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The Greatest Family Legacy: Nurturing a Healthy Person of Faith

IT IS CLEAR that in the world of Biblical faith, the family is the primary unit of meaning which shapes and defines reality. Walter Brueggemann¹

God, Faith and Family Life

WHAT MANY PARENTS AND TEACHERS know from everyday experience, scholars are discovering scientifically: “children learn what they live.” Because most children are born or “adopted” into families, these basic units of life become the primary context of

young people’s most formative relationships. The Scriptures reflect this understanding of the formative power of families.

Families are God’s primary relational communities for propagating and nurturing life and faith. Within families there are five clusters of formative relationships: 1) among the generations; 2) between husband and wife; 3) between parent and child; 4) among siblings; and 5) between private and public life. As participants with other human beings in propagating and nurturing humanity, Christians are called to live responsibly and joyfully as they participate in families. In these relationships, the Scriptures and the Christian tradition encourage children, men, and women to foster faith and values.

Mask of God and Vocation

MARTIN LUTHER viewed family relationships as “masks of God”—arenas where God, although hidden, participates with human beings in the propagation and nurture of human and Christian life. As masks of God, families are “orders” of creation, through which God acts to initiate and sustain humanity. The church can well assist families in this task.

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Thus, Christian leaders might well ask, “How can we find that which is good, right, and healthy in these relationships? How can we teach healthy values and vital faith in families?” The biblical and Christian traditions, as well as the behavioral sciences, have concepts and skills to offer in ministry with families. Leaders in Christian churches have the responsibility to place before families these concepts and skills as they support parents and children in their primary life journeys.

Family relationships are also affected by the Gospel. Jesus Christ came to defeat and destroy evil. He came to confront evil in its social as well as its personal expressions and influences. Redemption, restoration, and a reorientation of life’s purpose influence relationships as family members interact with one another and with society.

Families change throughout the cycles of their lives. Individuals change, spouses and children leave home, relationships and relational networks reorient as family members age and mature. Sometimes expectations are unfulfilled. Often dreams are shattered. Death and loss persist in a variety of forms and intensify throughout the stages of family life (job loss, poverty, separation, divorce, disabilities, death, violence, substance abuse, failure, depression).

The Gospel’s message of death and resurrection is good news to families in the throes of these transitions. In the pain of the cross, in the hope of the resurrection, their lives and relationships can be healed and sustained. Proclamation of the Gospel to and through families is an important ministry of the church. Faith communities created by the Gospel are called to heal and support persons and their relationships.

Thus, Martin Luther and the Lutheran tradition consider family relationships to be “vocations.” These Christian callings are settings where the Gospel is made known and does its healing and sustaining work. In these relational arenas, grandparents, spouses, parents, and children can carry on the “mutual conversation and consolation

of the saints.” Here, forgiveness can bring reconciliation and restore persons and relationships. Here, faith can be passed on to the next generation.

Passing on the Faith “Generation to Generation”

GOD HAS USED and uses families, imperfect as they are, as vehicles through which children learn faith and values. Through the families of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, their children met God, discovered their identity and discerned God’s will. The children of Israel prayed and worshipped in their families. Great events among God’s people, e.g., the Passover, were celebrated in home-based worship traditions.

Deuteronomy 6:1–9 provides instructions for passing the faith from one generation to the next primarily in the context of families.

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem

on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These are the types of activities to which Walter Brueggemann refers when he writes of families in the Old Testament:

Although the Bible has other agenda that are more central than that of the family, it does drop hints along the way about family that are worth considering. It is clear that in the world of Biblical faith, the family is the primary unit of meaning which shapes and defines reality. The individual person belongs to and lives out of the family. It is the family that provides deep secure roots into the past, bold visions for the future, as well as a sense of purpose and a set of priorities for the present.²

One major function of intergenerational life is to transmit the stories and the promises which identify the family, so that each new generation has an inheritance that gives both identity and roots, and purpose and vocation. "That you may tell in the hearing of your son, of your son's son how I made sport of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them: that you may show that I am the Lord" (Exodus 10:2; cf. Joel 1:2-3).³

Eventually, the major ritual and tradition through which Old Testament families celebrated God's "story" and Israel's identity (as well as the family's) was the Seder meal. At this meal, held in the home, faith and life as well as past, present, and future converged in the space and conversation of everyday life.

While the traditions and rituals of the larger family contributed to these spiritual and moral responsibilities, these tasks were the primary work of the "elders" of the family. The older ones of the grandparent generation were to tell the stories of God's mighty acts in calling and rescuing Israel. As the elders told stories of God's presence and activity in Israel, they cited illustrations from the tradition and from their own "days" with God as they spoke in the hearing of "your son's son."

The Lord's Supper, which Jesus initiated with his disciples whom he included among the "chosen family" of his followers, was a Seder or Passover meal, celebrated in Jewish families since the Exodus. The early Christian communities continued to celebrate the Lord's Supper in their homes, which were the primary loci of the New Testament church. Even as the bonds of marriage and birth were relativized, family households remained primary settings in which the oral tradition, psalms, and profession of Jesus as the Messiah were spoken, sung, and shared. House churches, which included children, servants, and guests as well as men and women, were the primary loci not only of worship but of mission, catechization, and caregiving as well.

In her book, *Family, the Forming Center*, Marjorie Thompson describes a shift in the definition and role of the family that came with the life and ministry of Jesus. In the New Testament, the family is not only the transmitter of life and faith; it also emerges as a prime carrier of the "transforming presence of Christ" in the lives of believers. Many of the foundational images of the early church are drawn from the family: believers are "brothers and sisters in Christ," and, "adopted into the family of God." This development carries implications not only for the nature of family life, but also for the essence of the church.⁴

Families matter in ministry with children, not only because of the generative purposes for which God created them, but because God desires to heal and transform them. Scripture reflects the "creative and "re-creative" roles and needs of families. Family systems theory expands on what Scripture asserts. What family systems term "generational transmission of dysfunction," Scripture expresses as "children will be punished for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but love will be shown to a thousand generations of those who love and keep my commandments." From their unique vantage points, pastors and therapists can tend

family “cut-offs,” aware that broken familial relationships will hurt people. Those very “cut-offs” hurt Jacob and Esau and continue to hurt families to the present time.

Pastors, teachers, and DCEs can address spiritual growth that results from healthy struggle with these issues. Family theorists can tend these life issues that emerge at specific stages creating crises that faced constructively result in growth toward maturity. The life cycle of individuals and families can be viewed as occasions for faith and life development, some of the many moments God uses to move his people toward maturity of faith.

Parents in the Life and Faith Formation of Children

IN THE BIBLE, parenting is a partnership in people-making. Mothers and fathers become central figures in the family’s and the community’s socialization of the new generation. Freedom and responsibility under God are the goals of “training up a child.” The child is to know how to love God, neighbor, and self in all that he or she does. Parents are to help the child claim and celebrate the unique person God has called him or her to be. The child is to be prepared for participation in the community, in which the adult can find fullness of life. The child is to be introduced to Jesus Christ and the practices of the Christian faith through the lives and practices of their parents.



Parents do this most effectively when they are believers who practice a vital and informed faith that reflects significant levels of Christian understanding, worship attendance, prayer and service. Parents can engage youth and family in conversation, prayer, Bible reading and service that nurture life and faith.

Parents need not only know and model the Christian faith; they can draw children and teenagers into faith practices. Parents can pray with their children at table, at family celebrations, during times of crises and over individual and family decisions. Family participation in service activities can be a way of life in Christian households. Together parents and young people can “turn their faces outward in mission” and live life for others.

Parents’ expressions of respect and love can create an atmosphere promoting faith. While marital difficulties, divorce and parent-youth conflict are no strangers to the households of Christians, their households can, within the promises of the Gospel and the support of the faith community, find ways of navigating the challenges and stresses of daily life with approaches marked by respect, equal regard, open communication, and cooperation. Parents can practice individual accountability, forgiveness and reconciliation, thereby modeling faith in action and generating an atmosphere where faith can be referenced and discussed.

Congregations in Family Faith Formation

FOR DECADES congregations and youth leaders have focused primarily on the church as the agent of spiritual development rather than understanding faith formation as a responsibility shared by congregation and family. This focus on church programming as the primary way to nurture faith in children has had a negative effect not only on the church but also on the lives of families and most especially on the faith maturity of young people.

Families have come to believe that faith is a separate element of life to be tended by

“professionals” at church, rather than viewing faith as the core of life, a responsibility of every Christian including families.

This need not be the case. Many congregations reflect significantly different commitments and patterns emphasizing strong partnerships with families. Their vision understands family to be a primal context for exercising faith in daily life. They understand the mission of the family to include becoming witnesses to Christ and caring for the world.

These congregations reveal expectations and practices that reflect the power and value of ministry with families. Moreover, these congregation’s children, youth and families are enhanced by both young peoples’ and their parents’ participation in the multi-generational ministries of the entire congregation. These congregations integrate parents and young people across the church as well as develop strong ministries with children, youth and their parents. Here are a few “best practices” drawn from these congregations.

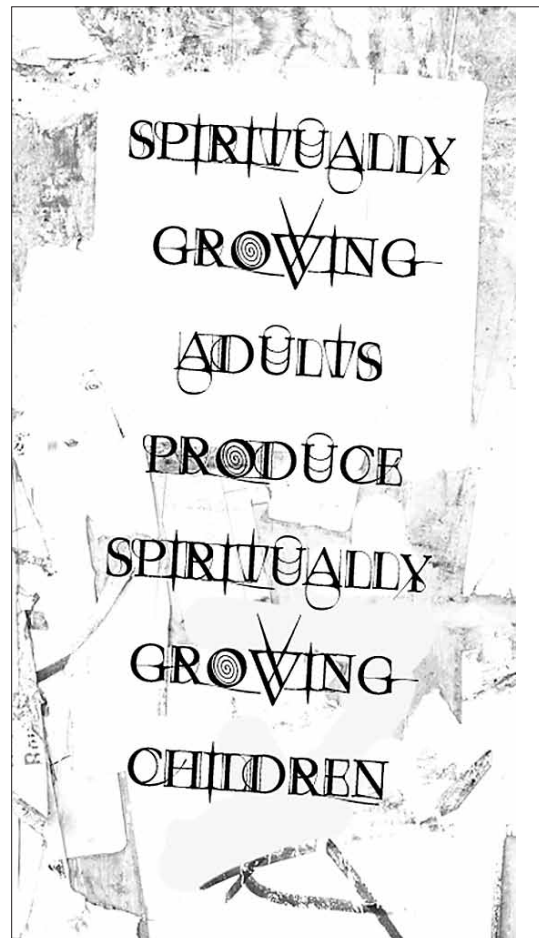
Strengthen Parental Faith

A MAXIM PAINTED on the wall of the youth ministry wing of a local church reads, “Spiritually growing adults produce spiritually growing children.” While the Holy Spirit ultimately produces faith, the point is clear: Ministries with youth must broaden their vision to include parents of youth as essential participants in passing vital faith on to the next generation. The effectiveness of children’s or youth ministries might well be judged not by how many youth sign up for a particular event, but by the spiritual maturity of the adults who live in the homes with the young people of the congregation. Congregational leaders can broaden their imaginations to developing the faith maturity of the parents of the congregation. This ministry might well include: strong preaching; adult Bible studies; adult faith forums; service-learning mission trips; adult discipleship groups; faith formation retreats, advocacy task forces and prayer ministries.

Promote Family Faith Practices

CONGREGATIONS can move ministry with young people beyond the walls of the church. This includes encouraging and equipping parents for practicing faith with their children. It means helping parents re-envision the necessary partnership between church and home. It calls for opportunities at church where parents and young people spend time together around Scripture and questions regarding daily life. It is teaching families to set aside time and develop patterns for faith conversations and practices at home.

Children’s and youth ministries can provide opportunities for young people to strengthen parents’ faith by encouraging young people to share with their parents the faith experiences that come from participating in events, such as speaking of their retreat and mission experiences with their parents.



Cultivate Family Harmony

PARENTS NEED RESOURCES that equip them for living married, for parenting and for mentoring their children. Providing enrichment and support for spouses, single parents, extended families, stepfamilies, or over-extended families can be particularly helpful. Congregations can contribute to the health and harmony of households and families as they become caring, constructive communities of quality relationships marked by honesty and forgiveness. Congregational environments in which children, youth and adults feel safe to gather, learn, and bring their friends can have a major impact in the lives of families. Youth leaders and family ministers might well work at developing faith communities that respect and nurture life-giving relationships with young people and their parents during activities at church.

Congregations foster family health by teaching about family relationships. They assist parents in developing more effective family communication and greater capacities to work through conflict, especially with teenagers.

Equip Parents

PARENTS LONG FOR SUPPORT as they raise their children and teenagers. Some churches offer classes and support groups for parents of teenagers. These include parenting classes, parent-youth discussion groups, parent support groups, and seminars for parents of youth entering adolescence. One congregation has appointed a task force to conduct ongoing focus groups with parents to discover their interests and needs. Utilizing this information, they tapped family life experts to provide four family-life seminars in a year for parents of youth. A “family life team” might well be developed to do this in any congregation.

Foster Parent-Youth Relationships

MANY CHURCHES value parents as partners in youth ministry and find ways to include the ideas, dreams, and vision of parents in youth ministry. These youth ministers develop ways

to tap the dreams and hopes that parents have for their teenagers. Congregations might well include parents in planning and involve parents in intergenerational community building, Bible studies, parent-youth communication workshops and mission trips.

Establishing strong “parental-youth relationships” also means providing “extended family of faith parents” for young people who don’t have healthy families or families where faith is practiced. Adult youth workers can play an important role as mentors or even “surrogate faith-parents.”

Congregations as Extended Families of Faith

THROUGH GOD’S WORD and the Sacraments, people are incorporated into the kingdom of God and become recipients of the saving work of Christ. In Baptism each person becomes a member of the Body of Christ, which is often portrayed in the New Testament as an extended family of faith. In the family of faith, there is the opportunity for daily repentance and renewal for singles, grandparents, spouses, parents, and children. Here, they can forgive and be forgiven, care and be cared for, strengthened and supported for their lives in their families. In the family of faith, these persons can be healed and sustained even when their families are destructive or fractured.

Some congregations develop prayer partnerships between older adults and youth by inviting senior adults to pray for individual youth. These “elders” pray for young people especially around major life and faith experiences.

Congregations and Families Working Together: Leaving a Living Legacy

IN THE MID-1980s Search Institute conducted a study of the effectiveness of Christian education among six mainline denominations. Among 28 significant religious influences reported by children, youth, and adults, the most significant were

mother and father. Both of these ranked higher than pastor or church school teacher and the Bible. The seven dynamics most directly related to mature faith in children and youth were:

1. A mother who models the faith;
2. A father who models the faith;
3. A regular dialog with mother on faith/life issues;
4. A regular dialog with father on faith/life issues;
5. A regular dialog with an adult other than a parent on faith/life issues;
6. Experience regular reading of the Bible and devotions in the home;
7. Experience a servanthood event with a parent as an action of faith.⁵

The study indicated that interactive family life and intentional faith instruction in the home combined with excellence in congregational Christian education were of significantly greater impact on the faith maturity of a child, youth, or adult than only participation in church school or congregational worship.

Parents in their ordinary day-to-day interaction with children have the opportunity to profoundly influence the lives of their children and leave their children their greatest legacy. In fact, parents cannot not influence the unfolding life and values of their children. An anonymous popular poem, regularly found on the walls in children's rooms, states:

Children Learn What They Live

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn

If they live with hostility, they learn to fight

If they live with ridicule, they learn to be shy

If they live with shame, they learn to feel guilty

If they live with tolerance, they learn to be patient

If they live with encouragement, they learn to be confident

If they live with praise, they learn to appreciate

If they live with fairness, they learn a sense of justice

If they live with security, they learn to have faith

If they live with approval, they learn to like themselves

If they live with acceptance and friendship, they learn to find love in the world.

Whether one follows the work of those who study the transmission of faith, or scientists who study families, or listens to the words of poets, the evidence presents a powerful message to parents . . . and to congregations who support Christian parents: through trusting relationships and the days and practices of your lives, the finest legacy you can leave your children is a vital, resilient, life-giving faith!

Endnotes

1. Walter Brueggemann, "The Covenanted Family: A Zone for Humanness." *Journal of Current Social Issues*, 14/5 (Winter 1977), 18.
2. Brueggemann, "The Covenanted Family," 18.
3. Brueggemann, "The Covenanted Family," 18.
4. Marjorie Thompson, *Family: The Forming Center* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1989), 24-25.
5. Peter Benson and Carolyn H. Eklin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990).

