

Kitchen Table Youth Ministry¹
A Paradigm For Spiritual Formation Of Youth

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a family-based approach to Christian formation of youth, centered around a metaphor of kitchen table. It argues that a kitchen table is a space for family's togetherness. In this space families demonstrate care and nurture to their young in a tangible way as an alternative to professionalization of the children and youth's formation. In this domestic space, youth are initiated into family, church, or community membership and faith tradition. The ministry of kitchen table to youth and families draws on Martin Luther's Table-Talk as a guiding formative practice. This article will highlight certain aspects of table-talk which can be transposed into contemporary contexts of families: sharing a story and using it as a vehicle for talking about faith, conversation and the conversational patterns between youth and their parents, and suggestions for engaging youth with the Biblical narrative framed with a theological (vocational) framework for kitchen table youth ministry.

Introduction

Not every weekend, but quite regularly, my parents, my brother, and I would visit my aunt and her family. We would gather for a Sunday meal around a large, oak table in what was my aunt's living and dining room. Around the table, my family would exchange their accounts about what

had happened to whom in town, remember their youthful years, recall anecdotes about family members who were no longer among us, complain about the politicians and the high cost of living, and always discuss the church. As a child, I used to retire to a comfortable sofa in the corner of the room after we had finished the main meal; and there, cuddled with my older sibling and cousins, I continued to listen to the adults' table talk. The pastor of my family's congregation and other guests from the community would also be invited to join us on occasion. As a youth, I was particularly interested in the theological talk between the pastor and my family. I tried to participate in the discussion, mainly in the form of asking curious questions, sometimes offering youthful philosophical insights in my attempt to crack the nut of life's complexities.

So if you were to ask me, "How were you nurtured in faith?" I would answer: In the church and around the table. Reflecting back on my family's table talk, I believe that *something* formative happened around that table. The large oak table provided the opportunity to be with one another as family. We gathered for more than food: for stories, for laughter, for argument, for sharing in human joy and sadness. We gathered for human fellowship. And at the center of that human fellowship was the story.

Kitchen table youth ministry represents a relational approach to Christian education and spiritual formation of youth. Illuminated by the theories of feminist epistemology, it emphasizes the process of spiritual formation as nurture.² Through the practices of nurture, children, youth, and families are encouraged to use reflectively their unique human experience, relationality, and community as the primary means through which they can gather, interpret, and live out knowledge. Kitchen table youth ministry is also firmly rooted in the history and tradition of the Christian church. It builds upon the legacy of the Reformation period, in particular, Martin Luther who pioneered family catechesis as a model of relational instruction in the Christian faith. Luther taught that it was a parental responsibility to educate one's children in the basics of faith. The practices of faith that a family in Luther's time would employ included not only readings from Bible, catechism, and prayers, but the parents were also expected to model the Christian faith to their children through their pious behavior. The family's practices of appropriating the Word of God into its daily routine helped the children become accustomed to interacting with the Word. The value of family catechesis lies in the fact that the intimate spiritual relationship between God and a person can be experienced and reenacted through family relationships, centered around God's Word.³

Methodology

Kitchen table youth ministry unfolds as an ongoing conversation between the history and tradition of the Christian church and the particular contemporary context in which the practice of catechesis is located. This conversation is facilitated by a confessional-correlational method of practical theology. The confessional aspect of the method stresses the transformative work of the Word as embodied in the Christian narrative. The Christian story, with its narrative and liturgi-

cal representations, is what shapes, educates, and guides the communities of faith on their faith journey. The correlational aspect of the method stresses the relationship between the Word of God and the socio-cultural situatedness of an ecclesiastical practice. In its freedom the Word of God binds itself to a particular historical and social context of the church and the individual. By examining these contemporary contexts, the correlational aspect seeks to propose a relevant and authentic practice for negotiation between God's Word and a particular human situation. It asks the question: In the twenty-first century, what are the models of catechesis through which we can communicate faith effectively and confidently to children and youth?

Eucharist and the Kitchen Table

Kitchen table youth ministry extends the church's ministry of Christian education into family. The form of education it proposes has the form of a natural conversation around the kitchen table between the families and their children. What might seem to be only the spontaneity of table talk is in fact a practice of communicating, meditating on, and discerning God's will and purpose amidst human experiences of divine sovereign action.

Families and communities who engage in the hospitable and transformative nature of God's Word do so by modeling the sacrament of Eucharist. By having a family meal, the adults nurture children in the memory, experience, and image of divine care and love. The metaphorical representations of the kitchen table reenact and embody the realities of the Eucharistic table such as divine hospitality, our remembering of God's redemptive action in Christ, God's remembering us in the act of uniting us around the table, divine playfulness, etc. Divine playfulness refers to how God is able to transform Christ's body into spiritual fellowship or church. To understand the significance of Eucharist, then, is to understand it as a creative action of the Trinitarian God to form spiritual fellowship which the believers recreate every day as a church, a congregation, or a family. When families sit down at their kitchen tables, they can remember the story and reenact its themes. At the kitchen table families literally share the resources such as food, space, time, and energy to prepare it, but they also share one another, and they share a pattern of divine love, hospitality, and care.

Nurturing or Surviving?

Kitchen table youth ministry attempts to counteract the paradigm of survival which, I argue, dominates cultural standards for how to raise children in contemporary US society. In trying to survive, the adults abandon their young. The forms of abandonment can be physical such as with Nebraska's new "Safe-haven" law that allows for parents or caretakers to surrender their children even beyond their infancy without recrimination.⁴ Abandonment also implies the loss of intentionality in providing nurture to children and youth that has a vision or crafted practices. The loss of

ability to mold nurture in meaningful way occurs because “For today’s parents, childrearing may often be in conflict with career, with finding a new mate, with loyalties to children from previous marriages, and with retaining even a modest standard of living.”⁵ Changes from the industrial era into the post-industrial era, from manufacturing to service economies facilitate the views on care and nurture as service to be handed over to others. Formation in the hands of professionals seeps in as an inevitable direction for raising one’s children. From an early age children shuttle back and forth between parents and baby-sitters, sport coaches, school teachers, Sunday School teachers, piano teachers, ballet teachers, tutors, etc. Errand specialists administer their medications, fix their meals or drive them around. And many times there is no one for the children and youth to bounce back to in between.

In order to address such trends, I argue that nurture in faith takes a form of what feminist and womanist scholars call the art of homemaking or homesteading.⁶ It means the art of cultivating with children and youth the sense of sharing in humanity, rootedness in family and faith values, vocational empowerment, and imaginative participation in the world. Homemaking as a ministry of nurture in the Spirit of the Word requires tangible presence of people who gather together around a meal, nurture one another around the word, celebrate one another, and send forth from and receive people back into community.

To do such ministry, a center is needed. Traditionally, it has been the kitchen table that took on a centralizing role of a family life. Architect Christopher Alexander describes the life of a family in the farmhouse this way: “The family activity centered around a big table in the middle: here they ate, talked, played cards, and did work of all kinds including some of the food preparation.”⁷ Theologian Letty Russell, in her discussion of feminist ecclesiology, employs the metaphor of a kitchen table to stress a close connection between the kitchen tables and everyday human lives. Describing the context of East Harlem, she says: “The kitchen table is the scene of arguments, reprimands, and fighting as well as the scene of counting up the small cash supply or filling out forms for court or the welfare office. As the center of daily life it reflects the basic activities of the families, both good and bad.”⁸ Even the American media are catching up on a symbolism of the kitchen tables in their discussion of everyday struggles of the American family. For example, the television network ABC has introduced a “Kitchen Table” series, inviting its viewers to talk about the struggles with the mortgage costs, affording elder care, health care, college tuition, and other issues. The kitchen table talk metaphor likewise is beginning to find its place in the vocabulary of politicians who address the economic anxieties of the nation.

Around the table, the bonds of trust, belonging, and fellowship in the family are formed. Columbia University, home to leading researchers on the eating practices of the families in the US, suggests that children and youth who eat dinners with their families on a regular basis are less likely to get involved in smoking, alcohol consumption, or taking drugs.⁹ They perform better academically and have a greater sense of bonding with their families. The benefits of family suppers are reported also in relationship to treating eating disorders successfully.¹⁰ However, the

greatest benefit of having a family meal is the message it conveys: We have time for one another, and we care for one another. We learn to cohere as a group because through meals we attend to the primordial human need to feed and to be fed, to care and to be cared about. The commitment of adults to show care in this tangible way manifest to their children that they can be depended upon to look after them.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes that “there is no sociology of the neighbor. The science of the neighbor is thwarted by the praxis of the neighbor. One does not *have* a neighbor. I make myself someone’s neighbor.”¹¹ Similarly, we don’t only need a sociology of family because our families are not comprised of sociological objects. What we desperately need is praxis of family. Sociology of family facilitates, for example, establishing a functional kitchen design, but praxis of family means creating family practices through which families mutually share in humanity and communality. Having a meal together *is* such a practice of sharing.

Sitting at the Table with Martin Luther: The Practice of Table Talk

The guiding formative practice of kitchen table youth ministry is table fellowship. Drawing on Martin Luther’s tradition of table talks, I will 1) describe table fellowship as a conversation that assists families in introducing faith issues to their members; 2) discuss the patterns of conversation between youth and their parents; and 3) suggest ways to engage youth with the Biblical narrative.

Table Talk: Historical Precedence

During the High Middle Ages Martin Luther’s table talks continued the tradition of storytelling alongside the legends about saints, kings, and heroic warriors.¹² Valued more as a piece of literature than as a historically factual and theologically well argued treatise, Martin Luther’s Table Talk provides us with the “opinions, the motives, the reading, the daily life and personal attitude of the greatest German of his age...”¹³ Table Talk covers a variety of topics on which Luther commented in casual conversations with his guests. They range from justification and free will to marriage, education, arts and other topics. The tradition of such table talk started in the context of Luther dictating his biblical interpretations to his guests. Soon enough, his disciples started recording not only Luther’s theological comments, but the informal conversations around them, too. In his distinguished career as a church reformer, Luther’s reflections on life proved to be the gems of wisdom and experience that Luther’s guests found valuable enough to write down.

Being invited to Luther’s table was a matter of honor, and young theology students got their seats on the recommendations of their mentors, and spoke of it as a privilege. The participants at these table talks observed that there were no topics about which Luther would be hesitant to talk. He was frank and open about his life. His sense of humor, jovial mood, making jokes, and teasing his wife were as characteristic of Luther’s companionable style as were his moodiness, brooding

thoughts, and silence around the table. When discussions grew heated, Luther's effort to maintain decency and respect among the participants intensified accordingly.

There are several characteristics of Luther's table fellowship that can be transposed into the contemporary context of American families: hospitality, storytelling and conversation, privileged time, and the honor of being around the table, reflections on the issues of life and faith, etc. In this article I examine how families can use these characteristics in their faith-forming role.

Table Talk as Authentic Storytelling

Table talk represents a story of a family. I assert that contemporary families need to see themselves as story-makers and story-carriers for future generations. That is so because human agency grows when families present themselves as a story to share. The immense popularity of the StoryCorps project, a mobile booth that travels across the country and which gives all the generations the opportunity to record their life stories, demonstrates a real need of human beings to tell a story as well as to be a part of a larger story.¹⁴ In the words of the StoryCorps founder, Dave Isay, the stories which people eagerly record convey the truth that "we are not just a nation of celebrity worship and consumption but, rather, a people defined by our character, courage, and heart."¹⁵ When a StoryCorps booth arrives in a city, there are only so many slots available. It is a privilege to tell one's story.

Storytelling is a formative practice in that it invokes connection, group identity, and imagination; it also helps preserve tradition, membership, and the sense of being placed in a particular time and location. Maureen O'Brien, building upon sociological research by Robert Wuthnow, underscores storytelling as a dominant and favorite mode of communication in small groups—and therefore a "natural" for youth and families.¹⁶ When authors Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer interviewed youth from the Youth Theological Initiative at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, they observed that youth regarded the personal interviews with them to be one of the most favorite features of their summer program.¹⁷ Youth enjoyed the interviewing process because they felt that the adults took time to show their interest in what youth thought and the stories they had to share. Sharing a story is a practice that assists in creating the atmosphere of trust and bonding within a family. With regard to youth, it reemphasizes the interest that family has in one another when inviting and listening to the stories of its members.

"Story," as Sarah Arthur argues, "does not equal fiction... its subject matter is human experience..."¹⁸ Therefore sharing stories that embody collective human experience of life, of the relationships to the world, to one another, and to God with youth can help nurture young people's desire to be part of a grand scheme of things. Teaching the complexity of life and endurance of faith starts with teaching our children to listen to a story and to tell a story. When the guests gathered for meals and conversation around Luther's table, they wanted to engage Luther on theological issues. In bringing the questions and stories from their own lives, guests were in effect express-

ing their desire to hear Luther's biblical and theological perspective on them. When we share our stories with our young, we, too, implicitly seek our place in the universe and strive to define our relationship with the Creator.

When Martin Luther is not Sitting at the Table with us....

Luther would start his meal conversations with a question: "What's the news?"¹⁹ The trajectory of this simple question followed the path of news in town to issues in the region and royal courts to theological discussions. Each family can find its own question that initiates their theological discussions. However, parents tend to be hesitant about reading the Bible with their children or talking about faith issues with them. Those families who do not have specific theological training feel ill-equipped to be spiritual mentors to their children, and they gladly pass the torch of spiritual formation to professionals in the church. Martin Luther is not sitting at the table with us, yet the absence of biblical scholarship or theological training among the family members ought not to permit the absence of God-talk. Theologian Gordon Kaufman claims that doing theology is a human task, a task in which we construct the image of God.²⁰ Human beings attempt the task by seeking the metaphors and symbols by which they capture the images of God. The metaphors are extrapolated from human experiences, reflections on the human condition and nature as recorded in the Bible, tradition, and personal narratives. Being a theologian involves being imaginative and alert to manifestations of God's revelations of God-self through finitude (such as human life), creation (such as nature and cosmos), and transcendence (such as death and resurrection of Jesus Christ). Although one can dismiss the need for theological training, one should not dismiss the need for identifying the images through which God in Christ meets and claims us. Kaufman insists that "We are the ones ... who must construct the conception of God which will be meaningful and significant for our day. There is simply no one else to do it."²¹

The implications of his assertion for spiritual formation are urgent. In truth, the task of spiritual formation summons individuals to honest and painstaking search for God. It calls persons to embark on a laborious journey of looking for the obvious God amidst human experience while learning to embrace the mystery of God at the same time. It means a call to understanding, feeling, intuiting, and narrating God's revealing and God's hidden presence in one's life. This call is perhaps articulated most loudly by narrative theology. Through the lens of narrative theology, doing theology represents going back to an original source or means of expression that captures God's activity in the world, such as lived experience, story, or myth.²² Narrative theologians move from a theological reflection that is expressed mainly through a propositional and abstract language to one that is intuited, imagined, and embedded in the story. With the words of William Bausch, a narrative theologian argues that "All theologies ... must somehow tap into and reflect life and point to story, and all stories are ultimately theological."²³

Being in Conversation about God Means Being in Conversation with One Another

Narrative theology emphasizes theological reflection originating with human experience which serves as a magnifier of divine presence in a person's life. Human experience of life that is imparted through the story and in the context of table fellowship represents a unique opening for the families and their children to engage the matters of faith, God, or good and evil. It can be a rich and complex time because story erects a reflective framework within which families and youth can safely wrestle with the dissonances of life and faith. Stories offer a softer entry point to talking with youth about faith than memorization of a creedal tradition. Employing story as a catechetical tool means that our conversations about God begin as conversations among ourselves.

Narrating life in a conversational manner is a skill of both imagination and courage. It is also a manifestation of care for one another. Conversational caring is a premise of care, talked about by Carol Lakey Hess, in which we manifest care by initiating a hard dialogue. "Going deep," argues Hess "where we probe beneath the surface, where we question the way things are, and where it sometimes gets uncomfortable, is crucial for genuine relationality and mature caring."²⁴ Descent to depths of human earnestness requires preparation. Bottomless and hard conversations float to surface truth of human experience but without an environment that is able to hold it such truth can destruct, not transform, human rapport. I argue that a practice that can help grow environments of trust, familiarity, and confidence to be truthful without riposte is table-talk, the assets of which are physical proximity, regularity, and talk.

What Do Parents Say and What Do Youth Hear?

When a family sits down for a meal, it adds a vital beat to the life that pulses with energy, work, and schedules. The life-sustaining beat in the form of family meal secures regularity of physical presence, nurture, and talk among family members. Regularity leads to familiarity, familiarity leads to confidence, and confidence leads to being a bard. Realistically, most family meals with teenagers are far from being ballads on a day in the life of a teenager. Instead, youth can be short, unwilling to say much, and quick to leave the family table. Family meals and table talk strive to open up the lines of communication between youth and their families. No story may be told during a family meal, but this does not mean the family time was a failure. A family meal and table talk represent a means of welcoming a hard talk that might occur later on. For example, my nephew loves to talk and share stories with his mother at bedtime. Although he does not say much during meal times, seeing his family together on a regular basis creates a trustworthy relationship with his mother and leads him to open up to her later on in the evening.

In her research on the patterns of conversation between men and women and mothers and daughters, Deborah Tannen observes that talk is an essential apparatus for forging intimacy and closeness between mothers and daughters.²⁵ These conversations are usually both deeply endear-

ing and dangerously volatile. As a daughter begins the process of individuation in her teenage years, her need to establish the autonomous self pulls her toward the freedom that remains with her throughout the adult years. A mother-daughter conversation takes on the means of expressing the struggle between a continuous intimacy and care which a daughter desires to have and a mother desires to give, *and* freedom from too much closeness and love.

Teenage children, both girls and boys, are sensitive to what appears as criticism or judgment of their persons. Tannen especially lifts up this dynamic in the conversation between mothers and daughters. A daughter complains about her difficult day (at school, at work, with husband and children), the mother sympathizes with her daughter who, to the mother's great surprise, turns against her, accusing mom of criticism. An innocent remark from mom, "Oh honey, you should not have taken such a load on your shoulders" will sound to her daughter like "You are not capable of multitasking or managing everything yourself." What one side offers as a consolation, the other side takes as judgment and evaluation of one's capabilities. This frequently occurs because we bring to our conversations with people, and particularly with family members, packages of emotions, memories, and mis-interpreted messages from the past interactions. The other example of misheard communication is this:

Parent asks: "Is Tim (a boyfriend) coming to dinner tomorrow?"

Daughter answers: "Yeah. We'll be hanging around the house."

Parent hesitantly: "Tomorrow is not a good time." (There is no hidden agenda in this request. A parent might feel tired, not ready for company, or just prefer a quiet evening.)

Daughter becomes upset: "I knew it. You never liked Tim."

Although a parent did not say that he or she did not like Tim, a daughter hears precisely *that* because in the past a parent might have showed disapproval. Given the sensitivity of teenagers to their personal criticism, "no" to Tim also appears as criticism of a daughter's choice.

The interaction between fathers and daughters is influenced by the similar tensions as experienced in the relationship with a mother. For example, a father and his daughter have an argument. Daughter accuses her father of not understanding her, cuts off the conversation, and goes to her room. In her room, she thinks over the conversation, processes her emotions, and *waits* for her dad to come in and talk to her again. A mother would most likely follow up with her daughter after an argument because of the inherent need of females to preserve connection and communication. But the father, who as a male has a high respect for autonomy, reasons that his daughter appreciates him leaving her alone and honoring her wishes for personal space. What he does not know is that his daughter perceives his gesture of respect as indifference and abandonment.²⁶

While females relate to one another through talk, males find their common platform for relating through activities, accomplishments, or performances.²⁷ This mode of relating enables them to demonstrate their individuality by juxtaposing it instead of integrating it with the individualities of others. A son tries to show his father what he can do on his own, how he might be different from his father, or how he might be improving and transcending his father's skills and knowledge. He

juxtaposes himself next to his father in hopes of gaining respect and validation of his independent self. Relating to his father is therefore many times conditioned by son's feeling of accomplishment, praise, or encouragement in the process of doing. This dynamic in itself can be a source of destructive communication because it builds upon instructional and prescriptive language which—though not intended to be mentoring or judgmental—can come across as such. With boys their developing masculine identity makes them feel that they do not need to take orders from “girls” because at the core of this feeling is their need to differentiate from mothers, and by extension from other females. They pretend that they do not need their mothers, caretakers, and this “independence” game further complicates conversations between mothers and their sons. Quite regular outbursts of explosive conversations between teenage children and their parents represent only one end of the relationship; on the other end there is the inevitable desire to be connected and intimate with one's parents. Sadly, parents tend to minimize the conversation with their teenage children because it can turn ballistic around even the most innocent themes. So, what to say and how to say things to teenagers?

Emotional lapses between being in a great mood and being in a terrible mood that characterize a teenager's personality advise parents to time their words accordingly. Chap and Dee Clark write, “Especially for early adolescents, right after school is one of the worst times to pepper them with questions or try to get them to ‘relationally engage.’”²⁸ When a teenage child is tired, agitated, or down, the best thing is to let conversation go. Communication scholars suggest that parents use internet and social networking websites as entry points for encouraging teenage children to open up about school, friends, and dilemmas of the adolescent world. “For boys especially,” Miriam Weinstein writes, “talking can be easier when they are doing something.”²⁹

Activity time such as sports or manual work and relaxing time (by the computer or by dinner table) are opportunities to initiate conversation with teenage children. I would not recommend asking broad questions, such as: How is school? I would recommend asking a more focused question: “What kinds of experiments did you do in your chemistry class today?” Speaking with my niece about her friends, I learned that to my broad question—How are your girlfriends?—she answers, ok. But when I ask her about the latest fashion her girlfriends wore to school on that particular day, she gives me quite a lengthy answer. This type of conversation is better suited to early adolescents (10-12). Part of the reason is that this age group are concrete thinkers or at the very beginning of formal operations (abstract thought). Middle adolescents (13-15) and in particular late adolescents (15-18) do not like to comment on chemistry experiments or fashion stockings (too silly or trivial in their eyes). They like to ask about unfairness, cheating, loyalty, love—more “ethical” issues which they come across in their class or relationships.³⁰ By having these conversations, families can build bridges to introducing a faith perspective. As Carol Lakey Hess suggests, “Very often, listening to the questions and doubts of young people enables us to share with them important aspects of the faith tradition.”³¹

Youth and the Bible

During a family dinner, my niece Daniela and I got into a discussion about fashion. She was talking about the girls in her class who like to exclude other girls based upon the fashion they wear. “If you don’t wear the clothes that are in, these girls won’t be your friends,” said my niece. Daniela’s grandmother asked her: “Is it right to exclude schoolmates because of their clothes? What if their families cannot afford to buy the latest fashions? You know, such clothes can be very expensive, right?” Daniela and her grandmother got into a discussion about judging people by outward appearances, the difference between privileged and less privileged families, and the definition of friendship. Although her grandmother did not bring any particular Biblical passage to bear upon the discussion, I saw the conversation as an entry point into engaging the faith perspective. The value this conversation has for spiritual formation is that it helped raise an ethical issue. Further, it challenged the adults and the girl to think how to respond morally to a real life situation. This situation pressed for the strategies of nurturing moral reflection as the issue at stake was the need to develop capacity for moral response with my niece.

Strategy can also lie in this real-life conversation; that is, in order to nurture moral reflection with youth, adults can deliberately try to engage various dilemmas of youth with Biblical perspectives. Parents or other adult caretakers can initiate these conversations by first bringing forward “the news” from the teenagers’ world. A real-life accident of a New Jersey teenage girl who fell into a manhole in the street while walking and text messaging at the same time might prompt discussion about the intensity of text messaging among teenagers and the value of a face-to-face conversation vis-à-vis a virtual one. Teen oriented books and magazines also provide parents with real life situations as conversation starters. For example, a mother goes through the mail and sees that the magazine for teenage girls, *Seventeen*, has arrived in the mail. She browses through it, notices and reads an article about hazing at high school sororities. Mom decides to bring the issue up with her daughter Jessie. Jessie who attends middle school complains about her girlfriend who appears to bully her.

Mother: “Jessie, your magazine arrived today in the mail.” “Have you had a chance to look at it?”

Jessie: “No, mom, not yet.”

Mother: “There was an article about hazing. I could not believe that this is going on among girls at school. And I did not know that there are sororities at high schools already.” Mom and Jessie can get into discussion about hazing, its ethical implications, with the intention of engaging faith perspectives. Studies on family dinner conversations note that families often start their talk by telling each other about the events of their day.³² Children are encouraged to share what happened to them during their day with their parents; mothers usually share about their day more often and more openly than fathers do. Mothers also use “trouble talk”, offering to talk about their hardships at work or home in order to prompt similar sharing from other family members.³³

The question is how the families can make a step from discussing real-life situations that carry possible ethical implications to matters of faith. Going back to the discussion between my niece and her grandmother, or between Jessie and her mother, there are two follow-up scenarios possible: First, Daniela's grandmother or Jessie's mother can reach for a Bible right after the meal and look together for the words of Christ that speak to the subject. Second, they can have a follow-up discussion in the girl's room after dinner, reading the Bible together. The challenge of the first option is that the adults might be hesitant to look for a Biblical passage on the spot with their children because they feel that they do not know exactly to which passage to go. During the week, they also might feel pressured for time, or they might lack focus and energy. This scenario also requires that youth are accustomed to sitting at the table even after the family is through with the meal (more often than not teenage children are particularly quick to leave the table as soon as they are done with the meal). They also must be accustomed to Bible readings as part of the family meal. The second option provides time and opportunity to return to an issue with greater thoughtfulness and depth. However, it loses the immediacy of the moment and the window of opportunity to pursue the issue from a scriptural perspective. Waiting for a follow-up discussion requires more intentionality and determination on the part of a parent, and it runs the risk of fading from people's minds.

If parents worry about their biblical preparedness, I argue that the solution is not so much about using the Bible as a self-help genre. Engaging a real-life issue with a faith perspective does not require people to find a particular verse that will remedy the situation; rather, the exercise is about reading a variety of passages and trying to understand the nature of God in Christ. Faith formation, as I present it, relies upon helping adolescents to create a faith-based framework that can guide them through various dilemmas, such as clothes, fitting in, being a good friend or finding a good friend. Without having a guiding interpretative framework, dramas of the adolescent life can easily be experienced at the level of intense feelings, hurt, or broken relationships instead of the opportunity for reflection and charting a response in one's own words or actions.

If adults worry about having a more defined structure, I would argue that using the liturgical rhythms of the church calendar (e.g. Advent, Lent and the practices accompanying these periods, such as devotional and Bible readings) can provide an initial structure, intentionality, and practices for developing the habits of kitchen table ministry. The goal of kitchen table talk is to offer familiarity and ease with biblical imagery, language, and stories. During the week when families feel overwhelmed by daily agendas, I suggest that they fill their dinner with "biblical snapshots." Biblical snapshots are a few words that lift up some aspects of divine actions (e.g. hospitality, faithfulness, sacrifice, deliverance, etc.). An example of a Biblical snapshot goes something like this:

Parent: "Here at the table we celebrate divine hospitality. It begins in the garden with Adam and Eve. God provided for them and God continues to provide for us." A parent can mention other instances of feeding God's people such as Israelites in the desert or Jesus' feeding miracles. He or she can retell the biblical story in his or her own words. These brief accounts of God's story and the story of God's people help orient the family toward the images and language with which

to frame the discussion of real-life situations. In other words, the transition from a secular framework of mind to a Christian one can be aided by these gentle reminders of God's presence in the lives of people in both the Bible and twenty-first century USA.

If Daniela's or Jessie's family introduces God's talk into their dinners, the discussion of fashion or hazing can be molded by deeper questions such as these: In what image is God in Christ forming us? What does God in Christ call us to do? Does God in Christ call us to respond? These questions do not require that a parent, a grandparent, or a caretaker hastily search for a scriptural passage on clothes or hazing. Rather, the questions might spur curiosity within a teenager, provide the freedom and motivation to read the Bible later, and open the space for wrestling with one's conscience. I admit that the answers from reading a Biblical passage may not speak directly to what kind of fashion to wear or what to say when somebody bullies me; rather they provide a youth with the framework of mind and heart to respond to these situations in their words and actions. Having a biblical framework acts as a compass that navigates a youth through various dilemmas of the adolescent world.

By discussing real-life issues from a biblical perspective, adults cater to a mode of teenage learning that I call *overhearing*. When asked about her faith perspective, fourteen year-old Brittney shared with me that she found answers to her dilemmas on her own "I don't talk to adults when thinking about situations at school or in my life," she told me. Brittney is responsible for her age, enjoys going on mission trips and reading the Bible to senior citizens in assisted living facilities. Although she admits that she does not seek direct advice from adults, she admits that she "overhears" the talk of adults—that of her parents, her pastor, and others—and draws upon their insights, experiences, and values. The talk of adults about the Bible in particular helps Brittney to form her response to how to live her young life.

Loners on the surface, adolescents nonetheless seek counsel from adults. They do not always ask for it in a straightforward way, and parents are advised to watch for the subtle ways of asking—such as an open door to a teenager's room, a youth hanging around the dishwasher as mom cleans the dishes, or a child opening up during a car ride. Talking about God with them can occur during both structured and unstructured conversational moments. Families can engage their children directly or indirectly when letting them hear the adults' perspectives on life and faith. Being conversational lies at the core of kitchen table youth ministry. Being conversational with family members about a day at school, work, or life in general represents a softer and more intriguing entry point to the faith tradition because it begins with curiosity and experience rather than dogma.

Summary

In this article I have proposed that kitchen table youth ministry be a catechetical ministry in the twenty-first century. This ministry summons families and caretakers to create and maintain a practice of table talk. This is a practice that employs several concrete steps. The first is having a

family meal which binds family members in a physical proximity, bodily presence, and a ritual of sharing the meal. Having a meal together on a regular basis builds up the pattern of conversation, care, and curiosity about each other's lives. The extended parts of table talk are activities that try to secure the continuity of talking, sharing a story, and probing more deeply. The goal of table talk is to help youth fashion their narrative identity. The family can implement various means to nurture the growth of the storied self with their youth. Sharing stories over the meal or during its preparation, going through photo albums or scrap books, cleaning out closets, re-reading old journals, working together on a project in the workshop, going for drives in the car or going for walks with the dog, all represent opportunities for telling stories. The stories which are told in the various settings do not have to have God-talk in their center; rather, their purpose is to describe a patterned human activity and to probe youth's imagination to interpret life in relation to faith and divine guidance. Table talk nurtures curiosity about faith, God, and a young person's place in the narratives of Scripture, family, and the world.

Notes

1 This article is based upon the research for my book on kitchen table youth ministry that will be published by The Pilgrim Press in 2010.

2 My research in particular draws on these theorists: Mary F. Belenky, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York, NY.: Basic Books, 1986); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982, 1993); Eva F. Kittay, Diana T. Meyers, eds., *Women and Moral Theory* (Totowa, NJ.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987); Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Linda Alcoff, Elizabeth Potter *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York, NY.: Routledge, 1993).

3 The effectiveness of family catechesis is evidenced by research conducted by Luther Seminary and Southwestern Seminary. The study concludes that a deep commitment of youth to faith is nurtured by a number of practices. According to this study, the practices most likely to help produce a deep faith are accrued in a family setting and through a family lifestyle that is centered around practicing a religious life actively. See Luther Seminary & Southwestern Seminary, "Factors in Youth & Young Adult Faith. Experience and Development: A Longitudinal Study," posted at <http://www.faithfactors.com/docs/Longdt.doc>; accessed on October 23, 2006.

4 Nebraska's safe haven law has become a controversial piece of legislature. Since it does not state an age limit for what constitutes a child, those up to age 19 can be dropped off at medical centers. A well known case is that of a father who gave up his nine children aged 1-17, unable to care for them after his wife had died.

5 David Elkind, *The Hurried Child*, 3rd ed. (USA: Da Capo Press, 2001), xvi.

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- 6 See bell hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA.: South End Press, 1990), 41-51. An illuminative analysis of the structural and relational changes to US households can be found in: Maggie Jackson, *What's Happening to Home?* (Notre Dame, IN.: Sorin Books), 2002.
- 7 Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 662.
- 8 Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round. Feminist Interpretation of the Church.* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 78.
- 9 http://www.casacolumbia.org/absolutenm/articlefiles/380-Importance_of_Family_Dinners_IV.pdf; accessed on March 11, 2008.
- 10 Miriam Weinstein, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals* (Hanover, NH.: Steerforth Press), 2005.
- 11 Paul Ricour, *History and Truth*, transl. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 99.
- 12 William J. Bausch, *Storytelling. Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 93.
- 13 Preserved Smith, *Luther's Table Talk* (New York, NY.: AMS Press, INC., 1907), 103.
- 14 See <http://www.storycorps.net> for an overview of history, mission, and goals of the project. See also Dave Isay, *Listening Is an Act of Love* (New York, NY.: Penguin Press HC), 2007. Isay is the founder of the StoryCorps project, and his book is the collection of the recorded stories throughout the USA.
- 15 Dave Isay, *Listening Is an Act of Love* (New York, NY.: Penguin Press HC, 2007), 269.
- 16 Maureen O'Brien, "How We Are Together: Educating For Group Self-Understanding in the Congregation", in *Religious Education* 92, no. 3 (1997): 315-322.
- 17 Dori Baker & Joyce Mercer, *Lives to Offer. Accompanying Youth on their Vocational Quest* (Cleveland, OH.: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 71-88.
- 18 Sarah Arthur, *The God- Hungry Imagination* (Nashville, TN.: UpperRoom Books, 2007), 76.
- 19 Smith, *Luther's Table Talk*, 11.
- 20 Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA.: The Westminster Press, 1981), 263-279.
- 21 Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, 274.
- 22 Bausch, *Storytelling. Imagination and Faith*, 15-28.
- 23 Ibid., 19.
- 24 Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 1997), 182.
- 25 Deborah Tannen, *You're Wearing That?* (New York: Random House, 2006), 62-63.
- 26 A helpful discussion about the challenges of a father-daughter relationship can be found in Michael Riera, *Staying Connected To Your Teenager* (USA: Perseus Publishing, 2003), pp. 132-134.

27 In addition to studies on the gender-based patterns of communication, my research draws on developmental theories of female and male processes of differentiation. When a child is between 3-5 years old, she or he goes through a differentiation and identification phase (Freud called this phase the Oedipal child phase). It is during this period that a child identifies with the same sex adult (ideally a parent) in order to learn intimacy with the opposite sex. A girl's less radical break with the same-sex parent (i.e. mother) enables her to see intimacy as an organic part of her personality. For a little boy, learning how to be intimate with the opposite sex is much more traumatizing. A boy experiences aggression in the process of surrendering his original oneness with his mother in order to identify with his father. This aggression becomes a male's mode of being, and it plays out as initiative, curiosity (Erikson), or a conquering, pioneering mentality.

28 Ibid., 118.

29 Miriam Weinstein, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals* (Hanover, NH.: Steerforth Press, 2005), 122.

30 With abstract thinking that emerges at the end of the early adolescence period, youth accrue the ability to think about their own thoughts, concepts, and abstract theories. This new mental competence enables them to engage in reflective thought the subjects of which can be relationships and abstract realities such as love, peace, justice, etc.

31 Carol Lakey Hess, "Ministry with Children and Youth," in H. Anderson, D. Browning, I. Evison, M. Van Leeuwen, eds., *The Family Handbook* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1998), 133.

32 For a bibliography on these studies, see Deborah Tannen, *You're Wearing That?* (New York: Random House), 2006.

33 Tannen, *You're Wearing That?*, 17.