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Pass the Peas, Catch the Faith — Please!

by Linda Staats

Congregations can partner with and equip the domestic church called "home" to help families share and teach the faith amid their busy and sometimes chaotic lives.

As a pastor and parent, David Drach-Meinel in Henderson, Nevada, reflects on the challenges facing families today, "Raising children in the twenty-first century has become increasingly complex. The choices parents and kids face have grown exponentially. Parents face pressure to involve their children in as many opportunities as humanly possible. The real challenge is to strike a healthy balance in all this."



Michelle Petty, director of Children and Family Ministries at Resurrection Lutheran in Tucson, Arizona, comments, "Two hurdles families face are time and technology. Kids today experience instant gratification for most of their needs and wants. Their lives are in constant motion. When they are not in school, they are at activities, and when they are being shuffled between practices they are text messaging, e-mailing, and watching DVDs — all at the same time."

Many families are exhausted from coping day to day with the impact of the economic crisis, child care, aging parents, educational pursuits, health issues, special needs, addictions, hunger . . . daily concerns without end.

Simple Daily Act

How can church leaders respond with lively faith and also take seriously the cultural and daily realities affecting people's lives? How can the church partner with the domestic church called "home" without adding to the guilt and demands on time that too many parents already feel? How can congregations practice faith when people gather, so that people are equipped when they scatter? How does a congregation create a cross-generational, caring community essential for passing on faith?

Two hurdles families face are time and technology. Kids' lives are in constant motion.

In Deuteronomy 6:6-7 adults are instructed to "write these commandments... on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night" (*The Message*). Not extra time, but all the time! Sounds easy, but certainly not simple.

Acts 2:42-47 describes the spiritual practices of Jesus' first followers this way: "They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, their life together, the common meal, and the prayers... They followed a daily discipline of worship in the temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God" (*The Message*).

These words may not exactly describe mealtime in our own homes or those where caregivers squeeze in a hurried meal between jobs, chores, chauffeuring, homework, and bedtime. Mealtime is often overlooked or even avoided as a means to cope with daily stress. It is rarely understood as a time and place to practice one's faith. Yet, what is more basic than sharing a meal?

Research and mental health experts consistently tell us that rituals and traditions, like those around sharing a meal, ground us and give us a sense of identity and belonging. The simplest of daily acts are the glue that keep us together in the midst of chaos, crisis, and especially in those times when there simply are no words.

Training Table Tips

Family Dinner Table

An article in the 2006 issue of *Journal of Adolescent Health* summarizes the research around the correlation between eating meals together as a family and the promotion of healthy adolescent development, "Frequency of family dinner is a protective factor that may curtail high-risk behaviors among youth. Family rituals such as regular mealtimes may ease the stress of daily living in the fast-paced families of today's society."¹

A survey of 18-year-old National Merit Scholars, across all ethnicities, gender, geography, and class turned up a common thread in their lives: the habit of sitting down together at the family dinner table.

Last January I had the privilege of joining families for a Wednesday evening dinner at Joy Lutheran Church, Parker, Colorado. The tables were set with tablecloths and flowers. A hearty meal was prepared and served on real dishes! There was a wonderful "hum" in the room as people sat at round tables and talked. Children were comfortable sitting with adults other than their parents. Singles and elders blended into the mix. There was a "buzz" about the special cake that had been baked to mark this night as "extra" special.

I know from my days on staff of a suburban congregation that this midweek meal might be the only time all week that busy adults and kids sit and share a meal. The staff planning the evening did not assume that people knew one another's names or how to pray or engage in conversation, let alone do faith talk. This was more than a chow line. There were lots of thank yous as people were caught serving one another. Multiple generations sharing food around dinner tables later gathered around the Lord's Table in the youth-led worship. The oldest and youngest present were honored. The simplest of routine tasks and interactions had been well planned. Nothing was taken for granted.

Upon a closer look at the meal served at Joy, it was a time for passing the peas as well as passing the faith. The Four

- Begin a "Mealtime Is Faithtime" all congregation and household campaign.
- Create cross-generational teams or "families" for kitchen crews and eating. For example, designate each table of 12 tables one month of the year. Sit at the table of the month in which you were born.
- Provide table tents and take-home resources for prayers and caring conversations.
- Ask a local restaurant for discount coupons. Discuss how one practices the Youth and Family Institute's Four Keys in public.
- Like at camp, print words of thanks on cardstock for all to see and sing them to familiar tunes. Place words on Web site. Sing in worship following communion.
- Serve others. Recycle. Go green. Identify and meet local needs. Prepare recipes and sell copies of *Food for Life: Recipes and Stories on the Right to Food*, a collection of global recipes, stories, and table blessings highlighting Lutheran World Federation and the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. Available from Augsburg Fortress (800-328-4648).

Keys for nurturing faith, developed and named by Dr. David Anderson of the Youth and Family Institute, were taught and modeled during the meal:

- Caring conversation: Sharing highs and lows or "Where did you see God today?"
 - Prayer/devotions: Formal, written, spontaneous, silly, sung
 - Rituals and tradition: Any consistent practice, serious or silly, that defines us as a family or congregation
 - Serving one another: No such thing as chores. Only acts of service and care for one another, our community, world, and earth.
- Some people departed the evening feeling affirmed, saying, "We do this at home too." For others it was a rare or new experience. They left encouraged, believing, "We can try this at home." And for those who normally eat alone or in their room or not at all, this was a time of grace.

Equipping Families

In the midst of the challenges that our twenty-first century congregations and families face, let's consider the kitchen table as a "training table" for daily life in Christ. Isn't this exactly what Martin Luther did as he invited peers and students of all ages to share a meal in his and Katy's home? I am absolutely certain there was prayer, Bible reading, acts of service (I hope Martin helped clear the table), and lots of conversation, sometimes contentious, maybe even outrageous! Luther reminds us, "In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life."²

Stephen Bouman, executive director of the ELCA's Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission program unit states, "All mission is local, and mission is about relationship. Every congregation is a mission station for the sake of the world."³ Every congregation is called to support families and equip households with tools for living their faith in the messiness of daily life.

Yes, our changing culture can easily engulf us and overwhelm us. But remember the power of mealtime in the midst of uncertain times. Obviously, Jesus did!

Endnotes

1. Jayne A. Fulkerson, et.al. "Family Dinner Meal Frequency and Adolescent Development: Relationships with Developmental Assets and High-Risk Behaviors." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39 (2006) 337–45.
2. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism, The Book of Concord*, eds., T.J. Wengert and R. Kolb (Fortress Press 2000), 41:461.
3. "Lutherans Chart a New Plan for Evangelism," ELCA News Service release, March 9, 2009, www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx

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- "Family Dinner Meal Frequency and Adolescent Development: Relationships with Developmental Assets and High-Risk Behaviors." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39 (2006) 337–45.
- *Food for Life: Recipes and Stories on the Right to Food* (Lutheran World Federation North American Desk, 2008).
- Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).
- The Youth and Family Institute, www.tyfi.org

Resources

- Bringing Faith Home, www.bringingfaithhomeonline.com.

- County extension offices, for example "Family Meal time," Cooperative Extension Service, University of Hawaii at Manoa, College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, Honolulu; www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/New/newsletters/FamilyMealTime.pdf.
- Make Mealtime Family Time, www.makemealtimefamilytime.com.
- North Carolina Synod's Family Table Devotions at www.lutheranyouth.org.
- Search Institute, www.search-institute.org.
- Taking Faith Home, www.tyfi.org.

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