith formation opportunities; and 3) promotes adult programs and opportunities through a multifaceted plan that generates enthusiasm and excitement.

The Effective Christian Education Study found that it was essential that adult faith formation have both a clear mission statement and clear learning objectives for each program.

3. Teachers of adults are people of mature faith who serve as "facilitators of learning."

The Effective Christian Education Study summarizes the role of the teacher in two characteristics: 1) they are people who are high in mature faith; and 2) they know educational theory and methods for adults (Benson and Eklin, 55).

First, a solid (mature) faith lies at the foundation of all good teaching of adults. Teachers are models for adult learners. They manifest the presence of God in their lives. Their continuing growth in faith and active discipleship offer living examples for other adults. They share their own faith story as they transmit the faith story of the Christian tradition.

Based on her research into congregational adult learning, Diane Tickton Shuster recommends that teachers of adults decrease "distance" from the learners by sharing "real" experiences from their personal life. She says that, "learners appreciate understanding how the teacher's own faith journey has shaped current thinking or values." The more teachers disclose how they have arrived at their current faith understanding, the more they help the learners to reflect on their own growth and change. (Shuster 2003a)

Second, the teacher of adults functions as a facilitator of learning, shifting from the "teacher-as-expert" to the "teacher-as-resource-for-learning." While transmitting knowledge is important, it is not the primary role of the teacher of adults. Teachers create space for adults to find their own voice as Christian learners and Christian knowers. In keeping with the nature of adult learning, we can identify several characteristics of effective teachers of adults. Teachers

- create intimacy in the program by asking learners about their experiences, needs, and perceived barriers to learning
- build relationships among the adult participants
- utilize diverse teaching strategies
- demonstrate the relevance and meaning of material being taught
- provide for learners' needs for physical comfort (e.g., food, lighting, seating)
- manage time well; begin and end on time; build in breaks
- seek to reduce learners' tension, anxiety, and emotional dependency
- guide the learners in transferring their learning into daily life.

Conclusion

This article has identified nine best practices in adult faith formation, drawn from research and pastoral practice. It is not a definitive list, but hopefully a helpful description that will assist congregations as they develop adult faith formation. Unfortunately there is limited research on the best practices, the kinds of programs now being offered, the experiences of people attending these programs, the characteristics or approaches of teachers, the long-term impact of the content being taught, and the factors that contribution to an ongoing commitment to Christian adult learning. There is a need for more information on best practices and the kinds of programs that effectively "grow" communities of educated adults.

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Practice Ideas

Planning for Adult Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with adults in your congregation.

Best Practice I. Adult faith formation pays attention to what is going on in the lives of adults and listens very carefully to what adults are talking about.

- What are the needs and interests of adults that your congregation is addressing through your current adult faith formation programming?
- How does your congregation systematically listen to the needs and interests of adults using a variety of methods, such as surveys, interest finders, focus groups, and interviews?

Best Practice 2. Adult faith formation targets the times of transitions and change in the lives of adults.

- What transitions and changes in the lives of adults does your congregation <u>currently</u> address in adult faith formation (e.g., family changes, loss of a loved one, unanticipated illness, career transitions)?
- What are several transitions and changes in the lives of adults in your congregation that can be addressed through adult faith formation? How will your church address these transitions? (See milestones faith formation in the "Best Practices in Family Faith Formation" for ideas.)

Best Practice 3. Adult faith formation is centered on spiritual growth processes in the lives of adults.

What types of retreats and spiritual formation
experiences does your congregation currently
offer adults?

Online spiritual formation
Mentoring with a spiritual director
Prayer group or prayer breakfast

Church-based retreats: evenings, one-day
weekend, Advent, Lent

- ☐ Retreat programs at local retreat houses
- How can your congregation strengthen the spiritual formation opportunities for adults? What are one or two <u>new</u> retreat or spiritual formation experiences that your congregation can offer young adults?

Best Practice 4. Adult faith formation connects with the motivations and interests of adults.

- How does your congregation's adult faith formation programming connect with the motivation of adults (e.g., input into the program design, enjoyable and enriching programs, ability to do something, relationship-building, time constraints)?
- How can your congregation more effectively build on the motivations of adult learners in adult faith formation programming?

Best Practice 5. Adult faith formation programs are guided by learning goals and measure the outcomes of programs.

- What are the outcomes your congregation has established for adult faith formation? What are the expectations and criteria for success?
- Does your congregation develop learning outcomes (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) for each adult faith formation program? How is each program evaluated?

Best Practice 6. Adult faith formation ☐ Online Learning / Church Web Site Does your church have a web site with utilizes a variety of program models to a special section targeted to adults? address the diversity of adult What features does your congregation backgrounds, faith maturity, interests, incorporate on the web site? For example: and learning needs. adult programs and opportunities Which of the following learning models is your in the congregation and in other congregation currently using in adult faith churches formation? What are the strengths and online learning courses and weaknesses of your current models? activities online small groups, courses, and ☐ Independent Learning Opportunities (e.g., reading groups ☐ formation resources for adults on a reading, magazines, podcasts and audio learning, video podcasts and video-based wide variety of topics and interests learning, online courses, online learning □ social networking among other adults who are taking courses or centers) participating in small group learning ☐ daily Bible study (on the web or emailed to young adults) audio and video podcasts of sermons and guest speakers, and ☐ Small Group Learning Opportunities (e.g., link to other sources such as iTunes discipleship or faith sharing groups, Bible (and iTunes University) study groups, topical study groups, question and answer box practice-focused groups, special interest Does your church web site provide groups, ministry groups) podcasts directed at adults (e.g., Sunday worship service, sermons, and presentations by guest speakers)? Does your congregation utilize e-mail to communicate and stay in-touch with adults? Does your congregation send an e-newsletter to adults? ☐ Large Group Learning Opportunities (e.g., multi-session courses, one-session program, What new opportunities for adult learning can your congregation introduce to engage more speaker series, round table discussions, adults in religious learning? parent parallel learning, field trips, intergenerational programs, workshops, film festivals, conferences) Best Practice 7. Adult faith formation is designed using a variety of learning methods that respect the diversity of learning styles of adults. Examine each of your congregation's adult faith formation programs and resources for ☐ Study-Action Projects (e.g., justice and adults to determine how well they utilize the service projects, church ministry/leadership characteristics of adult learning. group) ☐ Utilize adults' experience and prior knowledge in a learning program. ☐ Respecting the variety of learning styles among adults by incorporating a diversity of learning activities and methods in a learning experience.

☐ Incorporating activities that teach to the different intelligences of adults. verbal-linguistic logical-mathematical visual-spatial bodily-kinesthetic musical-rhythmic naturalist interpersonal intrapersonal ☐ Incorporate learning activities that are realistic and that involve, stimulate thinking, and challenge the adults. ☐ Incorporate real-life application of learning. Providing ways for adults to practice what they are learning promotes the transfer of learning from the session to their daily lives. ☐ Incorporate a variety of features into the learning experience. Adults enjoy learning

experiences that combine eating, praying,

sessions that allow them to physically move

sharing, discussion, and receiving new information about their faith. They like

■ How can adult programs and resources be strengthened and/or re-designed to more effectively address the characteristics of adult learning?

and even change rooms.

Best Practice 8. Adult faith formation programs create hospitable learning environments and build relationships among adults.

- How do adult faith formation programs create a safe and comfortable environment for adults, characterized by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences?
- How do adult faith formation programs create opportunities for adults to build relationships with one another in a caring community of learners?
- How can your congregation's adult faith formation programs strengthen the community and relational dimensions of adult learning?

Best Practice 9. Adult faith formation requires effective leadership in a variety of roles: pastors, a faith formation leadership team, and teachers.

- I. Pastors are committed and involved.
- How is the pastor currently involved in adult faith formation?
- What additional ways can the pastor be involved in adult faith formation?
- 2. Congregations have a coordinator and leadership team that plans, implements, and coordinates adult faith formation.
- What is the current leadership structure for adult faith formation? Does your congregation have a coordinator and adult faith formation leadership team?
- How can you strengthen leadership for adult faith formation?
- 3. Teachers of adults are people of mature faith who serve as "facilitators of learning."
- Who is currently involved in teaching adults?
- How are teachers of adults invited/recruited into their leadership role in adult faith formation?
- How are teachers of adults prepared for teaching as facilitators of learning?
- What new sources of teachers can your congregation identify—within the church and in the community?

Action Strategies



Best Practices in Parent Faith Formation

Jim Merhaut

arenting touches us all. No one escapes life without experiencing parenting in some form. Parenting is powerful. Parenting is unforgettable. Parenting shapes lives, and, therefore, shapes the world. Parenting at its worst causes destruction and death and perhaps no longer merits the dignity of being called parenting. Parenting at its best is an experience of God.

For millions of years human beings have been immersed in the experience of parenting, yet we still don't get it, and we still don't get it right. The story of parenting is a mystery that unfolds and develops in the process of doing it. We can learn from our parents how to parent. We can learn from experts who carefully watch parents develop patterns of success and failure. But in the end, we can't really appreciate the depth of the mystery until we dive in and parent another human being.

Christian ministers have a unique responsibility to understand and communicate the best practices of parenting because the Christian God is identified primarily as a parent. No person can truly grasp the mystery of Christianity without simultaneously grasping the mystery of parenting. We must do parenting well if we are to live Christian faith well.

I. Parenting is a universal adult ministry.

Defining what a parent is may not be as easy as one would expect. The following words and phrases give us a sense of the term's complexity: parent, grandparent, godparent, God the father/mother, stepparent, adoptive parent, foster parent, non-custodial parent, mother/father-in-law, surrogate parent. The list can go on.

What is a parent? What is parenting? For me the questions become even fuzzier when I consider all that I have learned from my children, especially how my children have helped me to appreciate the depth of what my own parents taught me. My children often help me to understand in real ways what my parents could say to me but not get me to grasp in a real-life sense. My parents used to hint at this reality when they would say, "Wait until you have your own children, and then you'll understand." When this enlightenment, prompted by my interaction with my children, actually does happen, I wonder who is doing the real parenting.

People of faith instinctively turn to the Bible for answers, but one cannot turn to the scriptures for definitive clarity about the word parent or the act of parenting. Jesus refers to God as Abba, a word that has been translated as "father." Abba is a word filled with deep respect and affection for one who is a parent, but God is not what we typically envision as a parent. Who is God's wife? Who is God's husband? God, who is pure spirit, cannot be one with the prerequisite sexual characteristics that we normally identify with parenting, yet God is Abba. What does this say about Joseph, the husband of Mary? He certainly looks more like a conventional parent than Jesus' Abba, but most Christians think of God when they hear the phrase father of Jesus. Does this detract from the admirable parenting accomplished by Joseph of Nazareth even though Christians don't regard him as Jesus' biological parent?

Jesus adds more ambiguity to the definition of parenting when he receives a visit from family members in the midst of his public ministry. All three synoptic gospels record the story: Jesus' mother comes to see him; Jesus uses the occasion to teach that motherhood is more than a biological connection; Jesus says that anyone who does God's will is his mother (cf. Matthew 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35 and Luke 8:19-21). John teaches in a similar vein at the crucifixion scene when Jesus instructs his beloved disciple to take Mary as his mother. Parenting in the Bible is a rich and complex reality that clearly transcends biology. God is a parent to us all, and we are called to be parents to all as we grow and aspire to become the image of the parenting God.

The perspective of parenting as faith formation is becoming a key in congregational faith formation. Churches that call upon all adult members to help parents form the faith of children are developing much more effective ministries than churches that leave parenting roles exclusively in the homes of their members. Parenting as a ministry will "arrive" not only when parents become more intentional about and engaged in the faith formation of their children, but also when all adults in a congregation actively assist parents with the faith formation of their children. Bonnie Miller-McLemore makes reference to "othermothers" in her book, In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice. "Othermothers" is a word coined by the black community to refer to those who intentionally nurture children who are not physiologically their own (Miller-McLemore, xvii). In short, every adult has a responsibility to share in the faith formation of children. We are all called to the ministry of parenting.

Let us return to our initial questions: What is a parent? What do we mean by parenting? The multiple levels of meaning discussed above can only be captured by a broad and simple definition, one that can be inclusive of all human relating and perhaps even beyond human relating. The word "parent" is rooted in a word that means, "to bring forth." I believe that parenting is the process of bringing forth love from another. God incessantly calls the created order to mature love. A parent is one who invites another to freely respond to God's call.

Practices to Encourage All Adults to Participate in the Ministry of Parenting

Current Approaches

There are numerous ways in which churches have traditionally encouraged adults to care for and to help form the faith of other adults' children. These traditional ways have been a great blessing to churches, but they also have some significant drawbacks that prevent many adults from participating.

- Sunday school and other religious education programs for children nurture close bonds with a teacher/catechist and several children. These bonds are often sustained long after the catechetical year has ended.
- Church sports programs offer adults an opportunity to build meaningful relationships with children through coaching.
- Scouting can be an excellent way for adults and children to explore the wonders of God's creation while building character through the scout moral code.
- Youth groups can provide opportunities for adults to participate in the moral, spiritual, catechetical and social development of adolescents.

While these traditional ways of connecting adults with children offer rich opportunities for adults to practice the ministry of parenting children who may not be their own, they also unfortunately result in too few adults taking responsibility for the formation of too many children. The demands of participating in these ministries often require highly refined skills that many church members believe they don't have, not to mention the time commitments that are not reasonable for a lot of multi-tasking adults.

There can develop a certain spiritual impoverishment for both children and adults when the care of a congregation's children is relegated to a few highly motivated adults. When children witness church leadership placing a high priority on the faith formation of children by a handful of adults, the children believe what they see. They grow to believe that faith formation is for children, not adults. If we do not find ways to involve most, if not all, of the adults in our churches in the process of faith formation, we should not be surprised when our children grow up and walk away from adult faith formation opportunities.¹

While adults who lead these traditional ministries with children are greatly enriched by their experiences, other adults in the community do not have ample opportunities to enjoy the spiritual riches of the ministry of parenting. Jesus identified possession of the kingdom of God with little children (Matthew 19:14). Adults who do not have the opportunity to develop relationships with children are in danger of becoming distanced from the gateway to the kingdom. The perspectives of young children are essential to the spiritual development of adults. Every adult needs to participate in the ministry of parenting by intentionally fostering healthy relationships with children in order to stay in touch with the dynamics of the kingdom of God. We do not do children's ministries only for the sake of children; we also do them because children offer unique and essential perspectives on God that adults have forgotten and cannot rediscover on their own.

Connecting Adults with Children

Churches need to promote the belief that parenting is a universal adult ministry by developing simple and creative ways to connect adults and children in their congregations so that all adults have the opportunity to participate in the ministry of parenting. One way to do this is to develop the expectation in the community that all adult members will show their faces at children's programs at least two or three times per year. Adults can help with things as simple as refreshments, hall and restroom monitoring, office help, parking lot safety, and so on. More importantly, child religious education programs and youth ministry programs should provide regular opportunities for adults from the community to share their faith with the children in their classrooms or meetings. Catechists or teachers can develop a simple format for adults to present what they do in their daily lives and how Jesus Christ helps them to do it with integrity and meaning. Adjustments like these will help to engage more adults in the ministry of parenting. We now turn to two examples, developed in greater detail, of how adults can participate more deeply in the ministry of parenting.

Worship

Liturgy of the Word for children is a congregational practice that takes on a variety of forms. Some churches dismiss young children from the congregation during worship. The children process to a separate room where one or two adult leaders guide them through activities and/or discussions that focus on the Scripture readings for that particular Sunday. Other churches bring the children forward into the

sanctuary after the readings, and then the pastor or another minister offers a children's homily in the presence of the entire community. The latter has some distinct advantages over the former as a way to promote the ministry of parenting for the whole community. When the children leave the community's worship space and are taken to a separate room, they become "out of sight" and "out of mind" vis-à-vis the adult community. Most of the adults who stay behind will focus on the adult readings and hear an adult homily or sermon that may be so engaging that they will forget that children even belong to the community. They may have a wonderful and moving adult experience, but they will be somewhat out of touch with the body of Christ because a critical part of the body is now absent. Worship is a time when the whole body of Christ gathers to offer praise and thanks to God as one people. Dissecting the body of Christ in the midst of worship sends the wrong message and robs adults of the opportunity to parent the next generation. Exclusive adult formation should be reserved for another time.

Providing a children's homily/sermon in the midst of the assembly, or perhaps even better, mixing the children's message with the adult message, helps the adults to focus on the meaning of the Word of God from the perspective of a child. This child's-eye approach gives every adult in the community an opportunity to benefit from the ministry of parenting. Each adult in the congregation will be called to the child's perspective as they hear the Christian message framed for a child. Adults, even those who are single, will have weekly opportunities to learn about the lives of children, and this can foster a universal care for children among all adults in the congregation, especially if the pastor specifically calls the whole community to express care and concern for the children in their midst.

Children's homilies/sermons are especially important for pastors who make a promise of celibacy because they will build the perspectives of children and parents into their weekly routine as they prepare their remarks for each Sunday. Celibate pastors must be quite intentional about this because they do not have the same consistent opportunities that parents have to learn from children. Not having children does not mean that one is free to ignore the world of children. Ignorance of children hurts the adult who practices it as much as, if not more than, the children who are ignored. Parenting is a universal task that must be embraced even by celibates if they are to be true heralds of the gospel, for the kingdom of God belongs to those who are like children.

Service

Service trips are another opportunity to promote the universal call to parenting among adults. Trips to places such as Appalachia or South America or the inner city often consist of groups of teens or young adults and a handful of adult leaders. What would happen if the whole community was invited to participate in a service trip? St. Michael Catholic Church in Canfield, Ohio can answer that question. Members of the St. Michael Appalachian Partnership, launched in 1998, will tell you that intergenerational service trips are profoundly transformative for a church community. Some of the teens, participating since they were in elementary school, say that it is the best week of their summer. Every July, approximately forty or fifty parishioners of all ages caravan to Grahn, Kentucky, to share in ministry with the people of this small Appalachian town. The people of Grahn, with the help of the St. Michael Appalachian Partnership and other groups, renovated an abandoned and vandalized elementary school into a thriving community center that provides year-round services to residents of Grahn. Two Franciscan sisters worked intensively with the people of Grahn in the early years to develop leadership and programming. Now the community center is run exclusively by local citizens.

The St. Michael group, which includes preschoolers, school-aged children of every grade level including college, parents, young adults, single persons, divorced persons and retired persons, participates in the programs offered by the community center. Some of those programs include construction and maintenance, a kids' educational camp, adult enrichment, and a community meal at the end of the week. St. Michael parishioners have become both clients and volunteers at the community center. The children benefit from the community center programs while the teens and adults offer volunteer services.

The benefits of this program are many. Parents serve with children. Children grow naturally into the ministry of service by observing older brothers and sisters and parents who are providing Christian service. Single persons and retired persons spend an entire week interacting extensively with children and teens from the parish. They build meaningful and lasting relationships that continue to develop throughout the year. All adults take turns overseeing the children and teens during free time. Every adult practices the ministry of parenting and the whole community is enriched as a result.

The Appalachian Partnership at St. Michael goes beyond the service week and touches the entire

parish. Everyone in the parish is invited to buy stock in the program at \$10.00 per share. Stockholders are invited to an annual dinner and meeting where they learn how their money was spent. The parishioners who have gone on the service trip host the dinner, and the children and teens play significant roles at the event by presenting some of the content for the meeting or by serving the meal. This gives more adults in the parish a chance to share in a ministry with children and teens, thus enhancing even further the ministry of parenting.

Strategies

What would church ministry look like if all adults in a congregation were called to think of themselves as parents of all the children in the congregation? How would church staffs reorganize their priorities and programs to facilitate this paradigm shift?

- 1. First, the call would have to be explicit. We live in a culture that does not encourage meaningful interaction across the generations. Our schools are age-segregated by grade levels. Our entertainment is agesegregated by rating systems such as the G, PG, PG-13 and R ratings for movies. Even board games, toys, and video games have age ratings. Parents sometimes feel guilty if they don't have their children in multiple, peeroriented extracurricular activities even after their children have spent an entire school day surrounded by peers. We almost unconsciously separate ourselves from each other according to age, and we won't be able to accomplish consistent intergenerational ministry without a great deal of explicit and intentional promotion from church leadership.
- 2. Second, church leaders will have to do an assessment of current children's and youth ministries to determine how they include and exclude adults from participation. The findings of such an assessment will provide clues to guide an action plan that will encourage more participation of a wider variety of adults in current programming.
- 3. Third, congregations need to imagine and develop new and creative ways to connect all adults to the children and youth in the congregation. This can be done with a simple bridge-building assessment. Leaders can gather a group of adult members to compare

the patterns of adult living in the community with the patterns of child living. Children and teens can also be included in this assessment. This kind of comparison will raise awareness of how the lives of adults and children intersect or fail to intersect during the routines of daily living in the community. When the dividing lines are clear between adult and youth culture, the group can begin to imagine ways to build bridges across those lines. The congregation will be on its way to promoting parenting as a universal ministry.

2. Parents respond better to informal support from congregations rather than structured programs.

One of the greatest challenges that pastoral ministers face is program attendance. Church ministers often spend weeks and months developing highly structured faith formation programs for adults, and when the day arrives to launch the program the organizers might outnumber the participants. Sometimes there will be a number of older adults who will show up for the program, but we rarely see large numbers of parents who are currently raising children attending adult faith formation programs, even if the programs are designed specifically for parents. Organizers wonder how people could be so apathetic or what could possibly be more important than an adult faith formation program. It is a frustrating and discouraging experience that leaves many church volunteers and professionals resenting the flock that they have been called to serve.

The solution to this problem may be as simple as offering simpler services to parents. A 2002 study by the Search Institute and the YMCA of the U.S.A. found that parents prefer informal support from congregations and community organizations rather than structured programs. It seems that in our planning, we forget to ask parents what kinds of services they are willing to accept from us. We assume that we know what they want and need—and indeed, they may very well need and could benefit from our structured programs, but there is no benefit if they don't show up. The services that the parents in the survey want are:

Advice from teachers, doctors and religious leaders;

- 2. Trustworthy people such as friends, neighbors and relatives spending more time with their children;
- Talking with other parents about parenting issues:
- 4. Others telling them they are doing a good job as parents.

About 65 to 85 percent of the parents in the survey said that these four services would be helpful. About 30 percent said they would be very helpful. Only 12 percent of the parents in the survey said that a structured class or workshop for parents is very helpful. And those who are experiencing financial hardship say that a more flexible work schedule is what they need most (Roehlkepartain et al. 2002, 45-52).

We might be tempted to abandon our structured programs in light of these findings, but there are still many, especially those in lower income brackets, who say that they benefit from programs. What the research suggests is that relationships are more important than programs, and programs excel when they are formed in the context of established relationships.

Practices for Providing Informal Support to Parents

Christianity is essentially a religion about relationships. Our God is defined in relational terms: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe that we are created in the image of this relational God, and we can only discover our true selves in relationship with God and others. Relationships are what we are all about, so why do we spend so much time designing our ministries to pass on information, and so little time building relationships? I believe that the answer is simple: information is easier to deal with and more convenient than relationships. The priority of relationships over information is a discussion for another time, but we must acknowledge and promote the relational core of our faith if we are to be successful servants of parents.

Parents don't want their child's doctor, teacher, or minister to deal exclusively with their child; parents want to establish a relationship with their child's caregivers. Parents want to know the important things that need to be incorporated into the lives of their children, and they want advice from these experts about how they can participate in the work of the doctor, teacher, and minister. They want to be a part of the relational loop when others are given the privilege of caring for their children.

When parents were asked what kind of advice they need, more than anything else they want to learn to understand their teens and their children, and they want to learn how to be more patient with their children (Roehlkepartain 2002, 47-48). It is often said that children do not come with user's manuals, but that is only partially true. The information to help parents become more understanding of and more patient with their children and teens is readily available. The truth is that parents don't always have relationships with the people who can give them the best advice about how to raise healthy children. The owner's manual is out there, but parents don't always have easy access to it. There are many things that we know about children and what they need in order to thrive as they grow and develop. Great congregational leaders take the time to learn about the things that are necessary for healthy human development, and they build trusting relationships with parents so that there is a context within which they can effectively share their findings with parents.

A Story of One Congregation

Fr. Nick Shori is the pastor of 900-household St. Paul Parish in New Middletown, Ohio. Fr. Shori is a firm believer in the power of informal presence in the community; he builds his ministry around it, and he advises ministers to get involved in as many community activities as possible. Fr. Shori is the chaplain for the Springfield Township Police Dept. He is the announcer for the local school district's football games. He shows his face at a variety of other sports and extracurricular events in the school district. He has also been a chaperone for the eighth grade trip to Washington, D.C., for the past eight years. Fr. Shori claims that the priest sex abuse scandal that rocked the Catholic Church recently had no measurable negative effects in New Middletown because people in the community know and trust their priest, and the reason for this is that he loves his people. They know he loves them because he shows it by spending the valuable resource of his time with them.

One critically important thing about Fr. Shori's presence is that it gives parents ample opportunities to seek him out for informal conversations about what is going on in the lives of their children. Parents gain a greater understanding of their children from a person who has not only taken the time to get to know the kids in the community but also has taken the time to educate himself about the best in child and adolescent development and faith formation. Fr. Shori has daily, informal encounters with parents and kids that allow him to know the people he serves, to affirm their gifts, and to offer the gifts he has to share. People appreciate his advice

and they share it with others, so the word spreads informally and organically. This can be frustrating from an institutional point of view because there is no way to track the numbers of people who are learning from him, but he says you can see the numbers on Sunday morning.

Even Fr. Shori's formal programs, such as baptism preparation and religious education, have a very informal feel to them. Baptism preparation happens with one family at a time, and Fr. Shori visits the home of the parent(s) preparing a child for baptism. They usually have a meal together and talk about family life in informal conversation. Through sharing family stories, all of the necessary elements for baptism preparation surface and are presented at opportune moments in the conversation. Fr. Shori's improvisational style matches family life perfectly where informality rules the day.

Families gather together regularly for religious education, called Total Religious Experience (TRE), at St. Paul Parish. When the adults (over 200 adults per month) meet for their faith formation session, the method that works best is to get the adults talking to each other by exploring a topic, then raising questions that are relevant to the topic and important to the adults. Dynamic, large-group sharing then occurs, and includes parents sharing advice with each other and the pastoral staff offering spiritual and theological insights into the discussion.

It is easy to see how Fr. Shori's ministry of informal presence can meet the top needs that parents expressed in the survey mentioned above. Parents get the advice they need and want from their pastor, they regularly see a community leader modeling how to spend meaningful time with kids who are not his own, they are given opportunities to talk to other parents about issues that matter to them, and they are affirmed in their goodness—Fr. Shori's very presence and his investment of time speaks that affirmation.

Strategies

Pastoral staffs in churches that want to develop a thriving ministry of informal presence in their community will need to assess the relationship dynamics that occur beyond the church walls. This is a great challenge for many church leaders because it calls the church to become more intimately engaged in the world, and sometimes, there is a tendency among church leaders to perceive the world as the abode of evil. Ministers need to be reminded that God is everywhere for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

One of the great blessings of a ministry of informal presence is that we find God in the most surprising places. If we believe that God is out there in the hearts of the people we serve, then we find new energy and new motivation to meet God in ways that we have never met God before. You have to believe it to see it. Wherever people are engaged in relationships that build a community of love, God is there. God is there when a teacher inspires a student to learn. God is there when a little league coach lets a kid play even if it might cost the team a victory. God is there when a parent offers rides to a child with a single parent who can't seem to get her kids to all the places they need to be. God is there when friends get together for a Christmas party to celebrate the joy of the season. The list is truly endless because God is always there when we look with eyes of faith.

If I were to assess my community for patterns of relationships that involve parents, here is what I might find:

- Parents are involved with kids in sports. We have baseball, softball, football, soccer, hockey, figure skating, wrestling, gymnastics, swimming, and tennis for children up to grade six. When they get to the seventh grade, they can add track. When they get to high school, they can add cross country and bowling. Parents are involved with coaching, selling tickets, organizing fundraisers, running booster organizations, providing snacks, etc.
- Parents are involved with kids in drama. We have three local community theater groups that offer opportunities for kids and parents to be involved in drama together. The local middle school does an annual fifth/sixth grade musical as well as an annual seventh/eighth grade musical. The high school offers both musical and non-musical dramatic productions every year. Parents are involved with building sets, making costumes, assisting with rehearsals, chaperoning backstage, fundraising, promoting and advertising, etc.
- Parents are involved with kids in instrumental and vocal music. There are well-established band and choral programs at both the middle school and the high school. Parents are involved with fundraising, chaperoning band and choral trips, organizing uniforms, promoting and advertising, running booster organizations, etc.
- Parents are involved with kids in dance. There
 are a variety of dance studios in our
 community that offer lessons to children of
 all ages. The dancers compete locally and

- regionally, and most of them become involved with middle school and high school drama to perform in the school musicals. Parents are involved with fundraising, making costumes, chaperoning during competitions, selling tickets, etc.
- Parents are involved with kids in science and technology. Our community offers science and engineering camps every summer through the public school district and a local university. Parents are involved with teaching, chaperoning, providing snacks, etc.

These activities provide parents with multiple opportunities to engage in relationships that create a particular kind of community. This community is the context in which our families discover and create their identities. God too is in the mix, calling people to build relationships of love and justice. Pastoral ministers in our community who want to develop a ministry of informal presence to parents have opportunities to build that ministry in all of these events. We don't always need to call people to the church building in order to help them find God in their lives. Most families have enough on their calendars; we need to help them find God in the stuff that they are already doing.

A common thread that runs through all of these organizations is the endless need for adult helpers. Imagine yourself as a ministry leader who cooperates rather than competes with these organizations by offering your help to them. Imagine learning to appreciate the good work that they do for families and children in your community. Imagine affirming that work and bringing it to a higher level by helping the families in your congregation begin to see it as holy work. Your investment of time in the organizations to which families belong will help them to see that what they are doing can be holy, and you will become available to them where and when they need you. You will get to know their kids better and see firsthand what their real needs are. A ministry like this will help you to respond to the most pressing needs of parents without adding more stress to their hectic lives.

3. Different kinds of families call for different kinds of support for parents.

Defining what a family is can be as difficult as defining what a parent is. Church leaders are called to offer support to parents regardless of the kind of family they have. There are two-parent families, single-parent families, same-sex-parent families, blended families, high- and low-income families, racially mixed families, minority families, older-parent families, homeless families, extended family households, childless families, ethnic families, and so on. While there are some commonalities to all of these kinds of families, there are also significant differences that call churches to provide different kinds of support to the parents or grandparents who lead these families. Due to space constraints, we will briefly explore four kinds of parents: two-parent families, single parents, stepparents, and minority parents.

Two-Parent Families

Internal support between two adults who share parenting responsibilities within a single household is a kind of parenting support that churches cannot provide. But they can help adults in their congregations see how important it is to support each other, and then help nurture supportive relationships between spouses and other parenting partners. Parents who are married or who are parenting with a partner report high levels of success in parenting when they also report that they have an excellent relationship with their spouse or partner (Roehlkepartain et al., 2002, 17). When two adults are parenting children together, it is critical for the adults to build a solid relationship. Only 50 percent of parents reported an excellent relationship with their spouse. Thirty-one percent reported a good spousal relationship (Roehlkepartain 2002, 19). A focused marriage-enrichment ministry on the latter group could easily bump up the numbers of the former.

Single Parents

Thirty-one percent of American families in 2005 (families defined as parents raising their own children under eighteen years of age) were single-parent families. That is up from 27 percent in 2000. Seventy-seven percent of those single-parent families in 2005 were headed by women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). While single parents can do an outstanding job of parenting, parenting alone should not be held up as an ideal. Single parents who parent well do so because they seek and receive support from a variety of sources. The same is true for two-parent families. Isolated parents, single or married, tend to be less effective and are more likely to abuse their children (Roehlkepartain et al., 2002, 9).

Single parents identify finances, parenting alone with little support, and job demands as the three greatest challenges in parenting; the top three for

married couples are job demands, sibling rivalry, and over-scheduling/homework (Roehlkepartain et al.. 2002, 36). Numerous studies across racial and ethnic lines show that single parents, especially single mothers, are more likely to struggle financially than married parents (Nicholas-Casebolt, 1988; Fields and Casper, 2001; Brown and Lichter, 2004). Brown and Lichter (2004) show that rural single mothers struggle financially even more than urban single mothers. Congregations that want to serve the real needs of single parents must be aware of the economic situations of these families, especially families with single mothers. It is not unusual for families in low-income brackets to stay away from churches because participation in church programs can be an added financial burden.

Stepparents

Parents of stepfamilies, sometimes called blended families, have needs that are not entirely different from other types of parents, but there are some particular issues that pastoral ministers need to take into account. Emotional attachment to an adult other than one's spouse is not unusual in any marriage, but when the attachment is to an exspouse who shares parenting responsibilities, then there are added challenges. Developing harmonious relationships between stepchildren and stepparents or among stepsiblings can be difficult because the relationships are often perceived as being forced rather than chosen. Even though biological siblings are not chosen, they tend to bond more deeply than stepsiblings do. These deeper bonds are due not only to biological proximity, but also to the length of time that biological siblings have to bond in comparison to many stepsiblings, who may come together long after the formative preschool years.

Stepparent authority is another pressing issue for stepfamilies. While stepparents must acknowledge the limits created by the lack of a biological or lifelong tie to stepchildren, they should not be laissez-faire in their parenting style. Mavis Hetherington, University of Virginia researcher, suggests that stepparents who actively employ an authoritative parenting style are more successful than stepparents who tend to leave parenting decisions to the biological parent (Hetherington, 190). Finally, legal issues can create challenges for stepparents. While marriage law is no different for stepparents than it is for other parents, stepparents do not enjoy the same legal status in regard to their stepchildren as biological parents do. This can become particularly difficult when raising adolescents who are beginning to understand the

legal implications of parenting (Mason, M. and Mauldon, J., 1996).

Minority Parents

The Search Institute and the YMCA of the U.S.A. followed their 2002 survey of parents with a 2004 survey that focused on African-American and Latino/Latina parents. While minority parents generally feel successful in their parenting, they are very concerned about employment stability. Both minority groups in the study said that job loss in their communities was the greatest challenge they face as parents. Like other parents, minority parents value relationships from those who offer them support. They will first turn to their spouse for support, and then they will seek support from extended family. After family, they seek support from professionals and spiritual leaders. The top three things that minority parents said would help them a lot are:

- 1. Spending more time with their children;
- 2. Having more income security;
- 3. Teachers/workers taking a personal interest in child(ren) (Roehlkepartain et al., 2004, 5-16).

Practices for Supporting Parents in Different Types of Families

Offering support to parents is more like weaving a multi-hued tapestry than it is filling a vessel. Congregations cannot simply offer a prepackaged uniform program to parents because parents are not all experiencing the same kind of parenting. The most effective churches develop their parent support programs specifically to meet the needs of every kind of parent in their congregations. They don't overlook or neglect the particular needs of any parent. Married parents, divorced parents, divorced and remarried parents, never-married parents, minority parents, wealthy parents, poor parents, grandparents, and godparents are all equally dignified in the parenting world, even if their roles can be very different, and must be given due attention by ministry staffs.

Support

When churches partner with community organizations they can avoid unnecessarily duplicating efforts. Churches in Northwest Ohio and Southern Michigan have teamed up with an organization called Parents Helping Parents (PHP) to provide support services to parents with children

who are in crises. Barbara Laraway, PHP director, reports that the organization started out with a few parents who had successfully navigated traumatic experiences with their adolescent children, and then decided that they wanted to share their success with other parents. The parents got some funding from the juvenile court system, the United Way, and some local businesses to establish a central office. They approached area churches to find meeting space. The churches welcomed the organization and became the key referring agency for PHP.

Parents Helping Parents hosts weekly meetings at different times and in different locations throughout seven counties. Meetings consist of experienced parents sharing information and parenting tips with other parents who are in earlier stages of coping with an adolescent crisis. Serious marital and child raising issues are referred to professional counseling agencies. Single mothers are the largest users of PHP, but there is a growing group of two-parent families benefiting from the support groups. PHP is currently expanding its services to parents of young children. Parents who use PHP support groups report increased levels of parenting confidence and family unity (Laraway, 2007). Learn more about this organization at www.parentshelpingparents.net.

Church leaders need to be aware of the various kinds of support offered to parents in their community. When parents turn to someone for help outside of their family, it is usually a spiritual leader who receives the call. Church ministers are often the initial contact for a family in crisis. Churches provide a great service to parents when they channel them into the appropriate community organization that can provide the help they need. Partnerships are among our greatest resources as church leaders.

Single parents, especially single mothers, and minority parents reported in the surveys mentioned above that financial and job stressors make parenting most difficult for them. There are many ways that churches can ease these burdens for parents. Churches can provide free tax preparation services by asking qualified members to share some of their tax preparation time with low-income parents in their congregation. Some agencies, like the Area Agency on Aging, offer tax-preparation services to low-income families free of charge. Retired accountants meet clients at a room in the public library to do tax preparation. Pastoral ministers who are aware of these kinds of services can simply refer parents to the agency. Churches can also offer simple seminars on budgeting and household management. These seminars can become faith formation programs when they are set in the context of a spirituality of stewardship.

Affirmation

Affirmation is another need of parents. Parents report that they need to hear when they are doing a good job, and this need is universal. All parents expressed a desire for affirmation from others, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, income, or parenting type (Building Strong Families, 2002, 49). How can pastoral ministers affirm all kinds of parents? Affirmation is close to the heart of Christianity because it is a necessary tool for loving relationships. Affirmation is the ideal context to initiate a positive relationship, affirmation sustains healthy relationships, and affirmation has the power to restore broken relationships.

Regardless of when and how affirmation is used, it must be authentic; people know instinctively when someone is giving a phony compliment. Affirmation should be personal if possible, as well as specific. It helps tremendously to know a person's name when you want to affirm him or her: "David, I think it was wise of you to take your child out of the room before you disciplined her; you're a good parent not to purposefully shame your child in public." This is better than simply saying, "You're a good parent." There is much momentum in parenting these days to catch our children being good. We should do the same for parents. Church leaders should always be looking for parents who are interacting with their children in positive ways, then finding an opportune moment to tell the parent specifically what he or she did well.

Affirmation for parents is important because gratification for parenting is delayed for a very long time. In an instant gratification society, parenting is not a very rewarding experience. Parents often have to wait months, weeks, and years before they can see the positive outcomes of their parenting decisions. Parents find themselves second-guessing their judgment because they are almost always on new turf. Every parenting phase for each child is new territory, and parents often receive little assurance, and will not be certain for a long time, that they are "doing it right."

Churches can highlight positive parenting moments in church bulletins and on bulletin boards. Parents, named or anonymous, can be the subjects of simple descriptions of positive ways they display their parenting skills while they are at church. Ministers can also send personal notes to parents expressing their appreciation for good parenting. Church leaders who are vigilant about authentic and specific affirmation provide a much-needed service to every kind of parent.

4. Parents are the first and most influential faith formation agents for children and teens. Faithful kids come from faithful parents.

It is difficult to overemphasize parental influence in the faith formation process of children and teens. Educational reform is a defining characteristic of that last quarter of the twentieth century both inside and outside the church, and both public and religious education reformers are finding that parents are a critical component in educational success.² This finding is expressed in the authoritative statements of all major Christian denominations, and in countless studies and theoretical books on Christian and secular education.

Most educators agree that parents are the single most powerful predictor of success or failure in a child's education. The general population seems to believe this as well. Both adults and teens report mothers and fathers as the most powerful personal influences on faith maturity, although mothers are significantly more influential than fathers (Benson and Eklin, 41).³ The clear challenge, perhaps the most critical challenge, of faith formation for the twenty-first century is to find ways to engage parents more intentionally in the catechetical process for children and teens.

Practices for Empowering Parents as Primary Teachers of their Children

Leif Kehrwald offers an extensive list of ideas for families who want to nurture the faith of children at home in his book, Families and Faith. Responding to research that shows how these kinds of activities are predictors of faith maturity, he categorizes them into three sections: Family Faith Conversations, Family Ritual and Devotion, and Family Outreach and Service (Kehrwald, 106-110). How can church leaders encourage and assist parents as they try to become more intentional about being the primary religious educator of their children without turning homes into structured classrooms? Let us consider some possibilities.

Family Faith Conversations

One of Kehrwald's suggestions is to invite discussion on provocative issues or controversial topics. This is an excellent suggestion that I know from experience works very well. But church leaders cannot simply make this suggestion to parents without providing them with simple resources to help them initiate and facilitate these kinds of conversations in their homes. Churches can provide simple talk sheets that include facts about a particular topic in the news as well as suggestions for how to discuss the topic with younger and older children. Some parents may resist these conversations, so the talk sheet should include a statement that reminds parents that kids at school will be talking about this particular topic. Parents should also be reminded that they might not want their kids to get their information about current events primarily from other kids. This may help to motivate parents to take some time to add their perspective to the discussion.

The talk sheet can include simple lists of facts about the topic. It should also include a Scripture reference and/or a doctrinal statement that offers a faith perspective on the topic. Parents can use the talk sheet with the whole family at mealtime, or they can engage their children in conversations individually either at bedtime, in the car, or at some other opportune moment. Some churches provide resources like talk sheets to parents through a mailing; others offer them during programs at the church where parents are present. The important thing is to find a way to get parents and kids talking about their faith at home.

Family Ritual and Devotion

Children spend a lot of time doing structured formational activities both at school and at church. Creating rituals and devotions for the home can be particularly challenging because we tend to want to duplicate what happens in institutional settings. There is a danger in this because the family is not an institution in the same sense as a school or church is an institution. We need to remain acutely aware that families are the foundations of all other social institutions. As the foundation, the family should not be mimicking what other institutions are doing; rather, families should be laying the groundwork for the best structures that are present in our social institutions. For example, churches are institutions where we publicly receive love from and express love for God with other people who also love God. Family is the place where love for God is born. The roles of church and family regarding love and devotion to

God are closely related and even overlap at times, but they are unmistakably distinct.

There are water rituals for the home and water rituals for church. Daily washing of the body is a water ritual for the home. It's not totally absent from church because there are times at church when we need to wash our hands. The daily ritual of washing is proper to the home but not exclusive to the home. Baptism, on the other hand, is a water ritual for the church. Blessing with water is not totally absent from homes because there are times when families can explicitly use water at home for religious purposes. Nevertheless, baptism is proper to the church but not exclusive to the church.

What is the relationship between baptism and daily washing, not to mention other uses of water such as drinking and swimming? Our experiences of water at home are foundational to our understanding of water as a symbol for baptism. Home experiences prepare us for church experiences. If we encourage parents to use water at home with a sense of reverence, baptism will be a much deeper experience for Christians. When placing children into the bathtub, young parents can be encouraged to say, "Thank you, God, for this water." Beginning bath time with this simple ritual will be a daily reminder that water is a precious gift from God that has particularly important meaning for Christians. The brevity and simplicity of the ritual is what makes it appropriate to family life. It is not elaborate and ceremonial, as one would expect in a well-developed institutional ritual. It is characterized by strength and certainty and serves its foundational and preparatory purposes well.

Family Outreach and Service

The Appalachian Partnership developed by St. Michael Parish described above is a highly organized opportunity for family members to participate in service together. Programs like that are rare, and they can only be offered for a short time during the year. They need to be complimented by a general attitude to service that is open and even spontaneous. A daily question at the end of the day for every Christian should be, "Whom did I serve today?" Parents can encourage children to ask this question at the end of each day followed by questions like these:

- How was I like Christ when I served?
- How did I see Christ in the person(s) I served?
- How did I feel when I was serving?
- What good was accomplished?
- Do I now know of any opportunities for service tomorrow?

Christian service cannot be reserved for one week out of the year. Service is a daily commitment and a necessary Christian disposition. We serve because Christ's life was marked by service. Faith maturity for children is nearly impossible without parents who courageously and intentionally nurture a home environment of service. When any need arises in any community, Christians should be on the front lines of response. We will not be there unless Christian parents consistently form their children in the ways of Christian service.

Conclusion

How can one express the greatness of the parenting vocation? Is it too much to say that civilizations rise and fall depending on the quality of parenting within the civilization? Human beings are formed most profoundly and permanently by those who nurture them through their early years. This is not to say that significant changes cannot happen long after one's parents are dead and gone; but if changes do happen in a person who is no longer in touch with his or her childhood parents, someone had to nurture and support those changes. That someone participated in the ministry of parenting by calling forth love from the other.

Parenting is the process of bringing forth love from another. Parenting is an essential process that invites us into the experience of divinity. It is an honor and a privilege to serve those who respond to the call of Christian parenting.

End Notes

- ¹ The Search Institute in Minneapolis showed this trend, i.e. children dropping out of faith formation as they grow into adolescence and adulthood in churches that don't involve adults in faith formation, in graphic form in their study, Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations A Report for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. See p. 53.
- ² For specific implementation examples of these reforms, see the introduction to my essay, "Transforming Faith Formation One Family at a Time" in the Volume 1, Issue 2 of Lifelong Faith: The Theory and Practice of Lifelong Faith Formation, Summer 2007.
- ³ Eugene Roehlkepartain shows the results in graph form on pp. 169-171 of his book, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*.

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Parenting Websites

www.mvparents.com. This website is sponsored by Search Institute in Minneapolis. It offers lots of information about their research-supported and experience-proven developmental assets. The forty developmental assets are building blocks for healthy child and adolescent development and are a framework for a whole host of practical ways to improve parenting skills. They also offer a weekly newsletter with professional advice on parenting issues.

www.search-institute.org/congregations. This is another Search Institute website that offers numerous links that will assist congregations in developing a universal parenting perspective. The work of the Search Institute calls all adults to take responsibility together for raising the next generation. The website also offers an electronic newsletter to keep congregations abreast of the best practices in parenting as a universal ministry.

www.singleparents.org. This website provides an example of what a group of like-minded people can accomplish together to serve their needs and the needs of their community. Singleparents.org is the website of the Single Parents Association in Tempe, Arizona. They provide support and education to their members through their website and through regular gatherings of their support group. They also provide information that you can use to start your own chapter of Single Parents Association.

www.parentsworld.com. Jill Lassaline, a single mom from Canada, started this website to provide a forum for single parents to discuss the issues that matter to them and to offer links to resources that can help single parents. It's free to join the website, and it's a great place on the web to learn how other single parents are succeeding with their children.

www.homefaith.com. Published by the Claretians (a Roman Catholic religious order), homefaith.com is a great resource to help parents raise faith-filled children. You'll find helpful essays, media reviews, blogs, book reviews, abundant links, electronic newsletters and more.

www.stepfamilies.info. The National Stepfamily Resource Center out of Auburn University hosts this site. Everything that you need to know about parenting in a stepfamily is either on this site or linked from this site.

Practice Ideas

Planning for Adult Faith Formation

Use the following strategies and planning questions, in conjunction with the article, "Best Practices in Adult Faith Formation," to assess your current efforts and plan for strengthening and expanding faith formation with adults in your congregation.

I. Parenting is a universal adult ministry.

- What are the ways your congregation <u>currently</u> involves adults and the adult community in caring for and helping form the faith of children and teens (e.g., education programs, social-recreational programs)?
- How does your congregation encourage every adult to participate in the ministry of parenting by intentionally fostering healthy relationships with children and teens, and participating in their programming? How does your congregation exclude adults from participating in the ministry of parenting?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives your congregation can undertake to engage the adult community in the ministry of parenting with children and teens?

2. Parents respond better to informal support from congregations rather than structured programs.

- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> provide informal support to parents, such as advice from those who work with children and teens, talking with other parents, and trustworthy people?
- What types of structured programs does your congregation offer parents?
- How can your congregation develop a ministry of informal presence to parents at the places parents are already engaged with their children (e.g., sports, drama, music, dance, school activities)?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives your congregation can undertake to provide informal support for parents?

3. Different kinds of families call for different kinds of support for parents.

- What types of parent support programs does your congregation <u>currently</u> offer parents? What kinds of families are these programs directed to?
- How does your church partner with community organizations to provide parent education, services, and support? How could your church strengthen these partnership and create new partnerships?
- What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives your congregation can undertake to reach more parents with education, services, and support programs?
- 4. Parents are the first and most influential faith formation agents for children and teens. Faithful kids come from faithful parents.
- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> equip, encourage, and assist parents in their role as the primary religious educator of their children and teens? What programs and resources are offered parents?
- How does your congregation assist, resource, and equip parents to develop family faith practice? Consider the following four faith practices:

family faith conversations
family devotions and prayer
family outreach and service
family ritual and celebrations

■ What are one or two <u>new</u> initiatives your congregation can undertake to equip, encourage, and assist parents in parenting for faith growth at home?