

Lifelong Faith

the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation

Journal Collection: Family Faith Formation



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Best Practices in Family Faith Formation

John Roberto

As 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 father 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 pray 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.
2. Sanctifying the family by living religion at home.
3. Resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness.
4. Serving others in the family and faith community.
5. Overcoming challenges and trials through shared faith.
6. 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 1: 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*.

1. 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 church-sponsored 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 over-emphasis 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 experience 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 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).
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.
- *Giftng* 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.
5. 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.
5. 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, e-mail) 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.

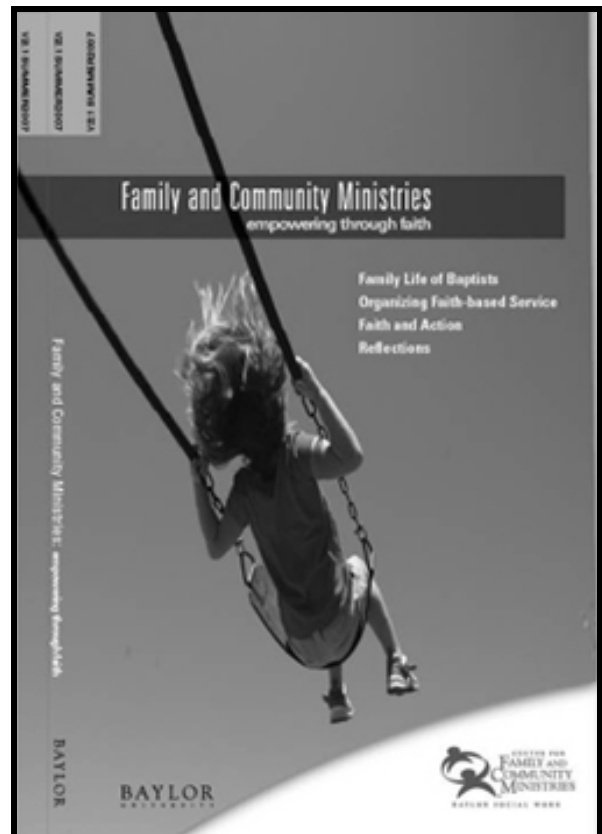
A recurring theme throughout the research is on the importance of parental faith and parents' role in faith formation. Recall Christian Smith's conclusions in the NSYR: "the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their 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 Ministries: Empowering Through Faith

The quarterly journal published by the Center for Family and Community Ministries at Baylor University incorporates practical issues, theological reflection, and scholarly contributions to advance the knowledge and practice of congregational leaders in family and community ministries. Go online to get more information: www.baylor.edu/social_work/cfm.



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

- How does your congregation currently 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 new 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 currently equip families to live their faith at home? What types of resources does your church currently 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 new 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 new 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 currently 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 currently 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 new 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 currently 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?



The Importance of Family Faith for Lifelong Faith Formation

John Roberto

One of the most significant, and to many 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% of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8% of those parents’ teens report that faith is not very or not important in their lives.” (Smith and Denton, 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.’ 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 and Denton, 57)

The importance of parental faith and practice on the lives of children and teens is clear.

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

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(This article is developed from the research presented in Chapter 5 of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* by Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto. St Paul: EYM Publications, 2010.)

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 and Denton, 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.” (Smith and Denton, 267)

In a second NSYR study, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell exam the factors in adolescence that influence religious commitments and practices during emerging adulthood (18-23 year olds). Once again the impact of parents early in life and in adolescence continues into emerging adulthood.

Among the variables in the first NSYR survey of teenagers, having had highly religious parents, a high importance of faith, frequent personal prayer, a larger number of personal religious experiences, frequent scripture reading, and frequent religious service attendance during the teenage years are the *most strongly* associated with more religious service attendance, greater importance of faith, and more frequent prayer during emerging adulthood. (217)

In order to sustain high levels of religious commitment and practice during the emerging adult years (18-23), several distinct factors seem especially important: first, strong *relational modeling and support* for religious commitment; second, genuine *internalization* of religious significance (importance of faith, religious experiences, no doubts); and third, the *personal practice* of religious faith (prayer). It appears that also important are

certain theological *belief commitments* (in miracles), more intensity of *personal practice* of religious faith (scripture reading), another form of *relational modeling and support* (more supportive adults in the congregation), and *paying certain costs* for one’s religious beliefs (abstaining from sex, being made fun or for faith). (217, 219)

A teenager who among his or her peers scored in the top one-quarter of a scale measuring these four factors—(1) *parental religion*, (2) *prayer*, (3) *importance of faith*, and (4) *scripture reading*—stands an 85% chance of landing in the Highest category of religion as an emerging adult; but one who scores in the Lowest one-quarter on that scale stands only a miniscule chance (0.4 percent) of landing at the high end of religion when he or she is 18-23 years old. In short, the combination of a teenager’s parent religion, importance of faith, prayer, and scripture reading makes an enormous substantive difference in religious outcomes during emerging adulthood. (220)

A teenager who scores in the top quarter of a scale measuring three more factors—(5) *having supportive nonparent adults in one’s religious congregation*, (6) *having religious experiences*, and (7) *not doubting religious faith*—stands 75 times the chance of landing in the Highest category of religion compared to one who scores in the bottom quarter. These three variables taken alone thus also make a big difference in the probability that a teenager will end up being highly religious as he or she grows into emerging adulthood. (220)

The Importance of Strong Parental Religion

Smith and Snell believe that strong parental religion is linked to higher emerging adult

religion through at least two social causal mechanisms—religious socialization and the avoidance of relational breakdown.

One obvious possibility is simple **religious socialization**—that teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely that those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood. Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents’ religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously. At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization. We think of this socialization as the “positive” side of the dynamic. But we also believe it is only part of the story.

A second social causal mechanism that we think connects strong parental religion to strong emerging adult religion is the more “negative” one of **the avoidance of relationship breakdown**. Most parents and children enjoy relationships—however imperfect—that they value and want to sustain. Parents and children in highly religious families, in fact, enjoy even closer and happier relationships than

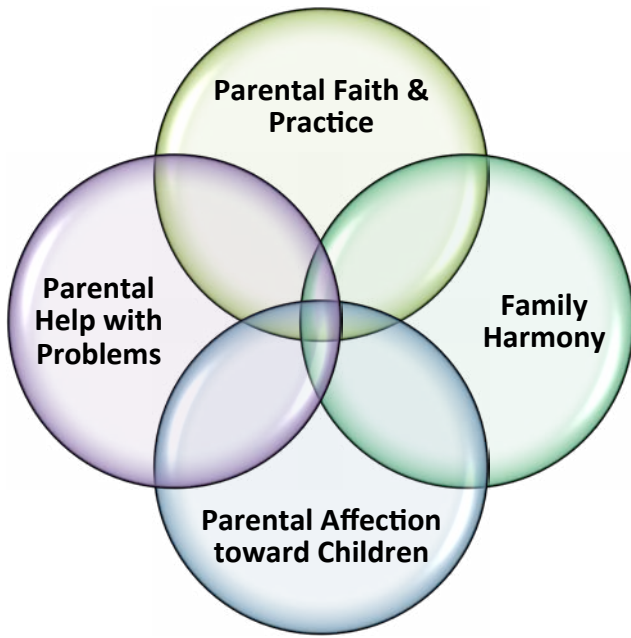
those of the national average. When it comes to parents, children, and religion, when religious faith and practice are particularly important to parents, it is usually the case that they want it to also be important in the lives of their children. When the children accept, embrace, and practice that religious faith, therefore, the relationship tends to be affirmed and sustained. When their children neglect or reject that religious faith, the relationship tends to be threatened. Children of seriously religious parents who are generally invested in avoiding relational breakdown therefore have an incentive not to disregard the religious faith and practice that they (usually accurately) believe their parents want them to continue. Unless some other overriding factor comes into play, therefore, the consequence of not believing and of living as a nonreligious person is too costly to accept. So we think that in part in this way, too, religious commitment and practice is reproduced from one generation to the next. (231-233)

Smith and Snell conclude that the lives of many teenagers who are transitioning into the emerging adult years reflect a lot more religious stability and continuity than is commonly realized. “The past continues to shape the future. This is important to know, because it means that *religious commitments, practices, and investments made during childhood and the teenage years, by parents and others in families and religious communities, matter—they make a difference*” (256).

Family & Household Faith

The “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” confirms the continuing influence of parents and the family on young people. Young people are influenced by the faith of their parents and family in a number

of significant, overlapping ways. These four overlapping influences describe the role of family and household faith.



Possessing Strong Parental Faith

Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith. A vital and informed parental faith includes understanding the Christian faith, participating in worship, praying, and engaging in service and mission. Young people are in households and relationships with parents where mature faith is cultivated and modeled.

The NSYR research tells us that parents will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves are. The strong, vital, mature faith of parents in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” congregations is surely one of the most important contributors to nurturing sons and daughters of vital, committed Christian faith. These are parents who are committed to Jesus Christ and experience the presence of God in their daily lives and relationships with others. Their faith helps them decide what is right or wrong and take responsibility for serving those in need. The most highly rated characteristics of the faith

of parents in the study are the listed below. (The highest rating is 9.)

- My faith helps me know right from wrong. (8.24)
- I have a sense of sharing in a great purpose. (8.20)
- I have had feelings of being in the presence of God. (8.12)
- I have a sense of being saved in Christ. (8.09)
- I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God’s creation. (7.89)
- God helps me decide what is right or wrong behavior. (7.88)
- I have found a way of life that gives me direction. (7.72)
- Religious faith is important in my life. (7.37)
- My life is committed to Jesus Christ. (7.72)
- My life is filled with meaning and purpose. (7.33)
- I have a real sense that God is guiding me. (7.30)
- I feel God’s presence in my relationships with other people. (6.87)
- I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually. (6.65)
- I try to apply my faith to political and social issues. (6.65)
- I talk with other people about my faith. (6.42)
- I give significant portions of time and money to help other people. (6.12)

Parents in the study seek out opportunities to grow spiritually. The overwhelming majority of parents are involved in spiritual support groups in their churches. They reported that they belonged to at least one church group in which others will prayer with them and for them as needed (7.23); in at least one church group in which they can talk about spiritual issues (6.99); and in at least one church group in which it is possible to talk about personal problems (5.88).

Promoting Family Faith Practices

Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life. Parents not only know and live Christianity themselves, they draw their teenagers into faith practices. Parents pray with their adolescents at table, at family celebrations, during times of crises and over individual and family decisions. Service is a way of life.

The “Effective Christian Education Study” (Search Institute. 1990) 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 father 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 research 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 pray 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% volunteer at least one hour per week. Among those whose parents do not model helping, only 36% 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% 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.

In the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” young people were asked how their parents influenced their faith life, they people identified six ways that parental faith influences them. Confirming the findings from the Effective Christian Education Study, five of the six influences

identified by the young people focus on family religiousness: talking about faith, serving others and God, and reading the Bible.

Parental Faith Influences	Mother	Father
1. Values are focused on serving others and God	7.41	6.88
2. Positive influence on my religious faith	7.23	6.21
3. Talked with me about my relationship with Jesus Christ	6.75	5.43
4. Attending Sunday worship	6.54	5.76
5. Talked with my parent about religious faith	4.89	3.95
6. Reading the Bible	4.10	3.48

When asked “How often does your family sit down together and talk about God, the Bible, or other religious things?” one in four young people said their family does this on a weekly or daily basis, and 40% once or twice a month. The combination of parental faith and parental faith influences promote a family which engages in faith practices at home. These are parents who read the Bible and pray with their teenagers, and include them in faith-informed discussions of family decision and budgets. Young people know about their parents’ vital faith not only from observing them at church, but also from conversations about faith in the midst of everyday life. Young people in exemplary congregations explore understandings of God and matters of faith in their families. Faith instruction in these congregations does not all occur in their youth ministries; families reinforce what’s learned at church through intentional faith practices and conversations at home.

Reflecting Family Harmony

Family members’ expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith. Families and households find ways to navigate the challenges and stresses of daily life with approaches marked by respect, equal regard, open communication, and cooperation. Parents, grandparents and others practice individual accountability,

forgiveness and reconciliation modeling faith in action and generating an atmosphere where faith can be referenced and discussed.

Young people in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” live in families where there is a high degree of family harmony as expressed in the interest that parents show their teens, close family relationships, and doing things as a family. In addition, young people experience parental affection from their parents and parental assistance with problems, They also experience a *lack* of parental verbal abuse. Each of these four features of family life influence the faith of young people and contribute to the development of a vital Christian faith in their lives.

Congregations Equipping Parents & Families

The congregations in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” ***offer instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equip parents for nurturing faith at home.*** Congregations provide strong adult faith formation, emphasizing adult discipleship and offering strong preaching, Bible studies, small groups and many forms of adult Christian education. Programs develop parental faith and prepare parents for nurturing the faith of their children and adolescents.

The congregations in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” ***offer parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.*** Parent-youth programs focus on adolescent-specific issues such as family communication, adolescent independence, decision-making, choosing friends, sexual expression, and conflict resolution; as well as faith themes such as studying the Bible together, discussing case studies from youth culture, and exploring popular media. Parent-youth programs enhance the capacity of parents and

teenagers to communicate and work together on matters of faith and life.

These congregations equip parents to pass on faith to their young people by:

- providing education and resources parents needed to teach their youth Christian concepts of right and wrong.
- showing parents how to foster the development of moral values in their teens.
- encouraging families to teach service as a way of life through their involvement in helping activities.
- encouraging parent-youth communication through classes on how to discuss adolescent issues with youth.
- helping youth and their parents deal with conflict.
- helping provide opportunities for teens and parents to interact.
- helping parents learn how to promote the faith of their children.
- helping parents share their faith with their youth at home by such things as rituals, faith conversations, etc.
- establishing a network of care and support for youth and their families

Conclusion

Family matters! Parental faith and influence matters! Family faith practices matter! The “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” clearly shows the continuing influence of parents and the family on the development of a vital Christian faith in young people. The parents in the study possess a mature, committed Christian faith and this has a profound influence on the lives of young people. Family faith practices—caring conversations, family devotions and prayer, family rituals and traditions, family service—influence the faith lives of young people. Congregations have a role to play by equipping parents to pass on faith and strengthening family relationships,

contributing to the influence of parents and the whole family on the development of youth of vital Christian faith. Given parents profound influence in the lives of their teens, youth ministries involved them directly in youth programs and activities, becoming a potential source of growth in faith for both teenagers and their parents.

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Developing the Faith of Parents & the Family

Use the following questions to explore how your congregation can enhance its ministries with parents and families during the childhood and adolescent years by reflecting on the five characteristics of Family and Household Faith identified in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry.”

- How is your congregation currently addressing each of the five characteristics of Family and Household Faith during the childhood and adolescent years? Identify specific illustrations of how your congregation is addressing each characteristic.
- How can you enhance what you are already doing?
- Which areas need attention? How can you develop these?

Characteristics of Family and Household Faith

Possessing Strong Parental Faith: Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith.

A vital and informed parental faith includes understanding the Christian faith, participating in worship, praying, and engaging in service and mission. Young people are in households and relationships with parents where mature faith is cultivated and modeled.

Promoting Family Faith Practices: Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life.

Parents not only know and live Christianity themselves, they draw their teenagers into faith practices. Parents pray with their adolescents at table, at family celebrations, during times of crises and over individual and family decisions. Service is a way of life. Together parents and young people “turn their faces outward” and live life for others.

Reflecting Family Harmony: Family members’ expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.

Families and households find ways to navigate the challenges and stresses of daily life with approaches marked by respect, equal regard, open communication, and cooperation. Parents, grandparents and others practice individual accountability, forgiveness and reconciliation modeling faith in action and generating an atmosphere where faith can be referenced and discussed.

Equipping Parents: The congregation offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equip parents for nurturing faith at home.

Congregations provide strong adult faith formation, emphasizing adult discipleship and offering strong preaching, Bible studies, small groups and many forms of adult Christian education. Programs develop parental faith and prepare parents for nurturing the faith of their children and adolescents.

Fostering Parent-Youth Relationships: The congregation offers parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.

Parent-youth programs focus on adolescent-specific issues such as family communication, adolescent independence, decision-making, choosing friends, sexual expression, and conflict resolution; as well as faith themes such as studying the Bible together, discussing case studies from youth culture, and exploring popular media. Parent-youth programs enhance the capacity of parents and teenagers to communicate and work together on matters of faith and life.

Strategies for Parent & Family Faith Formation

For the good of families and the whole Christian community, congregations can provide opportunities to equip homes as centers of faith formation at every stage of life. Congregations and age group ministries can make family faith formation a focus of everything they do as a church community, using an array of approaches and strategies to nurture faith at every stage of the family life cycle and in all the diverse forms and structures of the contemporary family. They can educate and enrich parents and the whole family to embed foundational religious practices—faith conversations, family devotions and prayer, Bible reading, service, and rituals and traditions—into the daily experience of family life. Congregations and youth ministries can strengthen the partnership between home and congregation by focusing on empowering, resourcing, and supporting the development of the family as the center of faith formation. To help your congregation strengthen its approach to families, here are several strategies that congregations are using effectively.

Strategy 1. 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.

Churches can utilize Sunday worship and church programs and activities to teach, model, and demonstrate faith practices that families can incorporate into home life, and provide them with specific resources to live their faith at home. Weekly worship and church events are significant opportunities for families to experience faith practices—conversations, devotions and prayer, Bible reading and reflection, service, and rituals and traditions—which can be extended into the home.

Strategy 2. 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-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 children/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 prayer, 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.

Strategy 3. Offer family and intergenerational learning programs, as well as parent-child/teen 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 over-emphasis 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.

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

Congregations can also plan programs for parents and children/adolescents on common areas of interest and need, such as communication, vocational decisions, cultural/media influences, social issues, and so on.

One model for family/intergenerational learning that is being used in 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 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).
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

(Source: *Intergenerational Faith Formation*, Mariette Martineau, Joan Weber, and Leif Kehrwald. New London: Twenty-Third, 2008).

Strategy 4. Develop family faith formation around life-cycle milestones.

Milestones are significant moments in life's journey that provide the opportunity for individuals 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 provides a natural opportunity to create a partnership between the congregation and the home. Milestones faith formation uses four elements to shape this vital partnership:

- *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.

From childhood through adolescence a variety of milestones such as baptism, first prayers, start of school, First Communion, receiving a Bible, Confirmation, receiving a driver's license, and graduations (middle school, high school), provide an opportunity for family faith formation. For each milestone, a congregation can provide faith formation that includes: (1) rituals and traditions; (2) intergenerational learning programs (building community, inviting conversation, encouraging storytelling, providing information, and modeling faith practices for individual and families); (3) a blessing of the individual and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home; and (4) 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 at home

For resources see:

Faith Stepping Stones. Faith Inkubators.

Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation. Vibrant Faith Ministries.

Bloomington: Vibrant Faith Ministries, 2007.

Shift—What It Takes to Finally Reach Families Today. Haynes, Brian. Loveland: Group, 2009.

Take It Home: Inspiration and Events to Help Parents Spiritually Transform Their Children.

Mark Holmen. Ventura: Gospel Light, 2008.

Strategy 5. Offer a variety of developmentally-appropriate family or parent-teen service projects.

Congregations can offer a variety of developmentally-appropriate family or parent-child/teen service projects where families can choose from different levels of commitment from beginner experiences to advanced projects that are local, regional, national, and international. Each mission/service project includes a learning component that focuses on understanding the issue being addressed, exploring the teachings of Scripture and tradition, developing the skills for mission and service, and then, upon completion of the project,

reflecting upon the involvement. Mission projects are “developmental” with projects geared to different levels of involvement and challenge including:

- local mission projects lasting anywhere from a few hours to one day in length
- short-term mission trips lasting anywhere from two to five days and requiring an overnight stay on location
- weeklong mission trips within the United States as well as to foreign countries, designed for those who are ready to take the next big step in service.
- global expedition trips of 10 to 14 days that provide the opportunity to be immersed for a longer period in the targeted community and culture

Strategy 6. Provide at-home resources for the core family faith practices.

Congregations can provide families with a variety of resources—print, audio, video, and online—to help families embed faith practices in family life at each stage of life, including resources for parents at each stage of life, for in-home celebration of church year feasts and seasons, for extending Sunday worship into the home, for celebrating milestones, for engaging in service, and so many more. Churches can use their websites and digital communication to resource and connect families, delivering timely faith formation resources to the home, providing social networking among families to share faith stories and practices, and providing support, for parents.

Strategy 7. Use the Internet to resource and connect families.

Congregations can create their own online presence (website) as the centerpiece of their online faith formation. They can deliver faith formation experiences and resources anytime and anywhere, reaching people wherever they go online (home, work, school, vacation, coffee house). They can also promote continuing faith growth and practice by using their online presence and digital communication tools to extend relationships and faith formation initiated in a face-to-face learning settings. Churches can use a variety of online digital media strategies for faith formation including:

- A resource center with daily, weekly and seasonal resources for the family, including faith conversation activities, family devotions and prayer, Bible reading activities, service projects, and rituals and traditions
- A parenting center with “how to” parenting articles and videos, faith enrichment resources, a “gathering space” for parents to interact, a blog staffed by parent mentors, parent-generated ideas and activities, links to highly rated parent and family websites
- A milestones and life transitions center with sections for each milestone/transition that include rituals, blessings, commentaries, personal stories, a “gathering space” for sharing stories and ideas
- A virtual chapel sharing not only audio and video clips of some of the sermons and other worship experiences but also extending it through the daily posting of images, songs, meditations, inspirational stories, prayers of the people, and online worship exercises.
- A calendar of events with locations, times, and descriptions, with Web-streamed audio and video recordings of select offerings.
- Themed “gathering spaces” for synchronous and asynchronous interaction, including live text-based chat and live audio/video conferences, threaded discussions, collected blog links, self-paced tutorials on a range of topics, and so on.

- A community directory that includes “home pages” with pictures, contact information, and other self-determined personal information. Each individual can include more of his or her personal dreams, goals, and activities through statements or interactive blogs.
- A library pod with access to e-journals, e-books, archived streaming video of speakers and events, a clearinghouse-type collection of links to resources, and other Internet-mediated resources.
- A mission/service opportunity clearinghouse for local, national, and international internships, volunteer opportunities, and jobs.
- A learning center with courses and webinars on topics such as faith themes, Bible studies, life issues, and Christian practices, self-paced and facilitated by church staff and church members at scheduled times.
- Small group gatherings online for faith sharing, Bible study, and book discussions

Strategy 8. Focus on parents—parent faith formation and parental training.

Congregations can 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. Churches can provide stand-alone parent programs, as well as incorporating parent faith formation and parent education into existing faith formation programs and support groups for parents.

Parent workshops and educational programs need to have content that is relevant to parents and processes that help parents learn and want to participate in new learning. Here are several tips for designing and leading effective educational experiences for parents.

- Create a supportive, caring environment for learning. Greet parents, provide time for them to get acquainted with one another, and encourage mutual support during and after the experience.
- Actively engage parents in the learning. The amount they learn will be in direct proportion to how much they put into the experience.
- Let parents be the experts. Show that you value their knowledge and experience by giving them opportunities to contribute to the learning experience.
- Tie the learning activities around the parents’ experiences and values so they know “this is for me and about my family.”
- Focus the content on real needs, issues, and concerns, not just on content that parents ought to know. If, for example, you want to help parents teach their child/teen about healthy concepts of right and wrong, first identify the ways this connects with parents’ needs or concerns regarding moral values, then develop the experience to reflect those concerns.
- Include information and skills parents can put into action immediately. Such application reinforces and helps parents internalize what they learn.
- Demonstrate how to use skills and practices during the program so that parents have a direct experience of how to use the skills or practice at home.
- Provide resources that parents can use for their own personal growth and with their family. Consider developing a parent website with resources and links to websites to enhance and expand the learning experience.



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

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Ph.D.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christianity's Ambivalence about Family Faith

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

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

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

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

birth but by commitment to doing God's will.

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

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

The Rule of Religious Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Extending the Rule of Religious Life to Family Faith

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

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

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

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

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

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

Practicing God’s Presence in Our Outward Lives

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

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

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

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

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

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

suggest that our outward actions themselves might become prayer.

Sample Practices of Faith in Families

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

Doing Laundry as Spiritual Practice

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

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

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

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

Playing as Spiritual Practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reading as Spiritual Practice

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

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

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

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

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

Doing Justice as Spiritual Practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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The Joy of Practice in Families

J. Bradley Wigger

My (now teenage) son and I embarked on an adventure a few years ago that reminds me again what can happen through learning. Together we have been learning to play the conga drums. As we began, we were both starting from scratch in relation to percussion, and I had not had a music lesson since I was eight years old. Linda, our talented and patient teacher, has been amazingly helpful and encouraging. Typically, she introduces a rhythm to us by playing it. The music itself inspires us, stirring the hope in us that we will be able to play likewise. Then she breaks the rhythm down into its parts—right hand, left hand, high drum, low, slap, bass tone, touch—and so it goes. Our homework is to practice putting these parts together so we can play the full rhythm for her the next week. Not only does Linda know how to teach by showing us the relationship between part and whole, she does something else that is crucial to good learning. She makes it fun. The experience reminds me again of the sheer joy of learning.

Good learning reinforces itself. Fun, joy, meaning—all create a constructive loop that motivates us to devote the time and energy it takes to practice or work on learning. In the case of our drumming, having some fun with it, together, was a key reason we wanted to play in the first place. But the joy of learning runs deeper than fun. There is something about learning itself—learning something where there was nothing, learning to perform, attaining a skill, developing a gift—that is inherently meaningful. It could be learning to drum or learning to whistle; it could be learning to cook or learning the history of rose gardening; it could be learning to read or learning to ride a bicycle. All such learning is gratifying. The more complex and demanding, the greater the gratification, as long as there are successes along the way. My hunch is that the joy of learning has to do with tapping our deepest natures, with tapping our freedom, creativity, and love for life. As we learn, our wonderful strangeness, our openness to possibilities finds a home where it can thrive.

The World of Practice

Without joy or meaning, sustaining the discipline and practice that learning requires is all but impossible. The tasks of learning become overwhelming burdens. However, when the joy of learning happens, even the “burdens” can be meaningful. Even practice. A friend of mine is seasoned opera singer, and he still spends

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many hours a week training his voice and practicing his art, even when he is not performing publicly. I asked him how he stays motivated, and he responded, “When I practice I get to sing, and I love to sing.” I can imagine no greater sense of meaning, joy, or gratification in learning than when the practice itself is joy. When practice and learning are always for the sake of something else—for performing, for mastery, for getting a good grade, for getting a job—the sheer enjoyment of the activity can get lost in such functional goals.

Something else happens in practice that is part of this gratifying loop that motivates and sustains learning: subtleties emerge. As subtleties emerge, as complexities and nuances are appreciated, the world gets richer and practice takes on depth. In fact, practice itself opens new realms. In terms of drumming, practice is not only a matter of putting parts together but discovering new possibilities. Maybe I get a slight popping sound when my hand is cupped a bit more. Maybe a time delay in timing or omission of a beat turns the whole rhythm in a new direction. Perhaps starting with my left hand makes the third beat stand out a little more. The world of the drum turns out to be a much more complex and fascinating than either David or I ever realized. But these discoveries, these complexities and possibilities keep the learning fresh and sustain the time and effort it takes to sit down and play. The discoveries and subtleties of learning are ingredients for the joy of learning.

While the world becomes more subtle through learning, learning also makes the world bigger. As David and I got better at learning particular rhythms, Linda began playing recordings for us. She taught us how to listen for particular rhythms in relation to specific songs and then connect them to more general styles of music. Eventually, we were able to work on the beat and play along with the recordings. To help with this process, she has passed along tapes and CDs from her own collection and has even taken us to hear local bands play. Linda is Puerto Rican by heritage and emphasizes all kinds of Latin beats and music. (It is not surprising to find David falling asleep at night listening to this music.) The point is that, even as our appreciation for the subtleties of rhythms deepens, our cultural-musical world grows beyond a four-four rock backbeat.

In addition, learning the drums affects how we see; better, it affects how we hear and feel the world around us. In the natural world, as well as in the cultural world, there is rhythm all over the place. In breathing air or gulping a glass of water, there is rhythm; in a bird’s song or a train’s rumble there is rhythm. Rhythm is everywhere. It was always there, but now we are much more likely to notice. Driving

down the road, I sometimes catch my son, working out the rhythm of a song on the radio. As he slaps his knees, he might say, “Sounds almost like a samba beat, but just a little different here.” Or he might say, “That’s the same beat we learned last week.” I have been affected, too. Often now, out on a long walk or run, I hear rhythms in my mind playing off the cadence of my stride. Sometimes I catch myself practicing on my chest, working out a new challenge or experimenting in relation to my steps.

This may be more than you want to know about the world of drumming, but there are clues about any kind of learning in the example of learning to play the congas. There are also clues about the relationship between practice, learning, and meaning. In general practice sustains learning. This is obvious to most people. But less obvious is the way in which practice actually generates learning and, along with it, meaning.

Spiritual Practice

Without addressing the deeper questions of meaning and faith, spiritual practices easily degenerate into burdens and busyness in a world already overloaded with things to do. Practice requires time, discipline, and energy. Practice is demanding, and this is as true for the spiritual life as it is for learning to play music. So if practice is disconnected from questions of meaning, practice will drain our time and energy. Or if practice is so oriented to functional goals that we no longer say, “I get to sing,” then it will eventually go flat.

In the spiritual life, generally, practice is understood in a couple of ways. On the one hand, if you are a “practicing” Christian or Jew, you are the opposite of a “lapsed” Christian or “unobservant” Jew. Practicing means doing things out of faith; maybe you pray, worship, or serve others. On the other hand, the term *practice* also refers to specific practices. In this sense, we focus time and energy to engage in some particular activity. In the larger sense of practice, we focus time and energy to engage our lives in an overall way. In both senses of the word, practice gives texture to the life of faith.

Both senses of practice are helpful to remember as we raise our children. Practice involves specific activities; practice is a general orientation to life. When practices are only specific activities like prayer or worship, it is easier to locate them in one place, such as in a congregation. But when linked to a whole lifestyle, it is easier to imagine and engage in practices anywhere and everywhere. Prayer can happen at home; caring can happen for those in another country.

The reason for noticing these ways of understanding practice is that one of the most powerful ways in which parents can be spiritual teachers is through practice. In this case, teaching is not so much oriented to drawing out three points of a Bible lesson or helping a child memorize a catechism, though it can include these. Again, parents have to shake off images of teaching shaped by classroom education. A powerful form of teaching is simply leading the way for engaging in rituals, disciplines, and practices that are explicitly religious. When these happen at home, children learn that home is spiritual territory. Not only do they communicate that a family can be a community of faith, practices connect the family community to the congregational community. Children learn that prayer, for example, is not just something that happens at worship, but it happens at the dinner table. Children can learn that talk of God is not just something that happens in religion classes or Sunday schools but on a front porch or in a car. Religious practices are bigger than either a congregation or a home, so they can unite both realms.

There is no doubt that the greatest challenge to practicing faith at home has to do with the multiple demands and complexity of modern (or postmodern) family life. We are a scattered lot, and nearly everything in contemporary society wants to drive us apart more. Even religion can add to this fragmenting mania, especially as it divides families and communities up by developmental stages or categories of special concern. But religion does not have to be divisive. In fact, the scattering of community life in the contemporary world only highlights the importance of families and communities finding ways to do things together. Religious practice at home, in congregations, in the community can have binding power, and we desperately need it. We need the kinds of practice that focus life together and resist the hurried manipulations spawned by a consumption-obsessed economy and technological culture. We can bless our children by showing them rhythms of life not driven by shopping, electronics, hurrying, fleeting images, working longer hours, fast meals, quick fixes, and speed in general. Although this hyper-world is not likely to change any time soon, the rhythms of the life of faith may slow us down long enough for creative possibilities to emerge.

Parents have to decide for themselves how and what they want to do in the way of faith practices in the home. I will suggest some possibilities because, historically, some activities continually emerge in the world of faith—perennial activities that can happen in congregations and homes alike. Over and over again, practices involving prayer, the reading of

sacred texts, service, talk of God, meals, and celebrations emerge in faith communities in one way or another. Very often these activities occur in conjunction with one another; each can be carried out in a thousand different ways, according to various traditions. And there are many, many more kinds of rituals and expressions of the spiritual life that are also very important (for example, rituals of confession and atonement or anointing and healing). I want to highlight some more general activities that can be carried out in the midst of family life.

Prayer

When a child sees a father bow his head in prayer or a mother raise her hands in praise, the child is learning to see that there is an authority even greater than the parent. As one child put it, God is “her parents’ parent.” The child is learning a lot about humility; the child is learning a lot about a source of security even greater than the parent.

Prayer itself covers a wide range of concerns and, as it does, integrates a wide range of human life, from joys to concerns, in relation to the Holy. Prayers of praise and prayers of thanksgiving teach gratitude. Prayers of concern teach about care and sources of strength in hard times. Prayers in hushed tones or silence teach reverence and respect; exuberant prayer teaches passion and joy. As children themselves pray, not only are they practicing these things but they can reveal what may be going on in their souls. A child may be afraid to start school, need protection from a bully, be so thankful for Grandma, or hope people who are hungry can find some bread today. Hearing the prayers of our children teaches us about them, helps us pay attention, helps us know how they are doing.

A few years ago, when Jane’s father was battling leukemia, we heard a great many prayers from our children: “. . . and God be with Grandpa, help him get better.” Sometimes the payer would extend, “. . . and be with everyone who is sick or dying.” Prayer created a place where they could share their worries with God and with us. Sometimes we would talk about Grandpa; sometimes we could not and had to let tears speak for us. But this is what prayer so often does. It creates a place for our fears and joys, a place to share vulnerabilities and sources of comfort. I know some parents worry, “What if our children pray for something, like healing, and it doesn’t happen. What will that say about God?” My only response to parents regarding this concern is that prayer also gives us a place to live with the ambiguities of life such as addressing a God we miss or hoping that those who are dying will heal. Jane’s

father, Andy, after some valiant fighting, lost the battle after a year or so. The prayers of David and Cora shift a bit: “. . . and God, be with Grandma and with Mom.” It seems to me that a good practice—in this case, the practice of prayer—is big enough to handle the ambiguities, the fears, and the concerns of life, and even death itself. And by engaging in such practices, we can handle them better, too. In fact, a few months later, after Andy’s death, Cora offered a prayer at dinner. “Dear God,” she prayed, “tell Grandpa we miss him, but tell him we’re doing okay.”

Prayer, like other religious activities, can be done alone. And this is helpful for children to know and to learn. But I am suggesting that families pray together, too. Many parents do have a prayer or devotional life, but it is completely hidden from their children. I am suggesting opening that life up a bit and sharing it. Sharing experiences together is a large part of their binding power. There are no guarantees that “families that pray together stay together,” because some families that pray together still fall apart. But I do think prayer is an integrating force holding communities together. It connects the parts to a larger whole. And so it is with the other practices as well. Shared meals and celebrations, as well as reading and talking together, help families and congregations stay together.

Because prayer can touch the deepest vulnerabilities in our lives, because prayer can be such an intimate experience, prayer can also be very intimidating. On the one hand, it can be so personal; on the other, we are addressing the Holy Creator of the universe, whose name we are forbidden to utter. This is powerful business. So it is no wonder that many parents, like many people in general, are afraid or overwhelmed to share in prayer with others, even family members. I hear from parents, “I’m not sure what to say anyway. Then with my children listening, I’m even more scared.” I believe this is another area where the resources of one’s congregation and tradition can be very helpful. Every religious tradition practices prayer in its own way. Some emphasize speaking from the heart; others emphasize formal, historical, or memorized prayers. I suggest taking your cues from your congregation’s tradition and resources. Almost any congregation can put you in touch with resources for prayer. Many have devotional books that are designed for individual use but can easily be used in family settings. Libraries, bookstores, religious magazines, and even the Internet are loaded with resources. One of the most empowering forms of family ministry a congregation can offer is to make resources available for use outside the congregational walls. If nothing else, most congregations use some

sort of worship bulletin or worship book full of prayers. Pay attention to these, and you should find plenty of help. Families could easily use, say, a prayer of thanksgiving printed in a worship bulletin as a mealtime blessing all week. Another great resource is the Bible itself, particularly the Book of Psalms, which is a book full of prayers. The Psalms have been one of the most meaningful guides to prayer in our household. Not only do they provide something to say, they put us in touch with the wisdom and history of people thousands of years ago.

For those who are motivated but not comfortable with praying aloud, using printed words can be a great way to practice prayer. It lets us do something on the one hand; on the other, it is a way of gaining facility with prayer, a way of getting accustomed to saying words of prayer in front of others, a way of learning. And so it is with children. If they hear us pray, if they learn to say prayers themselves, they will be much more comfortable with prayer and perhaps discover subtleties and meaning through it.

Sacred Texts

Parents reach a magic point in their family lives when their children learn to read for themselves. Although Jane and I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Seuss and *Goodnight Moon*, as well as all kinds of other stories and poems, after the first two or three thousand times through, enough was enough. When the children could read to themselves at night, it was a source of pride for them and a wonderful relief for us. Having said this, it caught me off-guard one night, two or three years after we had quit reading to our children, when David asked me to read, out loud, a poem from a book he had. I did.

He asked, “How ‘bout another one?”

“Okay.” I read another. This time Cora slipped in and started listening.

She said, “Do another one.” So I read a few more; then I suggested they reach read one and then go to bed.

The next night, they asked to repeat the reading. And each night, they kept asking. I was getting worried; I thought I was done with this. So before long I was talking Jane in relieving me of this duty, which had strangely returned from the past. But after a couple nights of relief, I found myself slipping in and listening, too. Finally we gave into this impulse and started by all sitting down together and reading books or stories or poems out loud together. Except for some breaks here and there, we’ve been reading out loud ever since.

Because Jane and I were so tired of reading the same preschool stories over and over again, we had forgotten the magic of reading out loud and the special time with the children reading had initially been. The hardest part for us now is choosing the next book. Sometimes we find ourselves not able to make the time to read together; someone is out of town, we have late meetings, or homework is not finished. But the truth is, we seem to find it harder to make some time to read when the book itself is not particular good. The better the book, the more likely we are to decide not to watch a television show instead, or make a phone call, or get papers graded, or check e-mail. Meaningful time, like good learning, is self-reinforcing and even has a way of creating time.

The importance of scriptures, of faith's story and the ways in which it roots us in faith, is essential. The scriptures, in fact, are so pivotal in a living faith that reading them can begin to feel like a duty. And maybe it is. But doing things out of duty alone has a way of killing the joy. So I share with you the experience of reading aloud with our children to accentuate another dimension of reading sacred texts: the sheer power of words and stories shared aloud. Some families make daily scripture reading a part of their lives. It could be as simple as a passage from a devotional book, accompanied with a prayer. It could be reading from a children's Bible at bedtime. Some make it a weekly habit, accompanied by a Friday evening or Sunday meal, for example. A friend of mine tells of the sense of reverence created when his father would go get the Bible from the shelf, open it, and begin reading. "There was just something about it, almost visceral, it felt real." This friend, a preacher, has devoted his life to exploring and sharing that reality.

Because the Bible is such a big book, the challenge is figuring out where to begin or how to find some kind of approach through it. Again, congregations, libraries, and bookstores usually have resource materials to help. Many people find it helpful to simply repeat the scripture readings covered in worship or class or Bible study. Unlike most preschool reading, going back over a passage of scripture that has been preached or taught usually reveals subtleties missed the first time. Parents can also pick the brains of the professionals, congregational leaders, or friends they respect. A parenting group, if there is one in the congregation, can play a helpful role. I know one group that, instead of focusing on how to get their children to behave or get to bed or all the other daily concerns of parents, did a Bible study. The study was intended to prepare the parents to read the passages with their own children. Inevitably, issues of discipline or the

frustrations of parenting arose, but they were placed in a large perspective. In this case, reading sacred texts had binding power in family life, as parents read with the children, but also binding power with others in the congregation.

Meals

Food has always been an important vehicle for sacred learning. The bitter herbs of a Passover seder teach about the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. The broken bread of communion teaches the crucifixion. Kosher laws, potluck dinners, meals for the grieving or ill, *Shabbat*, and Sunday dinner—these meals teach so much, including what it means to be part of this community, part of this family. Anthropologists pay particular attention to what happens around food in a society because so often the patterns and values of the society come to a head around the meal. The world-famous twentieth-century psychologist Erik Erikson would always try to have a meal with a family before treating a child. He wanted to see what was going on in the society of that child's family, and the meal was a good way to find out.

In fact, it was through meals that early Christianity and early Judaism in the first century distinguished themselves from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. As the festival meals and banquets of the Greco-Romans, it was expected that slaves, women, and children would not even attend unless it was to serve the property-owning men. In other words, they practices around the meal reflected the hierarchy of society; property-owning men were considered to be more deserving of love, respect, honor, and food itself. But then certain Jewish movements, including Christianity, challenged such ranking systems and, in turn, meals were eaten in a different way. These movements would try to accommodate large numbers of people rather than an honored few; they would insist on equality in relationships, and the numbers would include women and children. Jesus, for example, tells people not to choose places of honor at a banquet. In fact, he says, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14). Such teaching would turn the ranking system on its head. A more contemporary example would be the lunch counters and dining halls of the 1960s. Freedom Riders risked their lives to transform America's laws about eating, about who could break bread together. For a white person and a black person to sit together at the same table and share a meal was not just something nice to do, it was a revolution. So meals

are more than food. They teach and sustain a community's values.

For many households, the dinner table is a place that gathers the family and more. It may gather other sacred practices as well: a prayer, a scripture reading, or holiday celebration, for example. A friend told me of a ritual her own busy family has for supper. They light a candle, both for aesthetics and as a "reminder of God's light." After receiving a Bible from her congregation in third grade, her daughter has been reading from the Psalms, just a few verses. They take turns praying, but the other child likes to write and, with the encouragement of a Sunday School teacher, has written some prayers the family uses before the meal. As my friend told me about this, I thought it all sounded a bit too idyllic, so I had several questions:

"Does she understand those psalms?"

"Not always, but she will."

"I see."

"On the other hand, I don't always either; sometimes we talk about it; sometimes it's probably just a thoughtless ritual."

"What are the prayers like?"

"Some make me cringe; some are beautiful—a little like the psalms when I think about it."

"You all sound too good; don't you all fight or anything?"

"Who said we didn't? Who said we were good? We fuss all the time. Hell, the other night the kids got in a big argument over who would light the candle! Sometimes we argue; sometimes we tell jokes. We laugh, cry, bicker, act like babies, act like adults. Sometimes it's great; sometimes it's kinda boring. The point is—I'm not sure what the point is. We're just together. It's us. I don't think about it in terms of good and bad."

This mother may not think of the mealtime in terms of good and bad. But of particular interest to parents of older children and youth are studies pointing to the constructive role that family meals play in the lives of teenagers. Research out of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University suggests that the odds of teenagers doing drugs go down as they eat with their parents.

The odds that 12- to 17-year-olds will smoke, drink, or use marijuana rise as the number of meals they with their parents declines. Only six percent of kids who eat dinner with their parents six or more times a week smoke compared with 24 percent of those who eat dinner with their parents twice a week or less; for marijuana use, it's 12 percent compared 35 percent.

The research also gives insight into the current debate about whether parents or peers are more formative for children. "Kids who do not smoke pot credit their parents with their decision; kids who smoke pot credit their peers." Significantly, the other most helpful factor for preventing drug use is religion, specifically, attending religious services. Now there is nothing magical or mechanical about eating meals or attending services that automatically wards off these behaviors. It is more the case that eating together and participating in religious practices are part of a large fabric of living. "Parents who eat meals with their kids know where they are after school and on weekends and are involved in their children's school activities and academics."

So my suggestion is to eat together. Give the children chores in the meal's preparation and cleanup. Turn off televisions and telephones, say a prayer, enjoy the food, bicker, fuss, joke, and cherish the company. Meals are sacred.

Service

Whether it is preparing a home for homeless refugees or paying a visit to a homebound neighbor, acts of service teach children to care for others. Care is practiced within the home, just as it is within a congregation. But if it stays only in the home or congregation, children miss the greatest mission of faith itself, that is, to serve a hurting world. Each act of care and compassion teaches a child more than we can say. Some congregations facilitate the possibilities for service by organizing mission trips or having ongoing tasks such as taking flowers or meals to the elderly, volunteering at a shelter, or advocating for vulnerable people. Most congregations provide ample opportunities. My primary suggestion for parents and congregational leaders is to look for situations where it could be appropriate to include children. Could the mission trip be an intergenerational one? A child may be too young to work at the Habitat for Humanity building site, but could he or she help make sandwiches to feed the workers?

The national champion of vulnerable children, Marian Wright Edelman, tells of growing up in a household that valued service to others and how these values she learned so early shape her work with the Children's Defense Fund. In her home, "children were taught," she says, "not by sermonizing, but by personal example—that nothing was too lowly to do." She goes on to tell about a debate her parents had when she was eight or nine: Was young Marian too young to go with her older brother Harry to clean the bed and bedsores of a sick, poor woman?

She remembers, “I went and learned just how much the smallest helping hands and kindness can mean to a person in need.”

I am not suggesting that the main reason to engage in acts of service is to teach our children something. The main reason is to bring care and compassion to where it is needed. The same is true with other sacred practices. We engage in them for their own sake. Nonetheless, there are some indirect fruits of these practices. They are times together, they generate meaning, they forge deep bonds, they root our lives in deep soil, they resist the powers that hurry and fragment human relationships. And yes, these practices teach. We and our children can learn through them. So in terms of the practice of serving and caring, children not only receive care from their parents and communities, they can learn to give it and to bring care into another generation.

Personally, I believe acts of service teach the deepest lessons in the mystery of others and, consequently, are one of the great weapons against evil. The worst atrocities humanity commits against itself occur by dehumanizing others, that is, by reducing the fullness (mystery) of others to problems. Racism, genocide, torture, and violence in general all illustrate and embody the point. But compassion works in precisely the opposite direction. People are not problems, not reducible, not to be treated like dirt. Acts of service teach our children that every human being is made in the image of God. Acts of care teach the holiness of others.

Talk of God

Talking of God is not always easy; in fact, I don't think it should be. We can cheapen respect for God through cursing, for example, but we can also do so through facile explanations and easy theological answers: “God didn't want me to have that parking spot” or “Your suffering is a gift from the Lord.” Nonetheless, talking of God is important. If God is only mentioned in congregational life, it is difficult for children to see the sacred possibilities of everyday living.

Talking of God is more than simply using words for the Holy One or more than praying to God. Talking of God is akin to talking about what we believe, what our convictions are—things that really matter and fire passionate concerns. It is also akin to talking about big issues—matters of life and death, suffering and joy, or love and care. For children to be in an atmosphere where God can be revered as well as discussed teaches children how to deal with all kinds of important matters with respect and

confidence. Sex, conflict, politics, and ethical dilemmas, for example, can be all difficult to discuss.

As with praying, many parents are intimidated by God talk because they are not sure what to say. “Maybe I'll say the wrong thing.” I don't know why bad things happen to good people.” “I'm not sure what to think of miracles.” Because talking of God is so closely related to big life-and-death issues that resist easy answers, a simple question from a child can raise some of our own deepest questions and theological struggles. Sometimes it is easier to say, “Ask your rabbi” or “Ask the minister.” And there may be times when asking would be a wonderful thing to do, perhaps together. But if referring to others is the main strategy for God questions and God talk, children learn that home is not a place for discussing deep issues or difficult matters. In addition, if you do not already know this, clergy struggle with these big questions, too, and they may be no better prepared to talk to a child about them than anyone else.

One of the best pieces of advice that anyone gave me, as a parent, about such matters was this: don't be so sure your child always needs an answer. So instead of having an elaborate discussion about transcendence or referring your child to the clergy, perhaps it is enough to say, “I'm not sure why we can't see God. What do you think?” Many times this is all the child wants—a chance to wonder openly about things or express an idea. The simple response, “I'm not sure. What do you think?” can open the door to a meaningful conversation, and a child learns that home is a good place to reflect on such matters, that the child's questions and thoughts are taken seriously, and that there are big questions in life that don't always go away. Yes, parents need to be very clear with children about some things: “You do not cross that road by yourself,” “You and the car will be home by five o'clock.” Clarity in these matters secures safety. And there are also matters of convictions to be clear about: “We do not use that word in this house,” “I believe with all my heart that God loves you,” “It is wrong to judge people by skin color.” But there are other matters in life that are not so clear, so we can model how to live with difficult or even unanswerable questions.

On top of all this, the truth is that sometimes we will give bad answers. Sometimes we will fail at negotiating a good conversation. Sometimes we will not listen carefully enough or we will be too tired to realize that a perfect moment to talk about God or something important just flew by. Parents need to be gracious to themselves as well as others. And children can learn by such grace. Without a context of grace, any and all of these practices can feed an abiding sense of failure, which in turn fuels anxious

living, which is the wrong spirit. And even in a good spirit, there are no guarantees. It is easy to convince ourselves that, “If I pray daily with my child, she will be a better person” or “If we read the Bible together, my son will be more faithful.” However, religious learning and the religious life, generally, are simply not mechanical enterprises with neat cause-and-effect relationships. Nonetheless, even if our kids rebel against our values and beliefs, I would rather give them something meaningful to rebel against than a haunting void.

Then again, do not underestimate the power that any religious practice, including talk of God, may hold for a child. Author and musician James McBride tells how he asked his mother, walking home from church one day, whether God was black or white. McBride’s mother was a Jewish immigrant from Europe; his father was an African American Baptist preacher. The question held high identity stakes for the child. His mother answered that God is not black or white but a spirit. But McBride pressed, “Does he like black or white people better?”

“He loves all people. He’s a spirit.”

“What’s a spirit?”

“A spirit’s a spirit.”

“What color is God’s spirit?”

“It doesn’t have a color,” she said. “God is the color of water. Water doesn’t have a color.”

For the young McBride, thinking of God as the color of water carried deep power and meaning for him through his young life and struggle for identity. Such “teachable moments” are spontaneous times when no one would have predicted that a deep lesson could be learned. But even though these are unplanned, it does seem to be true that teachable moments are more likely to emerge in homes where religious practices have been integrated into family life. If the subject of God is always avoided, it will be difficult for a child to ask God question, especially the older they get. Praying, having thoughtful discussions, or reading scriptures, for example, can create an atmosphere where religious teachable moments are more likely to happen. And as McBride’s conversation with his mother illustrates, talk of God can pave the way for talking about other kinds of deeply personal, highly charged matters.

Celebration

Remember the joy of learning? Celebration is to the religious life as joy is to learning. Holidays and holy days, feasts and festivals, all help to sustain the life of faith. They order and shape the flow of the religious year. Christmas and Easter or Passover and Yom Kippur, for example, are times when religious

communities remember and celebrate the presence of God, the Holy One, who sustains life itself. These special times are not purely about joy and celebration, however. They also commemorate times of pain and suffering. For example, Easter recalls the crucifixion; Passover recalls the oppression of slavery. But the struggles of life are placed in an even wider context of the goodness of life—resurrection, freedom, redemption, and love.

Many homes that have no other visible religious practices in their lives celebrate the major holidays. These can be an important building block for other religious practices. Maybe a family decides to have a prayer or devotional reading every night in preparation for Christmas. Maybe a sabbath ritual is built into a weekend meal. Perhaps a meal and good company are taken into a lonely home-bound neighbor on a holiday. Religious practices have a way of working well together, each nourishing another.

Celebration, like joy, is tricky in this culture, however. First of all, most of the major holidays are pulled into the circle of a consume-and-spend economy. This can kill the joy and draw the meaning right out of a celebration. Although shopping for gifts or cards can be fun, it can easily become a duty overloaded with high expectations, competition, and greed. Parents are the main barrier between their children and such a culture. Keeping holidays rooted in their religious significance is a major way of helping children know a source of joy more enduring than the latest fad in toys or computer games. But another tricky matter has to do with joy and celebration themselves. We don’t always feel joyous; we don’t always feel like celebrating. Maybe this is the first Christmas since Mom died; maybe I just lost my job; maybe I find the intensity of the holiday overwhelming and depressing; maybe I am battling depression in a world that wants me to be happy and cheery. These are difficult issues and can plague children as well as adults. This is where, again, I think the spiritual nature of holidays is better than the pop cultural versions. For people going through a challenging time, the struggles expressed in the holiday may become particularly meaningful. Stories of Jesus on the cross before Easter, of the wandering in the wilderness, of the bitterness of oppression, of the desire for atonement, or of the slaughter of the innocents at Christmas—all are powerful stories to tell. Or something as simple as reading scripture or having a prayer or serving somebody in need during a holiday can give the child or adult something deeper to connect with, a place that can meet the sadness. It is helpful for families to be sensitive to these tricky dimensions of celebrations so that they

can tailor holidays in ways to suit their own situations.

With these qualifications in mind, however, sometimes families need to cut loose and have a party, get away, take a trip, prepare a feast, dance, sing, or raise a toast to life. Vacations, trips, weddings, reunions, special meals, birthdays, the end of school year, anniversaries, graduations, games, a bike ride, or a picnic—any or all of these are ways of sustaining joy in family life and teaching children that life is very good. Here, often, adults have more to learn from children than the other way around. Children know how to play; adults, for all kinds of good and serious reasons, can easily forget. But play and joy are joined at the hip.

Many families create their own playful rituals, not only for holiday celebrations or anniversaries but throughout the week or school year. The ritual might be as simple as playing catch after work or school or having a game night once a week. Other families have special meals on certain nights: homemade pizzas or breakfast at suppertime. Some parents like to create individual times with each child; every Wednesday they might play tennis in the park; every Saturday they go for a hike. Some families have a special place they visit every year—a special camping spot, a beach, a home town. These rituals and traditions, rooted in a playful side of life, are often some of the most meaningful times in a family's life.

Building on Strengths

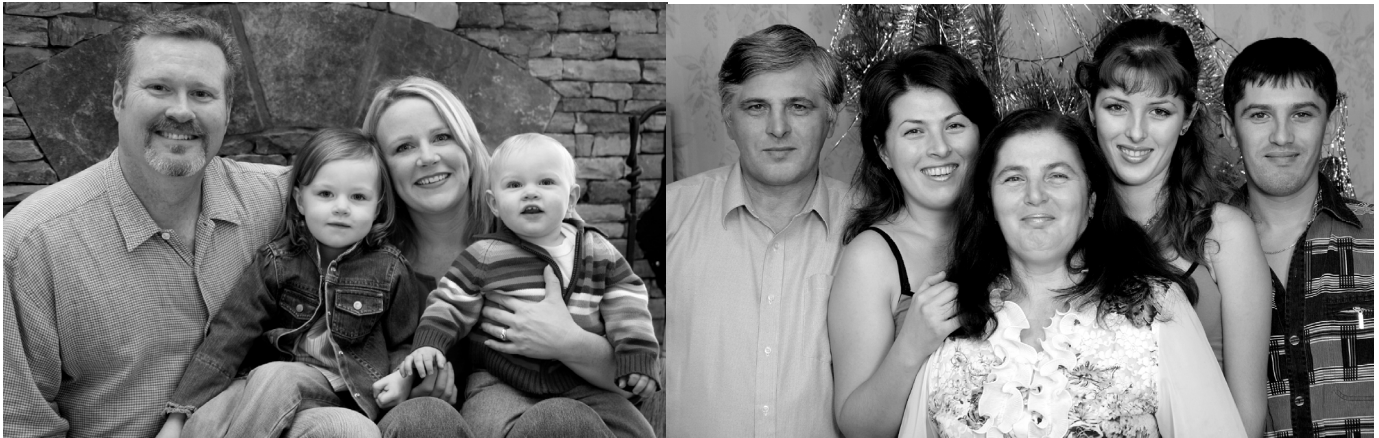
A major principle in education is one helpful to family life and religious practice. The principle is this: *build on strengths*. In education, building on strengths means if a student is good with language, the teacher tailors assignments around the use of language for that student. When studying history, for example, ask the student to write a report, tell what happened to the class, or perhaps write up the historical event as if it were a newspaper article. If students are particularly expressive, active, or dramatic have them act the historical event out. Ask musically inclined students to write a song about it. The idea is not that students uninterested in history should not learn history but that students learn better by approaching subject material through their gifts and interests. They are more likely to find the learning meaningful and, in turn, students are motivated to keep learning.

The implication for families and religious practice is that you can build on the strengths your family already has. If you manage to eat meals fairly regularly, perhaps mealtime would be a good time to

read a psalm or engage in prayer. If you know how to do holidays and celebrations well, maybe you can share some of that playfulness with friends or colleagues or others who could use some joy in their lives. If you read to your child at bedtime, perhaps that would be a good time to read a Bible story, too, or to say a prayer after your read. If you already pray with your children at bedtime, maybe that would be a good time to have some simple conversations about God. If you are highly creative people and enjoy creating new rituals, do so in the name of faith. If you do not feel so original, talk to other parents or ask people you respect what their families did growing up. Like anything, religious practice in home life is easier if a child grows up with it from the start. But children, even teenagers, may be more open to something new than you imagine, especially if they can have a say in it. You may have to experiment. But what if you try a devotional time and it just falls flat? Instead of giving up, it could be a time to rethink how your family does it. Maybe it starts with some drumming, or a walk, or a really good book and ends with a favorite prayer or blessing.

There is nothing set in stone about the practices identified in this article. There are certainly more, and there are ways in which the list itself is artificial. If you have a practice of inviting new congregation members to your home for a holiday meal, and at the meal you say a prayer, what practice would this be? Sharing meals? Celebrating? Prayer? Service? Perhaps you would call it something else altogether: practicing hospitality? The important thing is for children to know that faith is meaningful to you as a parent and to you as a family. And because it is so important, you want to find ways to live it out and discover ways for it to become meaningful to them as well. You can build on the strength of your family relationships to express and live into the spiritual life, even as the spiritual life strengthens family relationships.

I think of these visible religious practices, done intentionally and regularly, as analogous to a sanctuary. Recall Abraham Heschel's statement: "Even those who believe that God is everywhere set aside a pace for a sanctuary." He goes on, "For the sacred to be sensed at all moments everywhere, it must also at this moment be somewhere." Religious practices are the "somewheres" in home life that help us sense the sacred everywhere.



Faith Formation with Families in Today's Church

Leif Kehrwald

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

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

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

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

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

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

Families and Faith

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faith Moments in Family Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Step One: Awareness Stop! Look! Listen!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Step Two: Acknowledge It!

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

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

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

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

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

Step Three: Connect to the Sacred

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Step Four: So What?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recognizing the Moments

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

others in the community who may have had similar encounters.

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

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

Application

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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Practice Ideas

Connecting Family Faith to Congregational Life: Lent

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



Faith Formation with Hispanic/Latino Families

Ida Miranda

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

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

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

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

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

Faith and Religious Practices of Hispanic Families

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blessings

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

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

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

The *Novenario* Vigils

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

Promesas (Prayer Promises)

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

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

Quinceañera

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

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

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

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

Ash Wednesday

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

Holy Week

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Altarcito (The Home Altar)

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

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

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

Posadas (Seeking Shelter)

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

Presentación (Presentation of a Child)

Some Hispanic families keep their newborn babies at home for forty

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

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

Día De Reyes (Feast of Three Kings)

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

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

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

Our Lady of Guadalupe

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

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

Visits to the Blessed Sacrament

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

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

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

Ways To Nurture Family Faith through Family-Centered Faith Formation

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

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

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

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

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

examples of community faith formation opportunities.

CEBs (Small Christian Communities)

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

Quinceañeras

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

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

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

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

Family-Centered Faith Formation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Family-centered faith formation should include

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

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

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

faith themes their children are studying.

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

Home Visits

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

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

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

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

Endnotes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Transforming Faith Formation One Family at a Time

Jim Merhaut

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Working from the Family Back to the Church

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rejoice In and Proclaim the Vision

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Know Your Families

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

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

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

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

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

Identify the Practices of Family Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Connecting Christian Practice at Home with Sunday Worship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

transform our ordinary routines into deeply meaningful experiences.

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

A Process for Exploring a Christian Practice at Home

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

Step One

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

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

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

Step Two

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

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

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

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

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

Step Three

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

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

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

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

Motivating Parents to Practice Faith at Home

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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Family Daily Living Faith Practices

Christy Olson

A baby is born. A child is welcomed. A family is formed. The great mystery of faith formation within the structure of family shivers with potential. God is present in this awe-filled adventure of lifelong faith that sprouts, stretches and produces an abundance of fruit.

Lifelong faith development is as basic as intellectual, physical, social and emotional growth. “Spiritual formation is not optional” say Marjorie J. Thompson author of *Family The Forming Center*. The experiences and relationships of the individual unfold and the family is placed into a role of support, nurturing and recognition of spiritual gifts. How the family interacts and what they identify as the importance of faith, is vital to formation.

Families self-define. Society, including religious organizations, has spent millions of dollars and hours trying to define a family from the outside. And, yet, as a child is born and placed in a family through birth, adoption or circumstance, the people surrounding that child become family. The relationships of those who provide economic, social/emotional and physical care of the child define themselves as family. In today’s society, we are just as likely to hear two parents and two children call themselves “family” as a grandparent, mother, step father and step sister. The question becomes whether or not that self-defined family understands their role and God’s presence in lifelong faith development.

Think of the faith potential in a single family. To those of us who wake up each morning feeling the presence of God, the potential is palatable. Most people do not feel the presence of God in their lives. How do we educate to something many have only a hint about? Do we take them on retreat? If so, who pays for that in today’s economically challenged society? How do families discern, the “right” retreat for them. Do we write a book? How does the book get into a household? Do we require congregational attendance three nights a week to “get spiritual”? What’s the best venue to help families know and understand God? Hmmmm...

Perhaps we need to relook at the delivery system for knowledge about faith practices. To honor the faith growth of the family within the household, we need to concentrate on family *in-sourcing*. *In-sourcing* is getting the information to families in their homes with someone who can help in the family discovery. The

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change in this is about the final goal. Rather than looking at the primary goal as getting the family to church, our goal is to deliver faith information to the family at the place where they live. A human being is the main delivery system with a steady stream of easy ideas and a place to ask questions.

The single most effective tool is the presence of one who cares deeply about the faith journey of the family. Relationships and experiences are the ingredients needed for faith development. No matter what tool is used, the delivery system should be a human being who knows the fertile soil of family life and understands the gift of daily living faith practices.

A creative church staff member once told me that she needed to walk everyday. So she created 20 different door hangers for the 100 homes immediately surrounding their church. These included a group home and a senior living building. As she tended to the daily needs of her body through exercise, she delivered the door hangers. The door hangers had an easy idea for a faith practice to add to the life of the household, church information, and a phone number to call if the household wanted to stop the door hangers. The person on the other end of the telephone number was *not* the over extended church secretary, but a home bound woman who had time to talk to the people on the phone. The 12 phone calls to stop delivery, all resulted in good, spiritual conversations.

The goal of outreach is to reach out to others. The goal for the congregations is to reach out and engage people so they are inspired to the point of involvement in an active spiritual life connected to God. When we think of getting the message of spiritual faith practices into families the words family *in-sourcing* best describe the goal. *In-sourcing* means meeting families where they are getting the resources into the families.

This is a reverse of what is presently occurring in congregational faith formation programs. Religious education has embraced the need for families to learn together but still continues to bring them to the place of “real learning.” I believe that the “real” place of learning is in the home and we need to start there.

In her children/adult book, *The God Seed*, Edith Armstrong celebrates the presence of God in each of us from the beginning of life. This is a point of entry for educating families about spiritual faith practices. Continuing the metaphor of “seed” we know that both the potential of the seed and the potential of

growth for families is sacred. God is present in all growth. Young families, new grandparents, new great-grandparents are all given an “a-ah,” God is “present” message at the birth of a child. Part of the a-ha is about dreams and hope for future growth and the child. Here’s a common story.

Once upon a time a family had a baby. They forgot to call the pastor that married them 2 years earlier. They were so excited and only in the hospital for a day and a half. After six weeks of sleepless nights, a baby who evidently did not like certain kinds of formula, learning to diaper etc. the parents said, “We should get our baby baptized (christened, dedicated).” Now the list for the new family had several things checked off: 1) Get pregnant at the best time for the adults, our jobs and the world; 2) Have baby; and 3) Oh, by the way, we better have that baby baptized (christened, dedicated). The parents call the church and say, “Hey, we want to baptize (christen, dedicate) our baby. We aren’t members, but we got married there. We think we should baptize our baby. Everyone says so, so we need to do this, how about next Sunday? That looks convenient for us.”

This story is fertile soil for introducing families to faith practices. A miraculous, awe-filled, once-in-a-lifetime event has occurred so families think, “maybe there is a God.” Families not only need guidance at this point of a child’s birth, but also are actually seeking answers. Our expectation should be presence with the family, modeling of faith practices and let the seed of faith germinate through the family. By building a relationship, when the family needs more information, we can *in-source* materials or offer possible ways to connect with other families through study or service.

The Fertile Soil of Families

The family offers fertile soil for faith practices. Parents yearn for a spiritual life for their children, but are unsure of how to make this happen. Many adults have unhappy memories of organized church or they feel marginalized for many different reasons. Hurt has happened and a building called church, temple or mosque has been blamed. With guidance, healing and spiritual growth can take place in the home through daily faith practices. Family fertile

soil is a place where growth can occur moment-by-moment and day-by-day.

The fertile soil of families involves several important components. Each of these components parallels fertile soil in nature. Fertile soil for faith development includes the organic material of relationships and experiences. (Think about the worms and their place in soil.) Fertile soil is balanced. (Too acidic and those petunias won't flourish.) Fertile soil is teeming with potential. (Fertile soil receives sacred seeds and helps them grow.) Fertile soil can be gracefully amended. (Think weeding, adding manure and aerating.) How can we help the family identify itself as fertile soil for faith development?

The fertile soil of families is about the organic material of relationships and experiences.

Take the time to sit outside a grocery store between the hours of 4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. and you will know the status of families in America. Frazzled adults try to plan for dinner that night after working part time, full time or all the time. Tired adults push carts with tired children hanging on the sides. Arguing is the norm after being apart for part of the day or all of the day. Good decisions are not being made about food, behavior or attitude. Families are exhausted.

A parent attending a class I was leading, once said to me, "Stop the carousel and let me off. I need to feel the earth, and see, hear and smell the ways of my family. Please don't tell me I have to do something else to be the perfect parent." Of course, I was holding a six page two-sided hand out on what parents should do to develop the faith of her child. I understood exactly what the parent was saying. The urge is to tell parents about what their child needs. It is time to stop the carousel and help families use all their senses to identify the spiritually fertile soil that is their family.

Awareness of God's presence in the fertile soil of family relationships and experiences is a powerful way to understand God's gift of family.

The fertile soil of family life is balanced.

We ask families to practice spelling words, practice soccer, baseball, dance and piano. We ask families to attend worship, religious education and family

events. We expect that family events such as holidays, birthdays and anniversaries will be celebrated. With financial issues and housing issues, families are stretched to their limits. Spiritual faith practices are the key to balancing all this successfully. A pattern to life that centers around prayer, caring for self and others, and other faith practices will allow families to get off the carousel and be the sacred in the moment. The result is that the carousel still goes around and around but we are on it and in balance.

In her book *Busy but Balanced*, Mimi Doe writes, "I'm sure you feel this pull. Your days are jammed. You are living a life very much of this world. Perhaps you are struggling with how to balance work and family...rather than coming to a grinding halt, taking a sabbatical, and chanting in the woods for a week, you can create balance in your life. Indeed, this is the grace called balance." Keeping family life balanced in the home is a skill that aids in the discovery of faith practices in daily living.

The fertile soil of family has potential.

Soil by itself does not grow. Fertile soil remains ready for growth. This readiness is important when we are considering how best to introduce faith practices to the family. Growth happens more quickly when the family is ready and accepting.

God is present in what the fertile soil of family receives through relationships and experiences. When we help families to see God's presence in *all* of their daily experiences and relationship they will better understand faith practices. When we help families celebrate God's presence through faith practices we build spiritually resilient families. These spiritually resilient families will build strong faith communities become receiving agents for God's presence in all their relationships and experiences.

Fertile soil can also be gracefully amended.

Fertile soil is found in nature and in families. Germination happens at a certain temperature on a certain day. When this sacred timetable is fulfilled, growth is almost unstoppable. In families finding the best temperature for growth is a little trickier. It would be easier if we could just use a thermometer! The welcoming of a child or new family member is one obvious time for germination. Sometimes the imbalance of death, illness or loss makes families

more aware of the need to amend their lives to include spirituality. Or the potential of celebrations such as marriage, graduation or entrance into school provides the right place to gracefully introduce spiritual faith practices. Through gentle amending, the fertile soil of families becomes more receptive to growth in the area of faith practices.

Family Basic Skills for Using Faith Practices

There are several skill-sets that help families become more successful when working with spiritual faith practices. First, families need to be attentive to one another. This skill will help with faith practices like praying, caring for body and appreciating beauty. Families also need to understand the words and images around the word, “healthy.” This aids families as they begin to identify what dying well, eating well and celebrating life means. Thirdly, it is helpful for families to gather around good boundaries. Good boundaries aid families in serving others, participating in community, managing their household effectively, and doing justice in the world. Being attentive to one another, understanding the meaning of healthy, and identifying good boundaries, keep families in good relationship with self, each other and the world.

Families need to be attentive to one another.

Today’s families are focused. They are focused on singular pieces of their lives. The assumption being that the more focused, the more control. The feeling seems to be if they are focused on making money or being fit or going to school, they will get what they want. Think of the new parents who have a child and are focused on the child being spiritual. They may start with baptism, christening or dedication of the child. They are focused on that event and when it is complete, it is checked off the list. How does this differ from being attentive?

Being attentive is being open to God’s presence and trusting our own interpretation of the sensory information we receive. Rather than checking-off baptism, christening or dedication off a list, we are open to the possibilities of the experience. Attentiveness does not have a single answer, but is open to the question and knows that God is present.

If the question for a young parent is “how do I start my child on a spiritual path,” most churches will focus on a single answer “have them baptized, christened or dedicated.” If instead, we visit families in that first week of the life of their child and say, “your child is a created being of God, they are already spiritual. Watch them for miraculous behaviors and capture those moments in word or image. Get to know them and their cycles and uniqueness. Then when you truly know that they are spiritual beings created by God, bring them to public worship to be joined to a community of believers,” then we are modeling attentiveness to really knowing their child.

This is not easy task. Many who are well educated in the spiritual life, have trouble being attentive. Being attentive requires us to adjust our priorities and to show that through language and action. We need time to rethink how we look at one another. Do we look at our 7-year-old daughter and say, “your skirt doesn’t match your shirt” or “Wow, God has blessed you with the gift of creativity today.” First comes the change in heart and then comes the change in language. When the skill of being truly attentive to those in our family is fully integrated, we are open to God’s presence every moment of our family relationships.

Once a young teenager told me her Mom didn’t look right. The girl went on to say that her Mom was a funny color. When her mother expressed unexplained pain one evening, her daughter called 911. Her mother ended up having a heart attack but the paramedics were already there. The heart attack was minimal and caused no heart damage. This young woman was able to get beyond herself to be attentive to her mother’s health. She was open and attentive to her mother’s entire being. This attentiveness needs to be fostered in families as a basic skill.

Families need to understand what “healthy” means.

If you ask a four year old where a carrot comes from, the child will most likely answer “the store.” Their image of a carrot is 4 inches long and completely smooth. A 6-year old’s favorite dinner will most likely be in a box with a toy and received at a drive in window. A 14-year-old girl will be sure that the average “good” size to be is a 1 or 3. A 15-year-old boy will say that being 6 feet or taller is the best. These

are the images of healthy that the media provides to families today.

The ability to work towards a life centered on daily faith practices can only happen when we understand the context of the word healthy. It would be better to think of health as a way of life. Health is the attitude that helps mold decisions about lifestyle. Health is a practice that has a cumulative affect. Families need to understand that health does not have a single answer like take this supplement or walk today, but a long-term result of daily practice. Understanding the attitude of health as daily practice in the context of family, involves early education and experiences.

Reconnecting ourselves to the growth processes of our own food is an important part of this education. The family's disconnection from their food separates them from understanding health. Families need to understand their place in the food cycle as a stepping-stone to their ability to understand daily faith practices. We are created beings and God's plan is health.

Good boundaries within the family are also a basic skill for families.

Families sometimes get privacy mixed up with good boundaries. Within the structure of family privacy is a privilege that allows us to be free from the attention of others. Boundaries involve concepts like space and information. For instance, a child might ask for privacy for the evening while they work on a project. Think about what would happen if they tried to be private in the front of the television. No one in the family would be happy with that boundary. A good boundary for privacy involves a certain agreed-upon space. Boundaries are limits that are definable and agreed upon by all. Good boundaries allow family members to be involved in private moments with God.

Sharing comes under the scrutiny when discussing boundaries. Is sharing by all of everything an assumption in family? Good boundaries help siblings understand that yelling, "John's not sharing," at the top of your lungs does not result in getting to take John's truck. All family members need to understand the boundaries of goods and boundaries of space. If Grandpa is asleep in the recliner, that becomes his space. Jumping into the chair while he is sleeping is not a good boundary choice. This is daily living but without the good

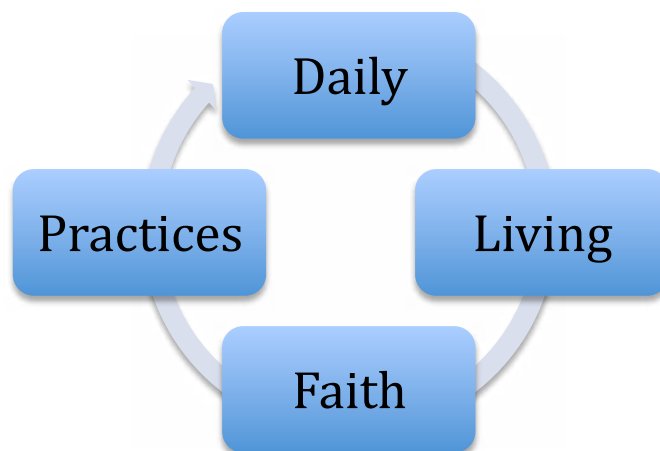
boundary it is hard to emphasize individual and family faith practices.

Boundaries are also important when sharing the stories of the family. Sharing stories is something we all do. The world encourages learning through the stories of others. The wisdom of others comes to us through story. Being a kindergarten teacher taught me about the necessity of helping children understand when there needs to be limits on what is shared. While books and television have caused us to laugh about limitless stories shared by young children, some of the information can be hurtful to others. And of course, the first thing we do is laugh, which models all the wrong lessons.

Language boundaries need to be processed as they happen. It is most often the child whose has not discussed sharing day at kindergarten and what it means, who tend to offer comments like, "Daddy hates Mommy's new dress and Mommy cried." Language boundaries can be solved through being proactive. If a family event happens and the family feels it needs to stay within the context of family, calmly discuss the boundary. This is not about keeping secrets it is about boundaries. To fully participate as a family into daily faith practices, all members of the family must understand and agree upon good boundaries is language and space.

Faith Practices and Families

I like to think of faith practices as wrapping around today's families and presenting protection against the arrows of the world.



The words “daily,” “living,” “faith,” and “practices” can be in any order and still result in enveloping the family in God’s presence. Whether we talk about “faith practices daily,” “practices daily living,” “daily living faith,” or “living faith practices” these phrases represent a profound change in how the family and faith connect. Faith becomes not something we go and get or read about, but something that we connect to in daily life each moment and each day. The most important thing about daily-living-faith-practices is that they are easily accessible, low cost or no cost and proactive. This connects well with over extended, financially challenged, and reactive families.

The problem is that often families look at a list of faith practices and say, “Prayer, well we’ve got that one. We pray at meals. And look this faith practice says ‘knowing beauty,’ didn’t I just spend an entire day at the spa?” This is why *in-source* experiences and relationships are needed to help families identify the meanings and depth of the faith practices. In the May/June 2010 issue of *Spirituality and Health* Thomas Moore says, “Spiritual practice that is purely abstract, mental, or moral isn’t sufficient. It has to be tangible, evocative, and beautiful to make spiritual sensibility fully present and effective.” These words are life-changing when the checklist mentality is replaced with sensory experiences that are beautiful and evocative.

Families practice intellectual development through spelling words and reading and a million other ways. They practice emotional/social development in relationships through many venues. Families practice physical development through walks, teams, biking and lessons. Families are used to goals and “times per week” to accomplish practice. Spiritual practice is continual and cumulative. The outcomes are long range rather than short range. Lifelong faith practice is the goal and there is not a test you can take and hand in or a single skill to accomplish. The concept of moment-by-moment, day-by-day spiritual practice is new to most families and quite intimidating. Helping families to connect daily living to faith practices will make spiritual practice more attainable.

By *in sourcing* with families, we can help them identify ways that they are already involved in daily faith practices. Through mapping their days we can show them how brushing their teeth is taking care of their body. We can look at daily schedules and see the ways that each member of the family supports the caring for their home. By being with the family

in their home we can help them understand how taking a time of Sabbath helps everyone function better. Walks through the family’s neighborhood, will help families identify places of beauty outside of themselves. Partnering with a family as they explore faith practices is a good way to explain lifelong faith as a daily gift from God.

There are several wonderful life stages to meet families and aid them in exploration and discovery around faith practices. One I call the “sprout” stage. This is the stage of young families who are growing so fast and coping daily on the little pieces of their children’s life. These families are yearning for a spiritual life for their family, but have no idea what that means or how to start. They look for books and places of information and are often confused by messages that are contradictory. With a trusted mentor, families are surrounded by the miracles of growth and are open to new information.

Another stage of life for introducing faith practices is the “harvest” stage. This is a transitional stage where the crop is brought in and people are looking ahead but need something to fill their time since harvest is over. I think of Mothers whose last child goes to full day school or couples whose last child gets married or even elders when a spouse dies well and redefinition of family is happening. Harvest stage encompasses all ages along the journey where there is change in the structure of the family. Helping families identify how they can redefine their spirituality as life changes.

Daily Living Faith Practices: Experiences

Pilgrimage

Families understand the idea of journey. They go to the store, school and to the library. Beautiful things happen when we bless the beginning of our journey and the thank God as we return home. The threshold of our home is a place of many rituals that have deep meaning. Hospitality happens on the threshold as well as messages of love and celebrations of safe returns. Wonderful holiday traditions happen at doorways such as the Polish Feast of the Three Kings when Christmas is over and K+M+B+ is inscribed on the door in chalk to represent the three kings. The doorway is often thought of as a place where we can look backwards

as well as forward. Doorways hold hope, acceptance and love in our daily living. Doorways begin a journey and are sacred.

The sacred journey toward God is more difficult to understand. Pilgrimage is not always concrete. We can take a sacred journey toward God through meditation, prayer or by using a labyrinth. We can walk, drive or ride bike to sacred places as we journey toward God. Historically, the act of pilgrimage, or taking a sacred journey toward God, is one of the oldest forms of faith practice. Dr. Ed Sellner, professor of the History of Christian Spirituality at the University of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, says, "We are naturally drawn to places and people who reveal the goodness of God, the beauty of creation, the sacred dimension of our lives." Dr. Sellner's deep understanding of pilgrimage is explored in a book, *Pilgrimage*. Pilgrimage for faiths all over the world is often to a sacred place specified by the spiritual traditions. A sacred place for pilgrimage could be a well in Ireland or a monastery in the mountains. A family cabin that has crossed generations, can be a sacred place where at certain seasons, the family takes a pilgrimage. All sorts of sacred places bring us through a journey, closer to God.

From a small age, the faith practice of journeying toward God can be learned through use of a three-circuit labyrinth. The three-circuit (or circle) labyrinth is simple and can be painted on a 6-foot tarp or canvas (see resources for ordering). The labyrinth is then folded away and brought out at times when discovering God through a journey is the goal. These times might include "looking for God" in a loss or a new accomplishment. By making an intentional journey to God with the labyrinth, families are reinforcing the idea that daily living, faith practices and God are uniquely linked.

Around the sacred space of the labyrinth, the family can explore the faith practice of journeying towards God together. This helps all members of the family understand the way we open ourselves up to the presence of God. The labyrinth represents the journey to God in a safe place. By using the labyrinth in the daily life of the family, the concept of the sacredness of each journey is discovered as well as an understanding of greater journeys in the lifelong faith of the individual. To have siblings gathered around the sacred space rather than the computer, toys or television, changes the family dynamics greatly.



There are a few general "suggestions" around using a 3-circuit labyrinth in the family. First, we open the labyrinth and fold the labyrinth together. In the sacred act of placing the labyrinth among our family we emphasize that our family is also sacred. Secondly, is that the space is sacred so we take off our shoes before walking. And lastly, we use quiet voices and silence as our means of communicating.

Activities surrounding the use of the three-circuit labyrinth in the family are in three general categories. First, activities can simply acknowledge the sacredness of the journey and the parts of beginning, arrival and ending. For the youngest family members this is enough. An example of such as activity might be as follows. (Materials needed: 3-circuit labyrinth, small bell.)

Stand together and hold the labyrinth as it is folded. One person reads these directions. This does not have to be an adult. "Close your eyes. Feel the presence of God and know that you are one of God's special creations. Pause Open your eyes. Look at your family. Think of something your family shared recently. I wonder if anyone in the family made you smile, laugh or cry." Pause.

"Today we will have new experiences with our family and God is here. Let's open the labyrinth carefully and place it on the floor together." Remind everyone to take off shoes.

"Let's look at the circles on the labyrinth. There are three circles. Think about how they connect. Does anyone want to share what you see about

the circles on the labyrinth?" Allow any members to share. "Now let's talk about how we get into the labyrinth. Where is the opening in the circles?" "Where are we going if we walk the path?" "Why is it important to follow this path?" "I have a bell here. The bell is to ring so that we know you have entered the labyrinth. As soon as you hear the bell, we are all quiet until we hear the bell again to know that the person walking has left the labyrinth." "Who would like to walk the labyrinth first?" As each person enters and leaves the labyrinth, ring the bell. Allow family members to move as slowly or quickly as they wish. After the bell is rung at the close of one journey, allow a little pause before someone else uses the labyrinth. If any member of the family uses the time in the labyrinth to be silly or showing off skills, use a quiet voice to bring that person back to the presence of God. "Doug is really being silly. He is showing us how God created him uniquely. God is present and knows what Doug is feeling in his heart." Close the time together by carefully folding the labyrinth together and again holding it between you. No follow up questions are needed because processing happens in each individual heart. Prayer at the end offered by anyone is also appropriate.

Labyrinth activities, like the above, emphasize God's presence on the journey. This is easily transferred into the daily journeys of the family. The labyrinth can also be used to help families be thankful for creation. A family creation walk can result in the labyrinth becoming a place to put offerings from the walk. Individual members walk to the middle and put what they are thankful for in creation. This kind of activity helps families understand that the beauty in the world is also a gift from God.



Labyrinths are most often used as a place of prayer. The physical journey brings us closer to God. Families can use labyrinths as a form of prayer. On a family day of sabbath, open the labyrinth in shared space. By leaving the labyrinth open during the family time, it helps to emphasize the inherent sacredness of family. Prayer can happen by walking individually to the center for quiet time. Or a group family prayer can happen to begin the day. The message becomes that sacred space for prayer and reflection is not some place we have to go, but is where we already are.

As families use this faith practice of journeying in their daily life, the journeys that they take at other times will change. Families will begin to see that a trip to the grocery store is a special time where God is present. The safe return of a parent from work each day becomes a visible blessing. This is the purpose of daily faith practices in the family. Our goal is to help families see that their daily activities are sacred and important to God, moment-by-moment and day-by-day.

Made in God's Image

Caring for our bodies is another good way to help families identify daily living with faith practices. We discussed previously the importance of defining "healthy" for most families. Families do try to teach healthy habits. Homes and schools teach cleanliness and basic health of teeth, hair and bodies. These are often areas of disagreement in families. Two adults get together and their health habits are different. Children are taught habits and quickly pick up on the fact that one adult did not brush their teeth today. How does this change if the health and cleanliness of our bodies is associated with the faith practice of caring for our God given bodies?

Our bodies are our oldest friends. They are truly miraculous the way they heal all the abuse we give them. God put together all our systems and gave just us this special and unique body. When we remind families that these bodies are God's gift, it changes how they react to media descriptions of what their body "should" look like. Going through a day in our life as we care for our God-given bodies, is one way to help families explore the practice of caring for our sacred bodies. (Materials needed: 1 piece of paper with each person's name, bubbles to blow, coloring materials)

At supper, have this discussion with the family. "Tomorrow we are going to have a day of celebration. We will celebrate the gift of our bodies, from God to us. Let's try something. Who would like to blow bubbles?" Allow one person to blow bubbles. "What parts of your body do you use to blow bubbles? What do you feel on the inside when you breathe? What do we see on the outside of your body when you breathe? God gave us the gift of breath and we use our whole bodies to breathe. Breathing reminds us that each part of our body is a gift from God." Time for everyone to blow bubbles and celebrate this gift of breath." Pass out pages with each person's name. Explain that tomorrow we will encourage each other to remember our bodies as a gift from God. Instead of saying, "Time to get up," we will say, "God gave you the gift of sleep to heal and grow. Let's get that special body moving." Remember that brushing teeth, combing hair, putting on clothing is all about our bodies. Each time a family member says a statement that recognizes the gift of their body, they color/draw something on their sheet of paper. Share pictures at dinner and process the day using these wondering questions. "I wonder why God gave us our bodies. I wonder why all our bodies look different from the outside. I wonder if our bodies are more alike on the inside. I wonder how we can honor God by taking care of our bodies."

The results of this activity are both internal and external and will be evident immediately. A day to celebrate our bodies can happen more than once. Family physical activities done together, such as walking, can become a time to remind everyone that our ability to walk includes many working systems that God gave us. A birthday is a time to celebrate the gift of breath when someone is blowing out candles. Even getting over a cold is a wonderful time to talk about the gift of healing that God has given us. Each time we emphasize within the family that God created all of us and we are sacred, we are living faith practices.

Holy Routines and Sacred Patterns in the Home

There is a daily routine to family life. Today's culture hits families with a million things they should do to become a successful family. Schools, media, and our

own need to be like others, fill our days with lessons, shopping, appointments, group meetings and social events. There seems to be a societal expectation that an over-filled calendar equals a happy family. The challenge is to help families know that they are God's creation and *being* family is more important than *doing* family.

Daily sacred patterns help us connect to God and all parts of life. There is a pattern of birth, procreation and death for all God's beings. There is a pattern to growth and development. There is a pattern for learning skills. There is a pattern for growing food, harvesting food, cooking food and eating food. The orderliness that comes from patterns is another blessing from God. We need to aid families in identifying the healthy daily living patterns and place God into their pattern.

To help families understand the need for patterns and routine in family life, do a Backwards Day. (This works best on a non-school day when everyone is home.) Agree the night before that the entire day will be done backwards. There will be a list on each door in the house of how the day will go. At breakfast, you will discuss the day and process what you learned.

- *Alarm goes off. Go back to sleep.*
- *Get up and get dressed in your dirty clothes.*
- *Kids pack lunches.*
- *Eat supper kids cook (serve a dinner menu).*
- *Adults do the kids homework.*
- *Eat a snack.*
- *Kids pay the bills or clean the kitchen.*
- *Eat lunch (serve a lunch menu).*
- *Kids do the laundry.*
- *Eat breakfast (serve a normal breakfast menu).*
- *Get dressed in clean clothes.*
- *Brush your teeth/wash your face.*
- *Go to bed, dressed.*

Process this activity with this discussion. "Why do we have a routine to our day? How does having a pattern to our day help us? How did it feel to have the routine uncertain? How does it feel when we have so many extra activities that it is hard for our family to find a routine? What if we had one day a week when we stayed home as a family? How would that day look? How about the different jobs we do to help each other keep the house clean? How did it feel to do different

chores? How does it feel when someone doesn't do a part of the job? What if there are not any clean clothes? What if we can't find things we need around the house? How is God present in a house that is orderly?"

In times past, the holy daily routine was necessary. If families did not tend their vegetable gardens and animals, they did not eat. If families did not take care of their possessions, they could not go buy more. There were no mini storage facilities. Lack of transportation other than walking or riding made activity with others a treat but not the norm. These daily realities allowed families to follow growth patterns set by God. Thomas Howard in his book *Splendor in the Ordinary*, says, "a third possibility would be to accept the fact that life comes tumbling at us nowadays, but that it is nonetheless possible for us to see our ordinary daily routines as proceeding among the hallows, so to speak." Daily routines and patterns are a blessing from God and hallowed ground.

Daily Service to One Another and In the World

Service to others has become big business. There are entire corporations involved in helping connect us to others in need. We can go on trips to far away places and help those with less. Service learning has been added to education at all levels. Many college degree programs require internships or service learning. There are 112,000,000 listings on Google under "service learning." What does the faith practice of service others mean in the daily life of families?

Service happens in the family among family members and out in the world. By serving others we are serving God. Families that help one another daily can more easily get involved in service to God in the world. They serve God by serving one another. One skill builds on another. If a family member takes an expensive trip to "learn" how to serve others the skills may not be applied in the home. If a family practices service within the family on a daily basis, the faith practice will be more easily applied in the world.

The reason service learning is now found in schools is that service fulfills a basic component of a human being. We want to give to others. This is basic to life. With websites, blogs and online video

possibilities, people are more easily connected to those in need. Volunteering is a culturally acceptable way to spend time. Families who learn to help one another daily and translate that into helping in community need to remember that they are serving God by serving others.

Helping all family members identify what services they do for the good of the family, is a good place to start. A "mom for a day" or a "kid for the day" role reversal experience might help family members be more sensitive to the needs of each other. Then list little ways that each family member could be served to help them function better in their responsibility to the family. Place the list in a prominent place where everyone can see it. For non-readers, draw illustrations to go with the list of ways to serve one another. Be inclusive so that each member of the family, whether adult or child, has ways that they can be served.

When the family begins to understand how they can serve one another, look for ways to serve others. Announce "open the door for others" week or "what can I carry for you" week. Every opportunity to help another through a doorway will be found during the week. Or every place when someone needs help carrying is explored. Process these experiences at a meal. Use questions like, "why is it important to serve others by helping them carry things or open the door?" or "how does it feel to serve other people?"

Neighborhood service opportunities are everywhere. Elders or sick neighbors that need help with yard work, picking up trash, or maybe just a smile each day are a great way to help families do service. Storm clean, raking or shoveling leaves, and snow or delivering "no reason at all" items to the neighbors are ways to serve others in the neighborhood. Serving one another daily at home and in the neighborhood, results in a better understanding of the faith practice serving. Interestingly, there does not seem to be an age applied to the skill and basic understanding of serving others. Quite often the youngest members of a family understand this concept better than older members. Placing serving others in the context of daily family life, helps everyone become a serving member of our community.

Conclusion

Families define themselves. Each family is a unique gift from God and fertile soil for lifelong faith. Families are bombarded with messages that tell them how to fill their days with things that will make them better families. Faith practices that emphasize the holy and sacred in daily life help shield the family from negative messages. Families are choosing to identify faith practices in their daily life.

In church leadership, we need to spend less time trying to get families to a building to be spiritual and more time, helping them identify ways they are already spiritual. There are times in the life of families that are organic (birth of a child, celebrations, transitions) and these times are open for *in-sourcing*. In-sourcing allows us to join with the family help them see how their daily lives are filled with opportunities to express the holy. *Daily Living Faith Practices* are the key to helping families find God in their midst.

Identifying journey as sacred, celebrating the holy act of daily routine, knowing the family members are made in the image of God and service to each other and the world are all important daily living faith practices for families. Once families begin to recognize and name their daily lives as sacred, they will begin to produce fruit that is abundant. This sacred fruit of family daily living faith practices has the potential to feed the world.

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Passing on Faith—Milestone to Milestone

Linda Staats

*In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’
Tell them... (Joshua 4:6–7)*

Julie and her peers at All Saints were called forward during worship to receive a blanket as a high school graduation gift from the congregation. These were not just any blankets; each young person’s name was embroidered on one corner, and a symbol of the cross and the words *All Saints* appeared on the other. As the blankets were wrapped around the shoulders of Julie and each graduate, a blessing was given: “The arms of the congregation are wrapped around you as you go out into the world. This blanket is a reminder of our love for you, and that you are covered in God’s grace and wrapped in the arms of Jesus. You are God’s child and marked with the sign of the cross forever.” There wasn’t a dry eye among those assembled during this service, which is a highlight of the year for the congregation. But there was also a twinkle in the eye of the small group of wise elders known as the Cut Ups, whose experienced hands and hearts lovingly contributed their time, talents, and prayers to making each blanket.

But this is not the end of the story. In the fall, Julie wrote to me:

Dear Linda,

Months have passed since I graduated and left for college. I want to thank you for coordinating the graduation milestone. The blanket lies on the end of my bed. It does more than add color to my room and keep me warm. The adjustment to college has not been easy, finding new friends and freedom from the watchful eyes of my parents—and you! Every time I have a tough decision to make about what to do or how to fit in, all I need to do is look at the blanket and I remember who I am and whose I am. I am reminded of all who care and pray for me.

Gotta go!

Love, Julie

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The Life and Work of the Church

Passing on the Christian faith from generation to generation is at the heart of the life and work of the church. This fundamental task requires much more than passing on biblical and doctrinal information. Passing on the Christian faith to others involves the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives birth to trust and confidence in the creative, redeeming, and renewing power of God.

The goal of lifelong faith formation is to enable a seamless journey of learning and passing on faith to every infant, child, youth, young adult, adult, and elder in our congregations and in our homes. The purpose is for individuals to develop an active, deeply owned faith in Jesus Christ that grounds, sustains, informs, and identifies him or her as a child of God in every age, stage, and transition of life. To accomplish this task, congregations need to align their resources around a vision and mission to nurture and pass on faith by creating a vital church-home partnership and intentional cross-generational culture that forms disciples.

What does Julie's story have in common with baptism, beginning Sunday School, the first day of school, losing a tooth, learning the Lord's Prayer, going to camp for the first time, first communion, receiving a driver's license, graduation, marriage, a new home, loss of a job, a new job, retirement, reliance on a wheelchair, the move into an elder care center, and death? All of these are turning points, rites of passage and potential memorable moments in the faith journey of a Christian. These are milestones in life, and they are experiences that offer an opportunity to celebrate God's presence and be reminded of one's identity as a child of God.

Using milestones as a basis for ministry within the church is a powerful way to engage parishioners of all ages and stages of life in nurturing their faith and spiritual growth. Milestones offer an opportunity to bring God's presence into the home and connect the rituals of daily life with the life of the congregation, thus shaping a vital partnership between home and congregation. Most important, milestones ministry renews and transforms congregations by tending the baptismal journey through all the ages and stages of a life centered in Christ.

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My Story

Nineteen ninety-five was a milestone year for me, a time when my educational background in human development converged with my passion for ministry and service in the church. In that year, I left the academic world to serve as the Minister for Faith Development in a mid-size congregation; also during that year, I heard two similar prophetic messages, only months apart, that urged church leaders to partner with the home to teach the faith in new and relevant ways. That April I attended a conference hosted by the local Catholic diocese, where the speaker was John Roberto. I can still see him drawing a church and a house with a line connecting them, and hearing the phrase "church-home connection" for the very first time.

In October of 1995 I participated in a conference called *Child in Our Hands* (now called *Passing on Faith*) in Mesa, Arizona, presented by passionate, visionary voices from The Youth & Family Institute. Along with a sound theological framework for faith formation, they introduced the idea of filling a FaithChest® for children, rather than a toy chest (an idea that has spread across the globe), as well as an idea for giving handmade "Holy Comforters" as gifts at baptism. The host pastor for this conference, Rev. John Bratten, introduced participants to the concept of family-centered confirmation, which begins at baptism and continues with a specific equipping event every year of a child's life through high school graduation. In this approach, confirmation is an intentional journey that begins with birth and involves the entire family and congregation, not a just a step to graduation shaped within a classroom.

Early in his ministry, John had discovered the joy and effectiveness of providing children's education, adult Bible study, and evangelism all at the same time! John Bratten became my patient mentor, freely sharing all his ideas for connecting church and home, congregation and families, for the first eighteen years of life.

And so it was that in 1995, my passion for passing on faith was ignited as visions of church-home connections, Holy Comforters, and FaithChests danced in my head. My own faith DNA and lens for doing ministry were forever altered.

Development of Milestones as Ministry

The phrase "milestones ministry," although it is not trademarked or registered, is most often associated with The Youth & Family Institute in Minnesota. The Youth & Family Institute, under the leadership of Dr. Dick Hardel and Dr. David Anderson, supported by inspiration from Dr. Rollie Martinson at Luther Seminary as well as many other milestone practitioners, has developed and incorporated milestones ministry into the core of its own ministry. Milestones ministry provides congregations with a means to implement a vision for passing on faith. Here, the child is placed in the center and God's redeeming work is at play throughout the interwoven circles of home, congregation, community, culture, and creation. Resources and support for milestones leaders are created by many different sources, including publishers, and made available to congregations to help them connect church and home in the process of passing on the faith.

Over the past forty years, numerous voices and organizations in multiple denominations have called on the church to rethink its approach to faith formation. Anyone who is engaged in the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation is encouraged to read *Will Our Children Have Faith* (1976) by John Westerhoff, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* by Eugene Roehlkepartain (1991), and *Passing on the Faith* by Merton Strommen and Dick Hardel (2000).

Theological Foundation

How do we make every generation a generation of disciples who pass on faith? Part of the answer is to immerse ourselves in a theology of daily life,

Christian vocation, and the priesthood of all believers.

The very point that Jesus makes in the gospel of John—"I have come that they may have life, an abundant life" (10:10)—is best communicated if we connect God with all the milestones of life. Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, the life" (John 6:14), "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48), "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God connects with us in all the milestones of life. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus promises, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us." To be effective in discipleship and evangelism, the ministries of Christian congregations must continue to connect God with more milestones in the lives of individuals and families.

Educational Process

Most churchgoers assume that Sunday school and confirmation are the primary means of fulfilling the catechetical, or teaching, mission of the church. However, ongoing research and observation over the past four decades have noted that Sunday school as a stand-alone program has had limited success in passing on Christian faith. Additionally, confirmation has been seen more as a graduation *out* of the Christian faith rather than as a deepening of that journey. Too much emphasis has been placed on isolated educational programs, especially programs that separate children and youth from their parents. Indeed, it has become abundantly clear that for the church to be faithful and effective in forming lifelong disciples, parents and other caregiving adults need to be seen as essential partners in the dynamic journey of passing on the Christian faith from generation to generation. This is the unfinished reformation.

One of the central concerns expressed about milestones ministry is the importance this model places on involving parents and essential caregivers in the faith lives of their children. All too often, critics say, parents are disinterested or already overwhelmed with the daily challenges of family life. The question of how to engage parents and other caring adults—who often seem ill equipped for the task of nurturing the faith of others—in the faith lives of our children and youth is a legitimate one.

Milestones ministry is a form of Christian education that subtly and gently involves parents and other caring adults with the ongoing Christian education of children and youth, while simultaneously engaging them in their own adult faith formation. Parents and caregivers are

motivated by the delight they experience in seeing their children receive recognition, the blessings they receive in the form of prayers and love offered from the congregation, receiving gifts (a visible and physical reminder of the milestone and a resource for faith nurture in their own homes), and connections made with other families and wise elders who form a community of support.

Social-Cultural Context

Stephen Wallace, the national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD who also directs the annual *Teens Today* research project, writes:

For years sociologists and psychologists have mourned the loss of traditions marking childhood “rites of passage.” In earlier American culture, movement toward adulthood was accompanied by more ritualistic, meaningful celebrations of transition to newfound independence and responsibility to the family and community. Indeed, absent reasonable recognition of their early milestones, many young people seek alternative rites to “maturity,” including drinking, drugging, dangerous driving, and early intimate sexual behavior. In a culture largely devoid of formal “rites of passage” and too often unobservant of the few that exist, young people may make up their own. By paying attention to the important transitions of childhood and adolescents, influential adults...can make it less likely that poor choices will become a child’s self-constructed mileposts along the path to adulthood.

The Milestones Ministry Model

The story of Noah (Genesis 8:8–22, 9:1–17) provides the template and the basic ingredients for milestones ministry, and reminds us to tell the story of God’s promise from generation to generation. In the Noah story:

1. A significant life event, the flood, represents an ending and a new beginning. The transition for Noah and his family is named, recognized and marked. The event is memorable and transforming.
2. Noah and his family (two generations) are actively involved.
3. God’s presence is recognized.
4. An altar is built. Noah and his family express their faith and gratitude for God’s care. God

makes a promise and a covenant with Noah. God further instructs Noah and his family on how to live. God blesses them.

5. There is a symbol, the rainbow, that becomes a means to “remember” and tell the story again and again and again. The symbol imparts meaning and creates a sense of belonging to a faith community of people who trust God. The rainbow is a gift from God and a reminder of God’s faithfulness and promise in daily life.

Milestones ministry weaves the following four basic elements into a vital partnership between the congregation and the home, whether that home is a house in the suburbs, a farmhouse, dorm, apartment, hogan, casa, group home, room in an elder care facility, or a motor home. These elements can be incorporated into any milestone, whether it is a birth, a baptism, a new puppy, a graduation, a wedding, joining an AA group, losing one’s hair due to chemo, a retirement, a funeral, or any occasion related to a stage, age, or moment in life.

I. Naming and Marking

Naming and marking the sacred and ordinary events in the life of a congregation and in our daily life (e.g., beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, rites of passage) creates rituals and traditions that shape us and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.

2. Equipping

Equipping provides instruction related to the milestone, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and brings at least two generations together. Participants learn from each other as they engage in experiential, cross-generational learning that serves as a model for faith practices in the home. Take-home resources encourage continued practice and the building of meaningful relationships. The equipping events may be a one-time gathering on a Sunday, or multiple-week gatherings on Saturdays or weekday nights. Today’s families more readily make short-term commitments than those involving a larger time frame.

3. Blessing

Blessing the individual, marking the occasion in worship, and providing tools for naming and blessing in the home says this is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred and the sacred ordinary.

4. Gifting

Gifting is a tangible way to provide a symbol and a reminder of the occasion being marked. Gifting serves as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. It has the potential to engage people's interests and talents in milestone events, as well as connect them to one another in new, meaningful relationships.

The Four Keys

At the heart and practice of every milestone both in the congregation and at home are the "four keys," formative daily faith practices first introduced by Dr. David Anderson in 1989 (see *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples In Home and Congregation*). The four keys are simple and practical. Milestone leaders are encouraged to practice them at every equipping event, providing a model and a resource for use in the home. The four keys open one's imagination to explore and play with additional ways of celebrating the Christian faith both at home and away from home. They are:

- caring conversation
- devotions
- acts of service
- rituals and traditions.

It's All About Faith!

"Milestones" is a familiar word to most of us. When I open my hometown weekly newspaper, the caption on the last page reads, "Milestones." On this page the births, deaths, engagements, and weddings are announced to the local community.

Dr. Paul Hill, executive director of The Youth & Family Institute and author of *Coming of Age*, introduces his audiences to milestones this way:

The research in the United States indicates that the average person connects the ministry of the Christian congregation to four milestones: birth/baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial. When teenagers say, "What does First United Methodist (or St. James Lutheran or St. Paul's Episcopal, etc.) have to do with life?" or "What does Jesus have to do with life?" they are not against God or the Church. They are only responding to what they have seen and/or experienced. If the only time a relationship with a gracious God is talked about happens in the buildings of the congregation and then, only around the four milestones of birth, confirmation, marriage, and burial, then our God and our faith are in a box.

How do we connect the events of our lives with God's biblical stories in a way that can help us realize God is traveling with us? How do we bring the milestones of the church year into the home, and how do we bring the milestones of home and society into the church? How do we celebrate those expected and anticipated events that are marked on the calendar and planned well in advance, as well as the events that are unexpected? In the midst of the milestones that give rhythm to daily life, how do families regularly acknowledge God at work in the highs and the lows, the beginnings and the endings, the giggles and the tears?

The following three categories are offered as examples for thinking about any and all aspects of life as having the potential for naming milestones that join our story with God's story. Milestones can intersect and weave together the circles of family, church, community, one's culture and creation. Each event listed has the potential to be claimed as a milestone and recognized in the congregation, at home and away from home.

- **Congregational milestones:** baptism, baptismal anniversary, celebration of Jesus' baptism, entry into Sunday School, first communion, presentation of Bibles, beginning confirmation, the rite of confirmation, marriage, death, the seasons of the church year (such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week), and learning the prayers, creeds, and various teachings of one's faith.
- **Human development and daily living:** birth, birthdays, first tooth, first steps, folding hands for prayer, toilet training, playing church, beginning school, burying a pet, braces, puberty, first date, driver's license, graduation, leaving home, going to camp, entering the military, lifelong commitment to another, end of a relationship, anniversaries, first job or new job, birth or adoption of children, first home, a new home, moving, disposing of possessions and moving into an assisted living center, retirement, and death.
- **Civic celebrations:** These important dates mark significant historical events and celebrations in our community and culture, and solidify our identity and sense of belonging as citizens of the United States: Memorial Day, Labor Day, the Fourth of July, Election Day, Thanksgiving, New Years, Mother's Day and Father's Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, President's Day, and Veterans Day. Within specific cultures are celebrations such as Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo, and many more.

Next Steps

So how do we begin to incorporate milestones ministry into our congregations and homes?

First, begin with yourself and your own household, extended family, and friends. Become deliberate about looking for opportunities to name and claim God's presence in your own daily life. Understand your own home as a center for faith formation for your family and guests. For example, every couple whose wedding my husband and I attend receives a red toolbox from ACE hardware. On the lid we inscribe, "Joe & Jane's Faith Chest." We then enclose a letter in which we explain that "ACE" stands for Active Couple Enrichment! Also enclosed is a gift certificate for the hardware store, and a few resources to support the couple's life together (our favorites are a copy of *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, written by Eugene H. Peterson, and a prayer book for couples). The unwrapped red toolbox perched among elegantly wrapped gifts always receives lots of attention—evangelism at its best!

Take inventory of all the milestones your congregation already marks; by the very nature of being a community of faith, milestones are practiced. Ask, "How do these fit the model of milestones ministry? Examine your entire ministry, asking, "How is this activity equipping parents and caring adults to nurture faith? How is this celebration supporting households to be centers of faith? Do we name? equip? bless? gift? Do we use the four keys to model in the congregation what we want individuals and families to practice in their homes? Are all the generations gathered at church and in homes to share stories and engage in meaningful interaction?

The following letter, from a Methodist youth minister in Virginia, contains an example of viewing one's ministry through a milestones lens:

The mother of a high school senior called this morning to discuss her daughter. The father is being deployed to Iraq in February, and the daughter is having a difficult time letting go. The mother was concerned because her daughter didn't want to attend two up-coming youth retreats, choosing instead to stay home with Dad and spend that time with him. She was trying to convince her daughter to attend the youth events.

At that moment, milestones ministry "clicked" for me! The event this young lady will remember for the rest of her life is her father's deployment. This is the milestone event of her senior year. Nothing we do can change that; however, as the faith community,

we have an opportunity to shape how this experience will be remembered. Will she remember this as a time of grief, loneliness, and worry? Or will she remember this as a milestone in her faith journey, a time when she chose to entrust God with the well-being of her father?

The mother and I talked about what we could do to make this an important moment, a milestone in the faith life of the entire family. I suggested they consider inviting the pastor and myself to come to their home and, as a family, hold a "sending" service in which they might be able to express to one another what this event means, and together place it in the hands of God. Milestones ministry is reshaping how I look at youth ministry and the opportunities we have to impact the faith journey of our young people.

Second, select a milestone you already mark as a congregation or household, and enrich it to reflect the milestones ministry model. For example, if your congregation already celebrates the giving and receiving of Bibles for a specific age group, add two or three weeks of cross-generational interaction and learning. Instead of the pastor or Christian education leader placing a Bible in the hands of the child, give the Bible to the parent(s), who then places it in the hands of the child, saying, "Today I am keeping my promise to teach you the faith."

Third, add one milestone each year to your church calendar and home calendar. For example, receiving a driver's license is a fun civic and developmental milestone to bring into the gathered community of faith and to lift up at home. When this milestone was introduced into my congregation, everyone got it! "Oh, this is about *all* of life. This is about *all* of us keeping our promises. This is *all* about faith!" Here's how this example can play out within the four elements described earlier in this article:

1. **Naming:** Receiving a driver's license.
2. **Equipping:** Gather at least two generations, the one who is receiving a license and members of the household where that person lives. Include a presentation by someone who represents the community, such as a police officer, a company that provides car insurance, or a representative from the local MADD or SADD organizations. The book *Can I Have the Keys to the Car?* a book that invites caring conversations about covenants and expectations related to driving, may be given to participating families. Incorporate common road signs into the presentation as daily reminders of the faith journey.

3. **Blessing:** Invite all new drivers to a special worship service. Pray for them and bless them. Provide a four key blessing for adults and youth to use at home as the new driver embarks on the first solo drive.
4. **Gifting:** Give a key chain in the worship service or at the equipping event as a symbol of the covenant between God, the child, parents/guardians, and the community of faith that the new driver be accountable for his or her actions.

Milestones have the potential of weaving together the circles of influence in a person's life: family, friends, congregation, community, culture, and creation. For example, one congregation invited elders to bring pictures of their first car, which provided an opportunity for cross-generational storytelling. New drivers were engaged in acts of service by delivering items for shut-ins. They also helped plan the Trunk and Treat Halloween festival for the community. The equipping event inspired a small group who went on to research the driving laws in other countries. They also discussed alternative fuel sources and care for creation. A plan of action was formed for people to share rides to church on Sunday.

If every congregation linked receiving a driver's license to the practice of faith, as well as to the home and daily life, how might it affect the entire health of a community? Could it lower the high accident rate for teen drivers? It is *all* about faith!

Support for Milestones Ministry

Milestones ministry is much more than a program or a curriculum. The model as presented in this article provides the essential ingredients for identifying, strengthening, and creating a milestones approach to ministry. Specific resources, tools, and training are available for congregations and homes that want specific support in building an intentional partnership between home and congregation (see the bibliography).

Another source of support material is the Internet. Simply enter the words "milestones ministry" into a search engine such as Google, Ask, Yahoo and explore the sites listed. Calendars for a full year of milestones are listed at All Saints Lutheran Church in Phoenix, AZ (www.allsaintsphoenix.org) and Tanque Verde Lutheran Church (www.tvlc.org) in Tucson, AZ; St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Williamsport, PA

(www.stmarkswilliamsport.org) posts pictures of the resources they provide for each milestone.

Challenges and Opportunities

It is evident that milestones ministry has greatly impacted and improved the efforts of congregations and households to pass on the faith. Yet there are still challenges for congregations to be aware of and explore in the process. These include:

- Incorporating and integrating all four elements of the milestones Ministry model into congregational life. Some congregations are caught up in the gifting aspect and forget about equipping. Others equip only the kids and forget about the adults.
- Remembering that the primary purpose of milestones ministry is to create homes as centers for faith formation. For example, participants in milestones are often blessed in worship, but may not feel qualified to bless one another in their own homes.
- Creating a milestones team with shared responsibility and a variety of gifts. The pastor and worship leaders need to be involved in the process, along with Christian education leaders. Enlist caring adults who are eager to do more than just drop off and pick up their kids.
- Naming rites of passage and marking milestones beyond the age of eighteen. Milestones ministry is for all ages and stages of life.

Some pastors initially panic when introduced to milestones ministry and say, "We can't be holding all these special services!" Although that statement can be debated, the worship team needs to decide which milestones will be recognized by the entire faith community, and which ones can be celebrated in homes or in smaller gatherings of the community.

Benefits

Now that we've explored how milestones ministry works, let's take a look at what it can do for your entire congregation.

- Church and home are connected as parents and caregivers of children are encouraged to grow in their own faith and equipped to be teachers of the faith, even in their own homes.
- The language of faith is spoken daily and expressed through actions both at home and in daily life.

- Children grow up anticipating their next milestone as a mark of maturation, supported by the community of faith. Households are supported through every age and stage of life.
- Daily life is connected, in real, tangible ways, to being a lifelong disciple of Christ.
- Children and youth develop a sense of belonging to God’s family that can sustain them for a lifetime.
- Elders are encouraged to share their passion and stories, leaving a legacy of faith for the next generation.
- Authentic and affirming adults are available to lovingly surround children and nurture faith.
- Faith is modeled and practiced through the four keys.
- The nurturing of faith extends beyond the classroom, and becomes more than classroom handouts and isolated lessons.
- Members of all the generations are engaged in providing meaningful resources to support lifelong learning.
- Care and concern for other members of the faith community grows as interaction increases.
- People are motivated by faith to make difference in the community and world.
- Congregations are revitalized and renewed as ministries are aligned around a vision for nurturing and passing on the faith.

Finding our Way Home

Rev. Mindy Bak, author of *Together in Faith*, explains the need for milestones ministry with a familiar fairytale.

When Hansel and Gretel leave the safety of their house to venture into the woods, they leave a trail of breadcrumbs to mark the way back home. The children of God have a way of wandering off as well, which is why it is ever important for us as faithful leaders and parents to leave a trail by which they may always find their way home. Instead of breadcrumbs, we leave a path of milestones. This way, when our children (of any age) become lost and begin to long for home, they will only have to look about them to see the trail of milestones and say, “Look, here is God in my life. And here, and here, and here.” Milestones are a visual reminder, or mileposts, that help us find our way back home into God’s arms, as well as the welcoming arms of those who love and care for us.

As Mindy gives this explanation to her congregation, she literally walks the church, dropping small stones in the baptismal font, on the altar, at the base of a chalice, by the front door of the church, and in the hands of new parents, caring adults, and wise elders.

Conclusion

Milestones ministry places all of life under the care, blessing and direction of our gracious God in Christ Jesus. Every ending, beginning, transition, and moment in life is an opportunity to actively claim God’s redemptive and renewing work in the world and in our lives. To weave our stories with God’s story is to live with confidence in God’s care in every way, every place—all the time.

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Reflection Guide

Milestones Faith Formation

Milestones provide an excellent way of developing lifelong faith formation by fashioning faith formation around each milestone through preparation, celebration, and follow-through using the Milestones Ministry Model:

- 1. Naming and Marking.** *Naming and marking* the sacred and ordinary events in the life of a congregation and in our daily life (e.g., beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, rites of passage) creates rituals and traditions that shape us and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.
- 2. Equipping.** *Equipping* provides instruction related to the milestone, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and brings at least two generations together. Participants learn from each other as they engage in experiential, cross-generational learning that serves as a model for faith practices in the home. Take-home resources encourage continued practice and the building of meaningful relationships. The equipping events may be a one-time gathering on a Sunday, or multiple-week gatherings on Saturdays or weekday nights. Today's families more readily make short-term commitments than those involving a larger time frame.
- 3. Blessing.** *Blessing* the individual, marking the occasion in worship, and providing tools for naming and blessing in the home says this is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred and the sacred ordinary.
- 4. Gifting.** *Gifting* is a tangible way to provide a symbol and a reminder of the occasion being marked. Gifting serves as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. It has the potential to engage people's interests and talents in milestone events, as well as connect them to one another in new, meaningful relationships.

Assessing Your Church's Approach

Use the following questions to reflect on your church's practice of milestones faith formation.

- Take an inventory of all the milestones your congregation already celebrates.
- Which of the following milestones are part of your church's faith formation efforts today?
 - Marriage
 - Anniversary of Marriage
 - Baptism
 - Anniversary of Baptism
 - Welcoming Young Children to Worship
 - Receiving a first Bible
 - Learning to pray
 - First Communion
 - Confirmation
 - Graduation (high school, college)
 - First Job
 - Leaving Home / First House or Apartment
 - Becoming a Grandparent
 - Illness
 - Retirement
 - Death
- How does your congregation currently provide faith formation around milestone events using the Milestones Ministry Model: 1) Naming and Marking, 2) Equipping, 3) Blessing, 4) Gifting
- What does your congregation need to do to strengthen its current approach to milestones faith formation? What are one or two new milestones around which your church can develop faith formation?

For Family-Centered Milestones

- How is this activity equipping parents and caring adults to nurture faith?
- How is this celebration supporting households to be centers of faith? Do we name? equip? bless? gift? Do we use the four keys to model in the congregation what we want individuals and families to practice in their homes?
- Are all the generations gathered at church and in homes to share stories and engage in meaningful interaction?
- How does your church provide home activities and resources for each milestone?



SAMPLE Bulletin Insert for Congregational Blessing

Today we celebrate a milestone in the lives of our new drivers.
[Parents and guardians and new drivers come forward.]

Reading

Exodus 13:21-22: *The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

Leader: As you begin to drive by day and you see the clouds in the sky, remember the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites by day.

Congregation: Let God be your guide.

Leader: As you drive at night and see the lights of houses, signs, and cars, remember the pillar of fire that led the Israelites by night.

Congregation: Let God be your guide.

Leader: The scripture passage tells us that the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night never left their place in front of the people, and our prayer is that you, too, will know this and remember this, that the Lord will always go with you and guide you on your way.

To help you remember this, your parents and our congregation have a gift for you. These Key chains are in the shape of *[name shape, such as a cross]* and they display the words "*[read words on keychain]*" to remind you that God does indeed go with you wherever you go.

Gift of the Key Chain and Youth Blessing

[Parents hand the key chain to their youth then lay hands on their children.]

Parents: Guardian of all, we give thanks for your Holy Spirit, who accompanies *[name]* on all journeys, short and long, for work, for learning, for relationship, for family, for mission, and for all destinations. We give thanks for your constant presence and guidance. Amen.

Parent's Blessing

[Students lay hands on their parents.]

Students: In this time of my new responsibilities and my parents letting go, help us to find reasons to trust each other. Even in the midst of worry let there be trust, peace, patience, and pardon, as the presence of your Holy Spirit guides us. Amen.

Congregation Blessing

Congregation: May the Holy Spirit fill you and give you wisdom and peace in this time of letting go and newfound freedom. Amen.

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Milestone Blessing Bowls

Bowls and stones created by Artist and Potter
Dawn Deines-Christensen



Meaningful, Memorable Moments Woven into a life lived in faith

When your children ask their parents in times to come,
"What do these stones mean?" Then you shall let your children know... Joshua 4:21-22
What do these stones mean to you?

EVERY DAY IS A GOD DAY
TELL THE STORIES – BLESS THE DAYS – SHARE THE PRAYERS

The extraordinary grace of God is hidden in the ordinary happenings of each day.
It is in the stories of families and friends that people receive their meaning, identity and purpose.

A Few Ways to Use Milestone Blessing Bowls!

1. Display on table or desk: People ask, "What is this?" and you will share stories of faith and life.
2. Family gathering or small groups: Invite each to pick a stone and tell about a recent milestone experience.
3. To honor a person: Invite everyone to pick a stone and tell a life story about the honoree.
4. Carry a stone in your pocket: Take into the day as a reminder of the people and the God whose love goes with you.
5. To pray: Pick a stone at random and pray for the life situation that comes to mind.
6. At the dinner table: Pass the blessing bowl, each selecting a stone and sharing a story of his or her day.
7. At a meeting: Use the blessing bowl to open the meeting, to check in on life's joys and sorrows.
8. To close time together: Take a stone representing what each is facing this week and ask, "What shall we pray for you?"
9. With young children: Match each stone to its picture on the pad. The inevitable question, "What does this one mean?" opens conversation.
10. Bible Study groups: Invite people to select a stone that describes what has happened in their lives since they last met.
11. Build a collection: Add to the bowl a pebble or shell or small memento that holds a memory.
12. Send a gift: Mark life milestones by giving a gift to a favorite ministry or charity.
13. Use a dry erase maker: On the blank stone, write your own milestone highlight for the day.

THE YOUTH & FAMILY INSTITUTE

1601 West Old Shakopee Road • Bloomington, MN 55431
Order bowls at: 877-239-2492 • www.tyfi.org
Caution: Please keep out of reach of small children

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MEANING OF THE STONES

Beginnings & Completions

Examples...

*Engagement • Graduation • First School Bus Ride
Driver's License • New Job • Moving Away • Retirement
Child Leaves Home*

In blessing new beginnings or completions we are reminded that a God who is familiar with us meets us in unfamiliar places. The creation story in Genesis states that every day had a sunrise and a sunset, "And there was evening and there was morning."

Sacred

Examples ...

*Family Time • Wedding • Funeral • Confirmation •
Baptism • Creation • Christian Holy Days • Eucharist*
The holy and sacred are found in the presence of God. Symbols, rituals and traditions are sacred when we meet God there Moses, standing before God in the burning bush was told, "the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Ex. 3:5)

Remembering

Examples ...

*Birthdays • National Holidays • Reunions • Sobriety
Anniversary • Baptism Birthdays • Anniversaries
Bible Stories • Songs*

We learn from the past so that we can move forward in life. Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5 we are commanded to keep a Sabbath day, to remember what God has done and is doing in our lives.

Care

Examples...

*Helping Others • Supporting Missions • Prayer
Campaigning for Peace, Justice, and Mercy
Medical Assistance • Visiting • Caring for Creation*
This milestone represents giving and receiving care with grace and gratitude. "Who is my neighbor?" the young lawyer asked. Jesus answered with the Good Samaritan Story (Luke 10: 25-37), giving us direction for faithful living.

Gratitude

Examples ...

*Friendships • Family • Health and Healing • Miracles
Appreciation • Prayers • Gifts • Thanksgiving Days*
We applaud, whistle, shout, stomp, sing, pray, smile, hug, give. "O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." (Psalm 136: 1)

Mountain Highs

Examples ...

*Birth of a Child • Recognition • Fishing with Dad
Learning to Read • Falling in Love • Achievement
Seeing a Comet or Star • Worship*
After looking at the heavens, the moon, and all the stars, the Psalmist in Psalm 8 states, "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Mountain Highs are Wow Moments!

Quests

Examples ...

*Learning to Dance • Job Interview • Running a Marathon
Discerning Vocation • Engaging in Mission • Try Outs
Climbing a Mountain • Finding a Treasure*
Quests are the times of wonder, stepping into the unknown, and taking the risk of exploring a new path in life. In Matthew 16:24 we are reminded that we are called to step away from our comfort zones, pick up our cross, and follow Jesus.

Valley Lows

Examples ...

*Fired from Job • End of Relationship • Acts of
Inhumanity • Recognition of Sin • Broken Trust • Failure
Destroying Creation • Depression*
Having the rug pulled out from under you, having the wind knocked out of you, depleted, disappointed, distressed, and distraught describe the low experiences and empty feelings of Valley Lows. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

Loss

Examples ...

*Death • Loss of Pet • Loss of Job • Miscarriage • Divorce
Loss of Health • Loss of Love • Loss of Family Farm*
In our deepest pain, God graciously wipes our tears and holds us with the arms of the cross as long as we need to be held. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8: 37-39

Other Milestones

God wants to be centered in every milestone of our lives. A God who is familiar often meets us in unfamiliar places and surprises us with grace. Jesus last words to his disciples, then and now, are, "remember, I am with you always." (Mt. 28:20)

TELL YOUR MILESTONE STORIES!

