



Best Practices in Parent Faith Formation

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

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

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

I. Parenting is a universal adult ministry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Current Approaches

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

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

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

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

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

Connecting Adults with Children

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

Worship

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

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

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

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

Service

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

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

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

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

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

Strategies

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Advice from teachers, doctors and religious leaders;

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

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

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

Practices for Providing Informal Support to Parents

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

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

When parents were asked what kind of advice they need, more than anything else they want to

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

A Story of One Congregation

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategies

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

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

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

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

regionally, and most of them become involved with middle school and high school drama to perform in the school musicals. Parents are involved with fundraising, making costumes, chaperoning during competitions, selling tickets, etc.

- *Parents are involved with kids in science and technology.* Our community offers science and engineering camps every summer through the public school district and a local university. Parents are involved with teaching, chaperoning, providing snacks, etc.

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

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

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

Defining what a family is can be as difficult as defining what a parent is. Church leaders are called to offer support to parents regardless of the kind of family they have. There are two-parent families,

single-parent families, same-sex-parent families, blended families, high- and low-income families, racially mixed families, minority families, older-parent families, homeless families, extended family households, childless families, ethnic families, and so on. While there are some commonalities to all of these kinds of families, there are also significant differences that call churches to provide different kinds of support to the parents or grandparents who lead these families. Due to space constraints, we will briefly explore four kinds of parents: two-parent families, single parents, stepparents, and minority parents.

Two-Parent Families

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

Single Parents

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

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

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

Stepparents

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

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

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

Minority Parents

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

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

Practices for Supporting Parents in Different Types of Families

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

Support

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

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

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

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

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

Affirmation

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most educators agree that parents are the single most powerful predictor of success or failure in a child's education. The general population seems to believe this as well. Both adults and teens report mothers and fathers as the most powerful personal influences on faith maturity, although mothers are significantly more influential than fathers (Benson and Eklin, 41).³ The clear challenge, perhaps the most critical challenge, of faith formation for the twenty-first century is to find ways to engage parents more intentionally in the catechetical process for children and teens.

Practices for Empowering Parents as Primary Teachers of their Children

Leif Kehrwald offers an extensive list of ideas for families who want to nurture the faith of children at home in his book, *Families and Faith*. Responding to research that shows how these kinds of activities are predictors of faith maturity, he categorizes them into three sections: Family Faith Conversations, Family Ritual and Devotion, and Family Outreach and Service (Kehrwald, 106-110). How can church leaders encourage and assist parents as they try to become more intentional about being the primary religious educator of their children without turning homes into structured classrooms? Let us consider some possibilities.

Family Faith Conversations

One of Kehrwald's suggestions is to invite discussion on provocative issues or controversial topics. This is an excellent suggestion that I know from experience works very well. But church leaders cannot simply make this suggestion to parents without providing them with simple resources to help them initiate and facilitate these kinds of conversations in their homes. Churches can provide simple talk sheets that include facts about a particular topic in the news as well as suggestions for how to discuss the topic with younger and older children. Some parents may resist these conversations, so the talk sheet should include a statement that reminds parents that kids at school will be talking about this particular topic. Parents should also be reminded that they might not want their kids to get their information about current events primarily from other kids. This may help to motivate parents to take some time to add their perspective to the discussion.

The talk sheet can include simple lists of facts about the topic. It should also include a Scripture reference and/or a doctrinal statement that offers a faith perspective on the topic. Parents can use the talk sheet with the whole family at mealtime, or they can engage their children in conversations individually either at bedtime, in the car, or at some other opportune moment. Some churches provide resources like talk sheets to parents through a mailing; others offer them during programs at the church where parents are present. The important thing is to find a way to get parents and kids talking about their faith at home.

Family Ritual and Devotion

Children spend a lot of time doing structured formational activities both at school and at church. Creating rituals and devotions for the home can be particularly challenging because we tend to want to duplicate what happens in institutional settings. There is a danger in this because the family is not an institution in the same sense as a school or church is an institution. We need to remain acutely aware that families are the *foundations* of all other social institutions. As the foundation, the family should not be mimicking what other institutions are doing; rather, families should be laying the groundwork for the best structures that are present in our social institutions. For example, churches are institutions where we publicly receive love from and express love for God with other people who also love God. Family is the place where love for God is born. The roles of church and family regarding love and devotion to

God are closely related and even overlap at times, but they are unmistakably distinct.

There are water rituals for the home and water rituals for church. Daily washing of the body is a water ritual for the home. It's not totally absent from church because there are times at church when we need to wash our hands. The daily ritual of washing is proper to the home but not exclusive to the home. Baptism, on the other hand, is a water ritual for the church. Blessing with water is not totally absent from homes because there are times when families can explicitly use water at home for religious purposes. Nevertheless, baptism is proper to the church but not exclusive to the church.

What is the relationship between baptism and daily washing, not to mention other uses of water such as drinking and swimming? Our experiences of water at home are foundational to our understanding of water as a symbol for baptism. Home experiences prepare us for church experiences. If we encourage parents to use water at home with a sense of reverence, baptism will be a much deeper experience for Christians. When placing children into the bathtub, young parents can be encouraged to say, "Thank you, God, for this water." Beginning bath time with this simple ritual will be a daily reminder that water is a precious gift from God that has particularly important meaning for Christians. The brevity and simplicity of the ritual is what makes it appropriate to family life. It is not elaborate and ceremonial, as one would expect in a well-developed institutional ritual. It is characterized by strength and certainty and serves its foundational and preparatory purposes well.

Family Outreach and Service

The Appalachian Partnership developed by St. Michael Parish described above is a highly organized opportunity for family members to participate in service together. Programs like that are rare, and they can only be offered for a short time during the year. They need to be complimented by a general attitude to service that is open and even spontaneous. A daily question at the end of the day for every Christian should be, "Whom did I serve today?" Parents can encourage children to ask this question at the end of each day followed by questions like these:

- How was I like Christ when I served?
- How did I see Christ in the person(s) I served?
- How did I feel when I was serving?
- What good was accomplished?
- Do I now know of any opportunities for service tomorrow?

Christian service cannot be reserved for one week out of the year. Service is a daily commitment and a necessary Christian disposition. We serve because Christ's life was marked by service. Faith maturity for children is nearly impossible without parents who courageously and intentionally nurture a home environment of service. When any need arises in any community, Christians should be on the front lines of response. We will not be there unless Christian parents consistently form their children in the ways of Christian service.

Conclusion

How can one express the greatness of the parenting vocation? Is it too much to say that civilizations rise and fall depending on the quality of parenting within the civilization? Human beings are formed most profoundly and permanently by those who nurture them through their early years. This is not to say that significant changes cannot happen long after one's parents are dead and gone; but if changes do happen in a person who is no longer in touch with his or her childhood parents, someone had to nurture and support those changes. That someone participated in the ministry of parenting by calling forth love from the other.

Parenting is the process of bringing forth love from another. Parenting is an essential process that invites us into the experience of divinity. It is an honor and a privilege to serve those who respond to the call of Christian parenting.

End Notes

- ¹ The Search Institute in Minneapolis showed this trend, i.e. children dropping out of faith formation as they grow into adolescence and adulthood in churches that don't involve adults in faith formation, in graphic form in their study, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations – A Report for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. See p. 53.
- ² For specific implementation examples of these reforms, see the introduction to my essay, "Transforming Faith Formation – One Family at a Time" in the Volume 1, Issue 2 of *Lifelong Faith: The Theory and Practice of Lifelong Faith Formation*, Summer 2007.
- ³ Eugene Roehlkepartain shows the results in graph form on pp. 169-171 of his book, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*.

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Parenting Websites

www.mvparents.com. This website is sponsored by Search Institute in Minneapolis. It offers lots of information about their research-supported and experience-proven developmental assets. The forty developmental assets are building blocks for healthy child and adolescent development and are a framework for a whole host of practical ways to improve parenting skills. They also offer a weekly newsletter with professional advice on parenting issues.

www.search-institute.org/congregations. This is another Search Institute website that offers numerous links that will assist congregations in developing a universal parenting perspective. The work of the Search Institute calls all adults to take responsibility together for raising the next generation. The website also offers an electronic newsletter to keep congregations abreast of the best practices in parenting as a universal ministry.

www.singleparents.org. This website provides an example of what a group of like-minded people can accomplish together to serve their needs and the needs of their community. Singleparents.org is the website of the Single Parents Association in Tempe, Arizona. They provide support and education to their members through their website and through regular gatherings of their support group. They also provide information that you can use to start your own chapter of Single Parents Association.

www.parentsworld.com. Jill Lassaline, a single mom from Canada, started this website to provide a forum for single parents to discuss the issues that matter to them and to offer links to resources that can help single parents. It's free to join the website, and it's a great place on the web to learn how other single parents are succeeding with their children.

www.homefaith.com. Published by the Claretians (a Roman Catholic religious order), homefaith.com is a great resource to help parents raise faith-filled children. You'll find helpful essays, media reviews, blogs, book reviews, abundant links, electronic newsletters and more.

www.stepfamilies.info. The National Stepfamily Resource Center out of Auburn University hosts this site. Everything that you need to know about parenting in a stepfamily is either on this site or linked from this site.

Practice Ideas

Planning for Parent Faith Formation

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

1. Parenting is a universal adult ministry.

- What are the ways your congregation currently involves adults and the adult community in caring for and helping form the faith of children and teens (e.g., education programs, social-recreational programs)?
- How does your congregation encourage every adult to participate in the ministry of parenting by intentionally fostering healthy relationships with children and teens, and participating in their programming? How does your congregation exclude adults from participating in the ministry of parenting?
- What are one or two new initiatives your congregation can undertake to engage the adult community in the ministry of parenting with children and teens?

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

- How does your congregation currently provide informal support to parents, such as advice from those who work with children and teens, talking with other parents, and trustworthy people?
- What types of structured programs does your congregation offer parents?
- How can your congregation develop a ministry of informal presence to parents at the places parents are already engaged with their children (e.g., sports, drama, music, dance, school activities)?
- What are one or two new initiatives your congregation can undertake to provide informal support for parents?

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

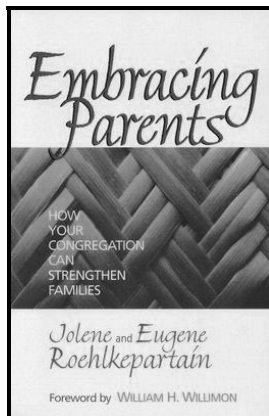
- What types of parent support programs does your congregation currently offer parents? What kinds of families are these programs directed to?
- How does your church partner with community organizations to provide parent education, services, and support? How could your church strengthen these partnership and create new partnerships?
- What are one or two new initiatives your congregation can undertake to reach more parents with education, services, and support programs?

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

- How does your congregation currently equip, encourage, and assist parents in their role as the primary religious educator of their children and teens? What programs and resources are offered parents?
- How does your congregation assist, resource, and equip parents to develop family faith practice? Consider the following four faith practices:
 - family faith conversations
 - family devotions and prayer
 - family outreach and service
 - family ritual and celebrations
- What are one or two new initiatives your congregation can undertake to equip, encourage, and assist parents in parenting for faith growth at home?

Best Practices Resources

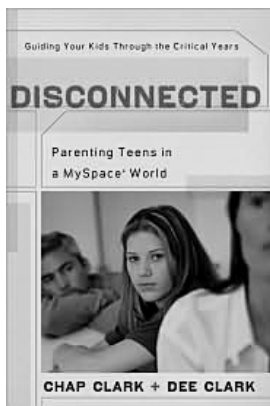
Parenting



Embracing Parents: How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families

Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004) [\$15]

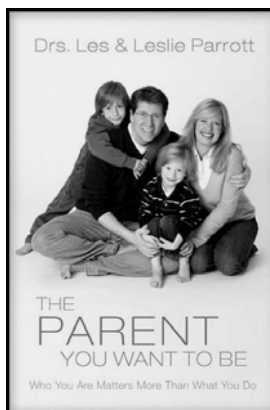
Based on the results of 2002 poll of 1,005 parents by the Search Institute and the YMCA, this book presents true stories, quizzes, checklists, and practical tools that congregations can use to become more effective in working with parents and strengthening family life. *Embracing Parents* challenges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



Disconnected: Parenting Teens in a MySpace World

Chap Clark and Dee Clark (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) [\$12.99]

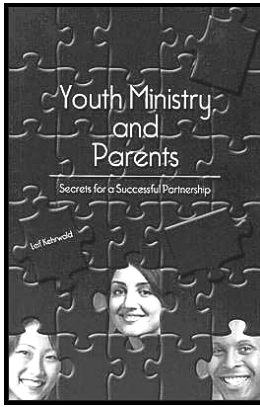
Dee Clark, a licensed marriage and family therapist, and Chap Clark, a professor of youth and family ministry, have team to write *Disconnected—Parenting Teens in a MySpace World* that uses research and their own experience as parents to provide guidance in raising children and adolescents. They have written the book to inform, prepare, encourage, and motivate parents. Chapters include understanding today's adolescent journey, the five tasks of parenting, parenting through the seasons from childhood to late adolescence, and parenting as a partnership. Written for parents, it can be used by congregations as the content for developing parent education programming.



The Parent You Want to Be: What You Are Matters More Than What You Do

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) [\$19.99]

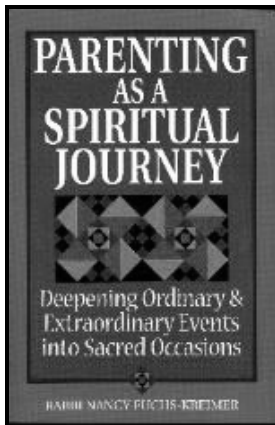
Les and Leslie Parrott have written a guide to parenting that helps parents learn: 1) a three-step approach to avoid become the parent you don't want to be; 2) how to make your child's perception of you as positive as possible; 3) the best way to give children the praise they crave; 4) how to hear what your child isn't saying to you—but wants to; 5) the immeasurable value of commemorating milestones; and 6) the key to building a lifelong bond of deep connection. The book includes exercises and brief self-tests let parents check their progress and provide instant feedback.



Youth Ministry and Parents

Leif Kehrwald (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004) [\$14.95]

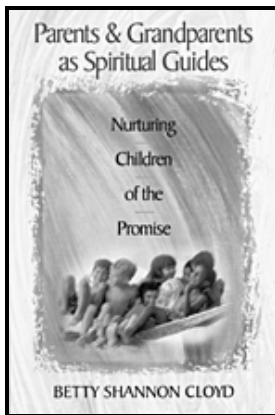
Because parents are the primary evangelizers of young people, they must be integrally involved in any successful youth ministry program. This book paves the way for youth ministers to create successful partnerships with parents of the teens in their church. It helps youth ministers understand parents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



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

Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1996) [\$16.95]

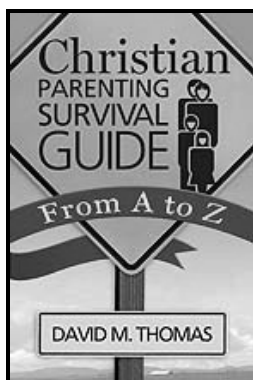
Parenting as a Spiritual Journey explores the transformative spiritual adventure that all parents can experience while bringing up their children. Fuchs-Kreimer shows, by looking at a typical day's routine, how even the seemingly insignificant moments in a day can be full of spiritual meaning. From waking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



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

Betty Shannon Cloyd (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000) [\$13]

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



Christian Parenting Survival Guide

David M. Thomas (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007) [\$13.95]

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