



# Transforming Faith Formation One Family at a Time

Jim Merhaut

**A**n ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy. This old Spanish/Portuguese wisdom saying captures a core truth about faith formation. There is simply no more powerful influence upon the faith formation of a human being than a parent.

The core context for educational success is the family. Educators, both religious and secular, have been proclaiming this message for millennia. A great tragedy of the modern era is that we have pushed to the margins the potent tool of parental influence in our educational institutions. On the other hand, a great blessing of the postmodern era is that we are learning from our mistake. Educators are acknowledging, discerning, and even celebrating the indispensable role of parents in the learning process.

The most successful schools in the country are schools that invite parents back into the classroom and encourage meaningful educational interaction between parents and their children. For example, Susan B. Anthony Elementary School in Sacramento, California, reduced annual suspensions from one hundred forty students to five students in one year by creating a parent partnership program. Before the parent program, student test scores were among the lowest in the district. After the program was implemented, student achievement and test scores improved immediately and dramatically.

One of the great challenges for Susan B. Anthony School was overcoming a cultural-linguistic barrier between teachers and parents. English was the first language of the school, but most of the parents did not speak English. The new program called for teachers to make home visits, with interpreters if necessary, just to get to know the parents of their students. Getting into the home, the teachers were now on their way to teaching with a family perspective, and parents were motivated to view themselves as partners in the educational process. The astounding results of this simple, personal, family-oriented approach drew national attention to this school (Furger, 47).

Some schools are trying to incorporate the patterns of family life into the institutional education process. Quest High School outside of Houston, Texas, is the highest rated school in its district. A family-like atmosphere with high parental involvement is their recipe for success. Students at Quest are grouped into

---

**Jim Merhaut** is the author of *Your Catholic Family—Simple Ways to Share the Faith at Home* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006) and “Families and Faith Formation” in *Families and Faith* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006). Jim works as a parish director of religious education in Youngstown, OH, and teaches courses and workshops on family and lifelong faith formation. He holds a masters degree in religious education from Duquesne University, and is married with five children.

family clusters with at least three adults. They remain in those families, meeting daily for forty minutes, for the duration of their high school years. Parents are viewed and treated as partners in the educational process, and family structure is the foundation upon which the school is designed (<http://qhs.humble.k12.tx.us/>).

Churches are also discovering the benefits of parental involvement in the faith formation of children. Family and intergenerational faith formation processes and programs are multiplying by leaps and bounds around the country. The Generations of Faith project developed by the Center for Ministry Development trained more than 1,500 parishes in a five-year period. These parishes are developing new and exciting ways to help parents, children, and other adults explore their faith together both at church and home ([www.generationsoffaith.org](http://www.generationsoffaith.org)).

Programs like Kathy Chesto's *FIRE (Family-centered Intergenerational Religious Education)* ground their success in replicating an extended family gathering as the methodological structure out of which catechesis happens. These initiatives succeed when they combine meaningful intergenerational faith formation gatherings at church with faith formation activities for the home that respect the existing rhythms of family life. This essay will focus on the latter.

Authentic faith formation in the home is absolutely essential if there will be any successful congregational formation. Institutional Christianity will decline into insignificance if congregations do not find ways to work from the family back to the institution, rather than from the institution into the family. This paradigm shift, from the false perception that faith formation originates in ecclesial institutions

to the truth that faith formation in fact originates in the home, is where we will focus our exploration of family faith formation.

not unusual for a modern Christian family to move into a new community and make a checklist of things that they must have in order to have a sense of

**Authentic faith formation in the home is absolutely essential if there will be any successful congregational formation. Institutional Christianity will decline into insignificance if congregations do not find ways to work from the family back to the institution, rather than from the institution into the family.**

## Working from the Family Back to the Church

Church ministry for families will be effective when ministers and educators enter the worlds of the families with whom they minister, and provide resources that will help families discover God in the routines of family living. We spend far too much of our time, talent, and treasure creating church programs that produce poor to fair attendance, while families are struggling to make sense out of the often chaotic pace of modern living. The church program ends up being just one more appointment on an already overloaded schedule. Even worse, church programs are perceived by families as commodities among commodities.

Georgetown theologian Vince Miller, in his book *Consuming Religion*, argues that consumer culture has the effect of reducing culture itself to a material good that can be consumed, collected, or even discarded. Tragically, even the church or God can be perceived as a commodity. It is

social identity and acceptance. The church, unfortunately, can become one item on the checklist, e.g., we have our house, our school, our cars, our yard, our riding mower, our church, our vacation spot, our grill, our entertainment system, and so on.

Churches feed into this perception. When churches offer programs, either church-based or school-based, as one more choice among other commodity choices, it is no wonder that families skip church programs for the soccer game. We have trained them to do so by not helping them to discover that God is the source from which all experiences emerge. God is not just one item on a list of things to have or to do; God is the *heart of everything* on their list of things to have and to do. All of our ministries, including our liturgies and our schools and our church educational programs, are in danger of being perceived as commodities if we do not help families become aware that God is the source of all, and is present in all.

As long as families are choosing religion as something that is produced outside of their homes, they will continue to

perceive it as an expendable item on a list of other things that are produced outside of their homes. If families can discern and act upon the presence of God in their homes and in their daily activities, then church will make sense as the place where we gather to celebrate the God whom we have personally encountered in the course of family living. Not only will worship services be more meaningful for families who practice the presence of God in their daily lives, but the dismissal from Sunday services will also take on new meaning. It makes little sense to tell people to “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” when they are uncertain of how to identify or find this Lord to whom they offer their love and service.

Our church-centered and school-centered programs have not helped the majority of our people believe that God is with them constantly. Our dismissal from Sunday worship is in danger of becoming an empty platitude because we have unconsciously trained our people to believe that God is found primarily within the confines of our churches, within portions of our schools, and within the church programs that take place in church buildings. We tell people that we send them out to love and to serve the Lord throughout the week, but our actions, i.e., our programs, tragically speak louder than our words; we are implying that they won’t find God until they return to church next week. Why? Because we do not give families the tools they need to explicitly discover God at home or anywhere else other than church.

Families can become more aware of God’s constant presence only if they practice unveiling the presence of God in their homes and in their daily activities. Better church schools and stronger church-based programs will not solve this problem. We

need to help families understand that God *is*. Wherever they are in their daily lives, God is there as well. They need to be reintroduced to God as “I Am Who Am.” They need to know God as *Emmanuel*, which means “God is with us.” They need to recall that Jesus’ parting words include the promise to be with us always—yes, even at home. They need to remember that St. Paul instructed us to pray without ceasing because every moment of every day is saturated with divinity, and we need only open our ears and eyes to commune unceasingly with the divine presence.

Families need to develop a spirituality of God’s constant presence because God *is*. Buying a house or renting an apartment and all the other things that go along with becoming established in a community are spiritually pregnant events, activities, and practices. God is always in the mix and is never disinterested. And the ongoing routines of daily living are loaded with God-centered practices that can invite every member of the household into deep and meaningful encounters with God at any given moment.

When families discover the presence of God in daily living, they will then have a reason and motivation to share their discovery with others, who are also meeting God in surprising and wonderful ways each day. This is when church life will begin to make sense to families. When families see the flame of God’s presence burning in the random and sometimes chaotic events of daily life, they will naturally desire to gather with others to praise God for the simple and wonderful gifts that are given to them each day.

The great patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith shaped our religion in response to a God who

met them in the ordinary experiences of family life. We should not expect that God will act differently today, especially in light of the fact that Jesus came to the awareness of his divine mission in the context of family life. We must work from the family back to the church if our churches are to have any relevance in contemporary culture. We must empower the family and give them the tools necessary to facilitate their spiritual growth in recognition of the fact that it is within the family, day by day, moment by moment, that God *is*.

---

## Rejoice In and Proclaim the Vision

---

How shall we go about this paradigm shift? How shall we cease doing ministry from the church to the family, and begin doing ministry from the family back to the church? We first have to celebrate the vision. We have to rejoice in the wisdom that God has given us, a wisdom that reveals the power of family ministry and of parents as primary educators.

We are thankful that church leaders of all denominations and educational leaders of all political persuasions agree that there is no greater predictor of educational success than an active and involved parent. In 1990 the Search Institute released its study, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*, showing the undeniable link between teen religious commitment and parent religious commitment. In Merton Strommen’s commentary on the study, he highlighted that teens are far more likely to attend church services, to be intentional about their own faith development, and to participate in service programs if they have

When families discover the presence of God in daily living, they will then have a reason and motivation to share their discovery with others, who are also meeting God in surprising and wonderful ways each day.

parents that actively nurture faith in their homes, compared to teens who have non-religious home environments (Schuller, 57-63).

These findings were reinforced by the 2005 *National Study of Youth and Religion*, released by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This study showed that Catholic teens tend to be the least religious teens in America, falling behind conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, and black Baptists. It's no surprise that the same study ranked Catholic parents as the least religious parents among the same four groups of parents surveyed. The study concludes that Catholics have relied too heavily upon schools and church programs to pass on the faith to children, and have neglected the active participation of parents in faith formation initiatives (Smith and Denton, 207-17).

The National Education Association states that, "Research shows that the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student's family is able to:

- Create a home environment that encourages learning
- Express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers
- Become involved in their children's education at school

and in the community (<http://www.nea.org/parents/research-parents.html>).

These insights confirm the results of numerous other studies from a wide range of researchers including medical, social, and behavioral sciences. They can and should be interpreted as refreshing and liberating revelations from God to a culture that has heaped too much pressure on educational institutions as causes of and potential solutions for society's ills. We now know without question that if we want healthy communities, we must have healthy families. If we want vibrant churches, we must start by nurturing households of faith and we cannot do it as an afterthought; it must be a top priority.

The church has existed and even thrived without church schools as we know them today; but the church has never existed without families. Faith formation is most effective when it is done by, or at least done in cooperation with, families. The visionary educational insights that bring the family back to the heart of the educational process are great blessings that should be proclaimed in a multitude of ways. We need to celebrate and promote the vision that *an ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy*, any chance we get.

## Know Your Families

Another critical piece of the family ministry puzzle is to know who these families with whom we minister are. How many of the families in your congregation are two-parent families? How many have children? Are your families large or small? How many are divorced? How many are divorced and remarried? How many are blended families? How many are raising preschoolers? How many are raising teens? What schools do they attend? Do they home-school? How many are launching children into college or into the workforce? How many households are made up of retired persons? How many single-person households are there? In what professions are your adults engaged? What social activities do your families prefer? What do they do with their free time? Where do they go on vacation? What television shows are they watching? What is causing them undue stress? What causes them to celebrate? Do you know your families? Do you know what they are doing? Knowing our people shapes the way we do ministry.

A simple reflection on the vast methodological differences between Jesus and St. Paul reveals how important it is to know your people. Jesus preached primarily in rural settings. To reach his audience effectively, he had to use rural imagery and symbolism to frame his message. Paul's letters are addressed to a more urban crowd. The lack of rural imagery and symbolism in Pauline literature is striking. In all of Paul's letters there are only two references to seeds, whereas in the gospels there are more than a dozen, and some of those references include great detail. Paul also only has two references to shepherding, while the gospels literally have dozens. Jesus and

Paul both knew their people and tailored their messages and methodologies to reach their people with great power.

Knowing our people cannot be restricted to knowing facts about them. We must also acquire a sense of the emotional landscape of the families in our churches. While the scope of this essay does not allow for an in-depth examination of this topic, emotional learning is generating a vast body of literature that highlights the relationship between affectivity and cognition, a relationship that has significant implications for how we educate people. Recent brain research is showing that our emotional life and our thinking life are not as distinct as we once believed. Educators need to be in touch with the emotional processes that are influencing a learner's ability to acquire and store knowledge.

For our purposes it is important to acknowledge the family as the foundation of any person's emotional makeup. The family is the place where a person's basic emotional patterns are formed. Because these family-based emotional patterns set the course for educational success or failure, educators need to be more proactive about helping families to develop in emotionally stable ways. Emotional instability in families detracts from a learner's ability to focus upon, absorb, and retain information on a cognitive level. Stable families that allow for healthy emotional development lay the foundation for constructive learning.

## Identify the Practices of Family Life

A powerful way to help families get in touch with the presence of God in daily life is to raise awareness in families about the routine Christian practices that

are the framework of family life. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra define Christian practices as, "Things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world" (Bass, 5). Bass and Dykstra identified twelve central Christian practices: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives.

Christian practices are essential, repeatable actions that are rooted in the gospels, and they characterize healthy family and community life. Like family life, practices cannot be compartmentalized into tidy and distinct packages; they often overlap in complex but complementary ways. For example, dying well and forgiving have a dynamic relationship. One cannot die well if one has not adopted the daily practice of forgiving. Forgiving is a necessary prerequisite for dying well, and one practices dying well in the very process of forgiving. Forgiving calls us to die to our desire to avenge a past injustice as we imagine and create new possibilities for relating in the future. Each time that we practice forgiving, we are simultaneously preparing to die well.

The death of Jesus weaves these two practices, forgiving and dying well, together not only by the cosmic reconciling truth of the paschal mystery, but also by Jesus' simple gesture of forgiving his executioners as he died an unjust death. We would be fools to think that Jesus was able to offer this kind of forgiveness from the cross by some miraculous intervention from God. Jesus discerned the presence of God from his earliest days, and he discovered God's identity as one who forgives through the very

practice of forgiving those who were constantly against him. The Scriptures are clear that Jesus had enemies from the day of his birth. Without the daily practice of forgiving others, Jesus would have developed into a bitter, violent, and vengeful person. He experienced this temptation to bitterness in his full humanity, but in his divinity he resolutely and regularly rejected the option to hate. Discerning the constant presence of God and practicing forgiveness every day gave Jesus the power to forgive even from the cross.

God became human to invite us to divinity. We are called to be like Christ, and we are called to help the families in our churches be like Christ. Jesus certainly did not leave his faith at the synagogue door as he left Sabbath worship to return to the routines of family life. Jesus, growing up in a family that practiced the presence of God each day, was empowered to discover his unique mission. Families in our congregations who are given the tools to practice their faith at home each day will also empower their members to discover their own mission in the world today.

Practices are the threads that make up the fabric of our lives. They are woven together to create the structure of our days and our nights. We express ourselves through them, and most importantly, we have the opportunity to step back from them and examine them to discern how we respond to the constant presence of God in our lives. The repeatable nature of a practice gives us multiple opportunities to work with it, to study it, to discuss it, to adjust it, and to allow it to be our gateway to spiritual freedom. But we can only be free in our daily practices if we are intentional about them.

The repeatable nature of practices also has a downside in that they can become things we do unconsciously. For example, dimensions of the Christian practice of caring for the body can easily become unconscious because many of the things our bodies do become habit. We walk the way we walk because we practice walking in a particular way every day. Walking style, or gait, becomes habitual and we do it without giving it any conscious thought. Yet an unhealthy gait can cause a body significant pain.

For example, a few years ago I went to a physical therapist because I was experiencing sharp pain in my upper back. The first thing he did was observe me as I walked back and forth in his exam room. He then told me that much of my pain was being caused by the way I carried my shoulders throughout the day. My practice had been to walk with my shoulders and my upper body leaning forward. This unintentional walking pattern was causing certain muscles to become weak, which caused other muscles to work harder in compensation. The overworked muscles were now rebelling and sending me strong and painful messages.

In order to be free from the pain, I had to develop a new way of walking. I had to practice caring for my body. I practiced walking with good posture consciously and intentionally every day for several months. Soon the practice paid off and the pain was gone. I occasionally slip back into my old pattern of walking with my shoulders forward, but as soon as I notice the pain returning, I am reminded that my ticket to pain-free walking is the practice of walking with proper posture.

One may wonder what the example about my back pain has to do with Christian formation.

We can certainly learn great spiritual lessons by the way that we deal with pain, but it is wrong to attribute pain to God. God wants to save us from pain and suffering so that every tear can truly be wiped away. The miraculous healings in the gospels are signs of God's ultimate concern for the salvation of the whole person. In the simple experience of learning to walk in a more healthful way, I was given the opportunity to respond to God's invitation to care for the body, an invitation that came to me through a series of routine visits to my physical therapist; in freely responding to God's gift of my therapist's advice, I was set free from pain.

## Connecting Christian Practice at Home with Sunday Worship

Earlier in this essay, I noted how irrelevant Sunday worship can become when ordinary people do not have the skills they need in order to discern the presence of God in their daily lives. They often come to worship believing that the worship service is their only meaningful encounter with God throughout the week. Fostering Christian practices in families is a simple way to improve family life while preparing families for more active and conscious participation in

**Christian practices help us to identify possibilities for spiritual growth in a multitude of simple and ordinary ways. Living the practices of daily life in more loving ways is how families can discover the presence of God at home.**

To say that God was not part of this process is to deny the power of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Religion has no hope if we do not discern and acknowledge the presence of God in every moment of daily life. God became embodied or enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ so that the glorious and liberating salvation of God might be accessible in any and all fleshly human experiences. Christian practices help us to identify possibilities for spiritual growth in a multitude of simple and ordinary ways. Living the practices of daily life in more loving ways is how families can discover the presence of God at home.

Sunday worship. We now turn to one specific Christian practice that families can do at home, the results of which will create more meaningful Sunday worship.

*Welcoming* is a Christian practice; Bass and Dykstra call it the practice of hospitality. All families practice hospitality or welcoming. Some practice it better than others. Congregations who welcome well are generally made up of families who welcome well.

Welcoming in a Christian home begins with the way in which human beings welcome each other into their lives on an interpersonal level. There is a lot of spiritual, social, emotional, intellectual, and physical terrain that makes up the person I am.

Each person I meet is welcomed into that terrain in differing degrees. I welcome my friends at one level. I welcome my spouse at another level. I welcome my children at yet another level. I welcome my pastor at a certain level. There are places in my self where my spouse is welcome but my coworkers are not. Interpersonal welcoming sets the tone for how I welcome in general.

In order to practice welcoming well, I need to explore the levels at which I welcome others into my personal life, and discern the limits of my welcoming and why they are there. Some of the limits are necessary and healthy; others protect me from issues I fear to face. Welcoming always involves risk, and we experience that risk most deeply when we welcome another into the inner workings of our souls. Exploring this dimension of the practice of welcoming is properly within the realm of spiritual direction.

There are also ways in which we practice communal welcoming in our homes, and this lends itself to multiple ministry possibilities. How do we welcome friends into our homes? How do we welcome strangers who come to our door? How do we welcome extended family? How do we welcome invited or expected visitors versus those who show up without notice? How do we welcome even the dreadful telemarketer, who always intrudes unannounced with a usually unwelcome message? Christ is truly present in the friend, the family member, the stranger, and even the telemarketer who seeks our attention while we are at home. The Christian practice of welcoming challenges us to see the face of Christ in all who seek our attention and to respond to Christ, who is welcoming us into a deeper relationship with God, a relationship that promises to

transform our ordinary routines into deeply meaningful experiences.

When families practice welcoming in their homes and in their daily routines, they become welcoming people, and they will carry that welcoming practice with them in public as a natural part of who they are. Helping families welcome more effectively at home is the principal way we can make our churches more welcoming. If welcoming is a value at church but not at home, the church welcome will ring hollow; it will look like nothing more than drama. Ushers and greeters will pretend to welcome by saying the right words and using the right facial expressions, but they will not touch the hearts of those they welcome, for it will be nothing more than an act. The externals of worship, while they are important, do not make worship either authentic or phony; rather, it is the internal disposition of the ones who facilitate worship that makes the difference, and internal dispositions are developed and nurtured through daily Christian practice at home. Welcoming families who are rooted in gospel welcoming are the heart of welcoming churches.

## A Process for Exploring a Christian Practice at Home

---

How can we help families to welcome in a way that helps them to practice their faith more deeply? Here is an example of a process for exploring a Christian practice at home using the practice of hospitality or welcoming.

## Step One

The first step is to become aware of the patterns of welcoming that are in our culture. Where do people feel welcome? Where do people feel unwelcome? Why do they feel welcome or unwelcome? We notice that country clubs welcome in a different way than amusement parks do.

In my travels, I've noticed that the transportation industry often makes some people feel more welcome than others. Elite or first class travelers wait in shorter lines and sit in more comfortable chairs than the general travelers do. Helping families to examine the patterns of welcoming that are present in the culture serves two purposes: first, it sparks the imagination by showing how common and far-reaching the practice of welcoming is; second, it is a non-threatening way to get into the topic because it does not make any personal demands on a participant to talk about how someone else practices welcoming—it breaks the ice.

This cultural examination can easily happen in the home. Here are some thoughts on how it might look: we can encourage families to use their mealtime as a time to discuss the culture; we can provide them with a few ideas to get them started (see previous paragraph). Parents can comment quite casually on how they witness patterns of welcoming throughout their day. Children can be invited, not forced, to follow suit and share what they might have seen in the course of their day. The family is on their way to a meaningful faith formation experience.

## Step Two

The second step in helping families to develop the Christian practice of welcoming is to facilitate an examination of the

patterns of welcoming within the family's household. When people begin to study the patterns of a particular practice in the culture, they often quite naturally turn to the way that practice is played out in their own homes. In response to discussions about the practice of welcoming in our culture, people often say, "I wouldn't do it that way in my house," or "That's a pretty good idea. It reminds me of how my mother used to welcome people." Christian practices naturally grow out of family experiences. Once the topic of a particular practice is broached, household applications are not far behind.

Parents can continue to facilitate the discussion at the dinner table mentioned above by asking questions such as:

- What do you think about the way we welcome people into our home?
- Let's think about the last time a guest was in our house. How did we welcome that person? What did we do? What could we have done better?
- Why is it important to make people feel welcome?
- How do you feel when others welcome you into their homes?

Open-ended questions like these will allow for free discussion of current practice as well as imaginative discussion for future practice.

### Step Three

The third step is to connect the family's practice of welcoming with the gospel. There are many stories about welcoming in the gospels. The birth of Christ, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Martha and Mary, and the Emmaus meal are a few that come to mind. There is a particularly

compelling story about welcoming in the seventh chapter of Luke. Jesus is invited to dine with a Pharisee whose hospitality is upstaged by a repentant woman when she lavishes an extravagant and dramatic welcome upon Jesus, one that Jesus suggests would have been appropriate for the Pharisee to emulate. This woman's action is motivated by love, and she experiences profound forgiveness for her sins as a result of her personal encounter with Jesus.

Exploring a gospel story in the context of family discussions about daily Christian practices can be a powerful learning experience. Parents can offer a story like Luke's repentant woman as the prayer for a meal that includes a discussion of welcoming, or they can read it as a follow-up to a discussion that occurred at a previous meal. The order of things is not as important in a family setting as is making the connections between the pieces. The gospel story can introduce the topic as the opening prayer of the meal, or the gospel story can be used at a later meal if that would create a more natural flow for the family. The critical thing is to make the connection between the gospel and the family practice.

Families ultimately need to be clear about one thing: Jesus Christ is at the heart of every Christian practice. When we welcome others into our home, we are encountering Christ in a new way. What is the benefit to the Christian practice of welcoming? The benefits are many, but peace is certainly eminent. Welcoming Christ is a pathway to peace, for Christ always brings with him the gift of peace.

## Motivating Parents to Practice Faith at Home

It is naïve to think that parents will take up the challenge of leading their families in the daily practice of Christian faith at home when churches have for so long usurped their authority in that role. Church leaders need to motivate parents to become more intentional about faith formation in their homes. We need to connect the daily practice of faith with the daily hopes, joys, fears, and concerns of parents. Parents will become more intentional about faith formation at home if and when they believe that practicing faith at home will help them navigate the routines of family life more effectively.

I have had great success motivating parents to share faith with their children when I tell them that doing so is what their children need from them. I use the results of solid research to let parents know that practicing faith at home is one way to assure that their children will have a better chance of making it to adulthood safely. Parents are motivated by that knowledge because they love their children and want what is best for them.

There are plenty of reputable studies that show a connection between active parenting and positive family outcomes. There are other studies that show a link between religious faith and positive family outcomes. We need to merge the research to expose the potent combination of an active and faith-filled parenting style, and tell parents in very clear and simple ways that authentic and intentional faith sharing at home will make their lives and the lives of their children better in every way.

Here's the rub. A change has to happen in our hearts first. If church leaders don't believe that

God is just as powerfully present in families as in our programs, then our call to family faith formation will not ring true. If we cannot find God bursting out of every non-church moment of our lives, and if we cannot name the very concrete ways in which our lives have improved because of our discovery of God at the foundation of all that we are and all that we do, then how can we motivate others to embark on the quest? Church leaders need a joyous conversion; a conversion of heart that will motivate us to share the good news of God's abiding presence in the family with energy and enthusiasm.

## Conclusion

---

*An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy.* Some may consider this wisdom saying to be an anticlerical remark, but nothing could be further from the truth. The truth that lies within this axiom has the power to set the clergy free to be what they are called to be. It is not their responsibility, nor is it the responsibility of the institutions

over which they preside, to implement the details of faith formation. The role of the clergy, and religious institutions is to be the visionary leaders who empower adults to pass on faith to their children. It is the role of the parent in the context of family living to do the actual passing on of the faith.

Churches need to consistently proclaim the vision—a vision that they wholeheartedly trust—that family is the primary place where faith formation happens. They must listen to their families in order to know them from the inside out, and provide families with the resources, programs, and motivation that will help them to practice their faith at home every day. Transforming faith formation one family at a time in this manner could have an explosive transforming effect on congregations.

### Works Cited

Bass, Dorothy C., editor. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

- Chesto, Kathleen. *FIRE (Family-Centered Intergenerational Religious Education)*. Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2000. (Multiple volumes)
- Furger, Roberta. "Secret Weapon Discovered!: Scientists Say Parents Partnering with Teachers can Change the Future of Education." *Edutopia*, March 2006, 46-49.
- LeDoux, Joseph. *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.
- Miller, Vincent J. *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- National Education Association Website, <http://www.nea.org>.
- Quest High School website, Houston. <http://qhs.humble.k12.tx.us/>.
- Schuller, David S., Editor. *Rethinking Christian Education: Explorations in Theory and Practice*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993.
- Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.