



Best Practices in Family Faith Formation

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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 experienced of families learning together, sharing faith, praying together, and celebrating rituals and traditions.
- They model the faith practices and traditions that the church hopes families will adopt at

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

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

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

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

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

1. Welcome, community building and opening prayer
2. Part 1: An All-Ages Learning Experience for the whole assembly that introduces the theme or topic for the program.
3. Part 2: In-Depth Learning Experiences that probe the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) *or* for specific 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.
- *Gift*ing 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.

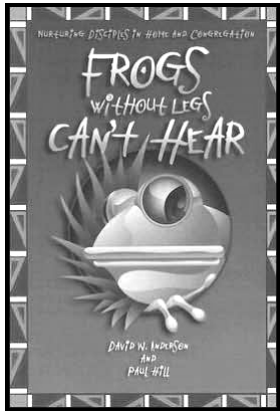
- Does your church have a web site? What kinds of information is provided online? Does your church web site serve and reach families?
- How can you better utilize your church's web site to deliver timely faith formation resources to the home, provide social network among families to share faith stories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

Best Practices Resources

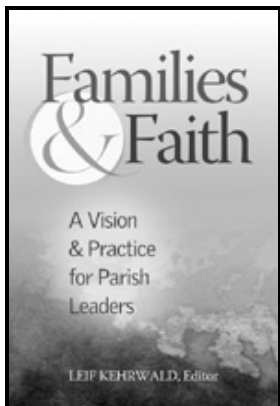
Family Faith Formation



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

David W. Anderson and Paul Hill (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003) [\$15.99]

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



Families and Faith: A Vision & Practice for Parish Leaders

Leif Kehrwald, editor (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006) [\$14.95]

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



Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation

Youth and Family Institute (Bloomington, MN: Youth and Family Institute, 2007) [\$99] (www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org)

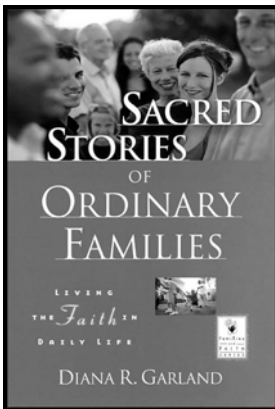
The *Milestone Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation* provides faith formation resources for home and congregation designed around sixteen life milestones from birth to high school graduation. There are three elements for each of the sixteen milestones: 1) worship—a litany and blessing, 2) cross-generational learning experience, and 3) household faith resources. Included among the 16 milestones are: 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 Stepping Stones

Faith Inkubators (www.faithink.com)

Faith Stepping Stones is a family ministry system that pulls parents into the role of primary faith mentors for their own children every night in every home. Faith Stepping Stones is a process that bonds parents and children into the body of Christ at eight crucial moments in parenting and leads them to incubate faith every night in every home. It provides faith-based parenting education from cradle to graduation through a series of eight short-courses. Each course brings parents and children together for fun and learning, and ends at the altar with a special blessing service. Through this process, parents and children develop nightly faith practices that includes blessing, prayer, scripture reading, sharing of Highs & Lows, faith dialogue, and a nightly “I’m sorry” before turning out the lights on the day. This “every night in every home” ritual blesses the child, gifts the family, and calls parents to their promise while incubating faith.



Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families

Diana R. Garland (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) [\$19.95]

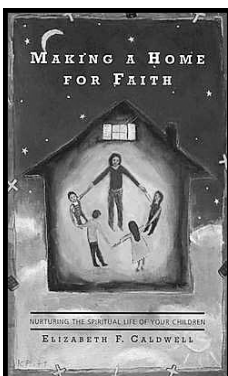
When families are faced with crises and challenges—unemployment, the untimely death of a family member, natural disasters and chronic illnesses—those who seem to weather the crisis best are often those who have an active spiritual dimension to their lives together. And in times of joy and celebration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



Home Growth Faith

David and Kathy Lynn (Nashville: World Publishing, 2006) [\$12.99]

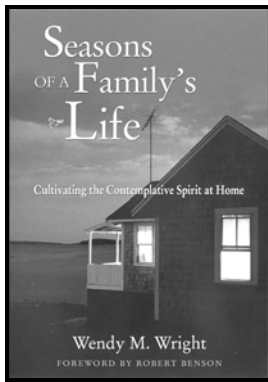
We all know that the single most important social influence on the lives of children and teens is their parents. David and Kathy Lynn present a well-researched and practical book to encourage and teach parents (and church leaders) how they can shape the spiritual lives of their children and teens one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



Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children (revised edition)

Elizabeth Caldwell (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007) [\$16]

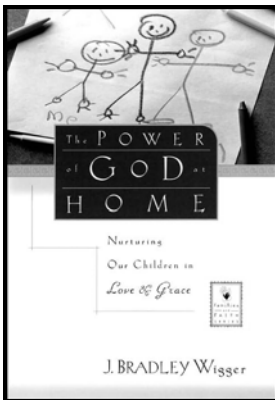
Churches often assume that parents know what to do with their children in regard to nurturing them in a life of faith after baptism or dedication. Elizabeth Caldwell addresses this important need by offering parents and educators insights and ideas for nurturing the faith of children and creating a faithful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



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

Wendy M. Wright (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) [\$19.95]

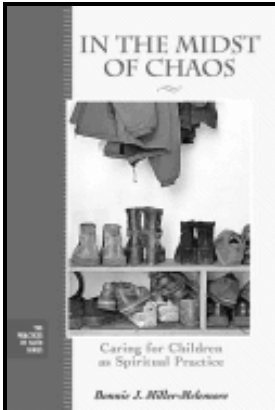
Wendy Wright offers a story-filled, and inspirational examination of the spiritual fabric of domestic life. This practical and insightful book explores family life as a context for nurturing contemplative practices in the home. Rooted in an appreciation of our deep and wise spiritual traditions that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



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

J. Bradley Wigger (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003) [\$19.95]

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



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

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007) [\$21.95]

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

Recommended Web Sites

- www.luthersem.edu/cyf – Luther Seminary's children and family resources
- www.baylor.edu/social_work/cfm – the Center for Family and Community Ministries, publishers of the journal *Family and Community Ministries*
- www.generationsoffait.org – intergenerational programs and home activities (Center for Ministry Development)
- www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org – milestones ministry and family activities from the Youth and Family Institute
- www.faithink.com – GIFT intergenerational programs and family activities from Faith Inkubators
- www.homefaith.com – resources and articles to nurture family spirituality

