Little Faith, Big Responsibility: Reimagining the Church's Partnership with Parents in a Child's Spiritual Formation

Jennifer Blake
dmin-fpcoord@fuller.edu

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This ministry focus paper entitled

LITTLE FAITH, BIG RESPONSIBILITY: REIMAGINING THE CHURCH’S PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS IN A CHILD’S SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Written by

JENNIFER L. BLAKE

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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BY

JENNIFER L BLAKE
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ABSTRACT

Little Faith, Big Responsibility: Reimagining the Church’s Partnership with Parents in a Child’s Spiritual Formation
Jennifer L. Blake
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2017

The goal of this ministry focus paper is to examine the role of the institutional church and that of parents in the spiritual formation of children. This paper explores new ways in which the church can collaborate with parents to better accomplish this important task. It also seeks new ways to reimagine this partnership and how the church can provide parents with the tools and resources needed to confidently reclaim the role of primary faith nurturers.

This project seeks to present the importance of parents and the home as the primary source for a child’s spiritual formation. Child development theorists have shown that caregivers are the greatest influences on a child’s early development in all aspects of life. There is a small window of opportunity to lay a foundation of faith that a child will continue to build upon for his or her entire life and the home is where that takes place. Church was once the focus of the American family and an important element in a child’s spiritual formation, but fails to ring true in the twenty-first century. Even when a family makes attending church a priority, formal religious teaching encompasses only one hour of a child’s 168-hour week, not enough to make a significant impact on his or her spiritual formation.

This paper contains three major sections. Part one looks at the need for parent support and education within the institutional church. Part two establishes the theological foundations of this project. Part three engages a conversation to create a plan of action. Reimagining the partnership between church and home begins with the support of the community of faith, while developing resources and tools to better equip parents in their God-given vocation as primary faith nurturers of their children.

Content Reader: Anthony Jones, PhD
Words: 291
To my parents, Don and Nancy Blake, who laid a firm foundation of faith and taught me to always follow where God leads.
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PART ONE

THE NEED
INTRODUCTION

A little over two years ago, I stood in front of my congregation along with baby Nathan and his parents, Jeff and Kristin, as they publicly expressed their desire for Nathan to be baptized and dedicated to God. As they held their precious child I asked them a question, “Do you promise, with God's help and in partnership with your church family, to provide Nathan a Christian home full of love and peace, to raise him in the truth of our Lord's instruction and discipline, and to encourage him to one day trust Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior?”¹ That morning, without hesitation, Jeff and Kristin answered, “We do.”

The role a parent plays in a child’s development is immeasurable. All aspects of a child’s growth and development are first fashioned within the context of family. In the best of circumstances, a child is born to parents who love and care for him or her.² That child is then brought into a home with an extended family who also encompasses that same love and care. Through this loving home, a child begins to learn about the world around them, forming and shaping their worldview. It is within the context of family, with the child’s parent as the primary educator and nurturer, where life’s greatest lessons are learned. A parent has the highest vocation—a calling from God—to care for their child’s physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Those who care for children

¹ Adapted from Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Common Worship (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

² For the purposes of this paper I am using the term “parent” to be defined as one who loves and cares for a child. The reality of the term parent, both inside and outside the confines of the church, is that there is no longer a set definition but many types of parents: traditional two parent, single parent, grandparent, same gendered two parent, adoptive parent, foster parent, or other type of caregiver. No matter the type of parent a child has, the emphasis and importance of the role the caregiver takes is the same: one who cares for the wellbeing, care, and nurture of the child.
have the responsibility to share their beliefs and spiritual values and equip their child with
the tools of faith that will continue with him or her throughout life.

On that Sunday morning after Jeff and Kristen professed their faith in Jesus and
their desire to raise baby Nathan in the faith, I took him in my arms and walked over to
the baptismal font. As I gently poured water onto Nathan’s forehead, I repeated the
promise his parents had just made. “Nathan, with this water you are claimed as a beloved
Child of God, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. You are loved
by your family who promised to share with you the love of Christ. As you continue to
grow and learn and live, may you never know a day without the love of God present in
your life.”

As I cradled baby Nathan in my arms, his forehead still wet with the waters of
baptism, all eyes were focused on that precious baby boy. I then proceeded to walk up
and down the aisle of the church, introducing him to his new family, the members of our
little church. As we arrived about half way up the aisle, I stopped and addressed the
congregation, reminding them of the old proverb that says, “It takes a village to raise a
child,” and the promise they were about to make to pray for Nathan as well as encourage
and support Jeff and Kristin as they set out on the task to raise Nathan in the faith.

That day a big promise was made by the church family. It was a promise that is
difficult, but not impossible, to keep. The people, who were gathered as witnesses, made
a pledge to walk beside Nathan and his parents and support Jeff and Kristin in their role
as primary faith nurturers of the child God entrusted in their care. Since that day, the
church has watched little Nathan grow week after week. Some have been his Sunday
school teachers teaching him about Jesus’ love, while others continue to pray for him
daily. But, the promise made to Jeff and Kristen, to love and support these two parents as they seek to raise their son, has not been kept. Jeff and Kristin continue to question their parenting skills and the various parenting choices they face. They have huge concerns for Nathan’s development and the kind of person he will become. They also struggle with their own faith, including what they believe and even who God is. This leads them to question how they can confidently convey that faith to their precious child. They need help but cannot seem to even formulate the questions they need to ask to find the answers.

Jeff and Kristin are not alone in their struggles and questions; they are joined by other parents who are sitting in the pew. The day-to-day task of raising a child is not an easy one. There are so many factors, elements, and decisions to be weighed and evaluated in child rearing that some parents completely put laying a spiritual foundation aside to place all the importance on their children’s education or extracurricular activities. Other parents think it is enough to bring their child to church to participate in one hour of Sunday school every week or so, as their busy schedule allows, and may occasionally talk about matters of faith at home. Still other parents have completely abdicated their responsibility in the spiritual development of their child by giving all responsibility and influence to the professionals at church to instill faith. By doing so, they have also chosen not to reinforce what is being taught at church in the rest of their daily life as a family. On the other hand, other parents desire to lay a great faith foundation for their children. A few of these parents lack the tools and confidence in their own faith to feel certain of their skills and abilities in sharing their faith with their children. They feel helpless and do not even know where to begin, so they stumble and fail and eventually give up. Only a
handful of parents who take their role very seriously feel confident in their own faith and their ability to pass it on. They pursue every opportunity to live out their faith and instill it into the life of their child.

In addition to the parents’ confidence or lack thereof in spiritual matters, also comes the stress of church itself and the commitment level of families. For some parents, there is an unrealistic expectation of perfect behavior and the perception that squirmy children are not welcome in worship. This can be a major source of stress on parents that can result in a negative experience of church for the entire family. Still another stress on a parent is juggling the family schedule and feeling guilty when church does not make the calendar or disappointment when other sacrifices have to be made so that church does make the calendar. Reality is church can be a very busy place and sometimes as well-meaning church staff, we create events that add more stress to the already fragile system.

The spectrum of parental commitment to the spiritual formation of children is wide, but the questions we as church leaders face when it comes to parents and the spirituality of children still exist. The church needs to figure out how it can support these parents in their own various stages of faith and ability as well as in their efforts to instill faith in their child. The church needs to determine how to convey the message that faith formation does not happen only within the four walls of the church building, but in partnership with the home as the primary place a child’s faith foundation is established. Then, the church needs to work to provide the tools which will help parents gain confidence in their role as the primary faith nurturers as they seek to lay a solid faith foundation for their son or daughter.
This paper seeks to answer those questions, not as a professional who has all the answers, but as one who takes very seriously the promise made at baptism to “love and support a child’s parents as they seek to be faithful to God, to walk beside them, pray for them and encourage them in their role as parent.” I strongly believe it is our obligation as church leaders to encourage parents in their vocation as spiritual nurturers, equip them with the tools for the job, and walk beside them through the entire journey. It is time for the church to begin to reimagine our partnership with parents in the spiritual nurture of children.

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3 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Common Worship.
CHAPTER 1

MINISTRY CHALLENGE

In Hebrew, the name Nathan translates to “gift,” and Baby Nathan is truly a gift to those around him. After many years of infertility and heartache with several fertility treatments ending in failure, Jeff and Kristin finally became pregnant. As they made preparations for the arrival of their little boy, they began to shape Nathan’s worldview. The nursery had a whimsical Noah’s ark theme filled with playful animals and storybooks of Noah and his journey and Jesus and his friends. Once the baby they had hoped and prayed for finally arrived, together with extended family and friends, Jeff and Kristin brought their precious child home.

Home is the center of a child’s life and a valuable tool in his or her development. As children begin life, they are entrusted into a family who is to love and care for their needs and teach them as they grow. It is also within the confines of family that children begin to learn and explore the world around them.¹

¹ The perspectives presented in this paper are of the ideal environment for a child’s development and spiritual growth. There are many circumstances which can negatively influence a child’s spiritual growth, for example: abuse, abandonment, criticism, chronic illness, or even the death of a loved one. The conclusions in this project are constructed under the understanding that when children are nurtured in a loving environment, given freedom to explore the world within the safety of family, and encouraged in their creativity and imagination, faith is able to take root.
To begin this journey of reimagining what the partnership between the church and home could be in the nurturing of a child’s spiritual formation, it is important to begin with a few of the essential blocks on which we will build. First is to define spirituality and, in particular, spiritual formation when it comes to children. Second is to examine the important role of the home and the influence a parent has on their child’s growth and development. Last is to look at the current state of the church and its role in Christian nurture and spiritual formation.

**Spiritual Formation**

Spirituality is a difficult word to define. Add to that the word “Christian” and the difficulty increases exponentially. Many books and articles have been written attempting to put into words what for most people has been categorized as experiential and beyond description. Since the late 1980s to early 1990s, there has been a growing interest in the concept of spirituality, including that of children’s spirituality. In an attempt to define children’s Christian spirituality, The Society for Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives gives the following working definition:

Children's spirituality is the child's development of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within the context of a community of believers that fosters that relationship, as well as the child's understanding of—and response to—that relationship.²

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² Holly Catterton Allen, ed., *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publicatons, 2008), 11. The Society for Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives is an educational organization exploring factors that contribute to the spiritual development of children, through examining biblical-theological perspectives, empirical research, pedagogical approaches and children's issues related to social justice. This definition was a collaborative effort between psychologists, sociologists, and Christian educators, written as a starting point for discussions about children’s spirituality at the 2006 Children’s Spirituality Conference.
Studies in children’s spirituality are built on the foundations of earlier theorists in human development such as cognitive development theorist Jean Piaget, social development theorist Erik Erikson, moral development theorist Lawrence Kohlberg, and more recently, faith development theorist James Fowler. These theorists have contributed greatly to the understanding of the various stages of a child’s development and the role of the community in how a child develops both positively and negatively. When these theories of development are combined, they bring about a better understanding of the vastness of human development which in turn has an impact on a child’s spiritual formation.

Spiritual formation is best understood as the practice and participation in faith and Christian life. “It is the process of transformation and formation, of conversion and nurture. It is a natural process that is intentional.”\(^3\) Therefore, a child’s spiritual formation is an ongoing developmental process of building a relationship with the three persons of the Trinity, nurtured within the community of faith. As we look at a child’s spiritual formation, there are two main influences: first and foremost is the family and second is the church.

**The Role of the Home**

Everyone is born or adopted into a family and brought into a home that provides the context for his or her daily life, his or her relationships and the development of his or her worldview during formative years. Child development theorists have shown that the

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greatest influence on a child’s development is the caregiver. As a child enters the world, he or she is completely dependent on others to care for every physical, emotional, and spiritual need. Children ultimately have no say in how their young lives are governed, how they are cared for, or how they are loved. A child’s parent is the primary influence on basic aspects of social, emotional, and cognitive development. They also help to shape the moral and spiritual growth that takes place in normal and healthy growth and human development. From birth, a child begins to discover surroundings, engage with their world, and grow as a person. An infant first learns by mirroring what they see, and as he or she continues to grow and develop, they become an imitator of life. At around two years of age, they begin to develop an awareness of right from wrong, gain feelings of independence, and acquire a sense of trust. It is also during this stage of development that children begin to formulate an image and understanding of God.

According to developmental theorist Erik Erikson’s stages of development, one of the crucial stages in a person’s growth and development occurs in the stage he calls “trust versus mistrust.” It is during infancy and toddlerhood, when a child is completely dependent upon their caregiver, that they develop a sense of trust which will accompany them throughout life. Trust is born in knowing that their most basic needs will be met consistently and lovingly. Young children depend upon those who care for their every need. A healthy sense of dependency is foundational for a child’s spiritual formation knowing that God, like his or her parents, are always present and care for their every need.

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Young children also possess an innocence, trust, and willingness to submit when it comes to interacting with their parents. As a child continues to develop from a toddler to preschool age, they begin to develop a sense of autonomy as they explore their world while still maintaining a close bond with their parents. When this closeness is demonstrated and affection is reciprocated, a child is able to develop a stronger sense of self. There is a sense of intimacy that comes with a touch or an embrace. It is through the embrace of his or her parent that a young child gains a sense of belonging and finds connection with the other. As a child grows older and continues to explore their world, they will still seek safety in the form of their parents and will continue to submit to their authority, but the child will continue to test the boundaries of the parental relationship. In this stage of development, which Erikson calls “autonomy versus shame and doubt,” a child still possesses an eagerness to obey as they feel a sense of freedom and safety to investigate their surroundings. There is an underlying sense of connectedness and a continual need for affection from a child’s parent to foster a healthy development. A posture of autonomy when it comes to a parent-child relationship is also a posture of faith as a child learns about God.

James Fowler, a professor of theology and human development, applied human development theories to a person’s faith formation. According to Fowler’s Stages of Faith, infants and toddlers are in the midst of developing faith through trust, courage, hope, and love. Joy is found through the positive interactions a child has with their

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5 Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 251-254.

caregiver. These precious moments of bonding are what help lay a foundation for later faith development. As language skills are developed, between ages three to six, a child begins to express verbally their thoughts, and imagination and creativity begin to emerge through this self-expression. As a child advances further into the next stage of development and begins to foster a deeper understanding of concrete and abstract thought, symbols and rituals become important as a deeper understanding of faith begins to materialize. There is power in telling the faith story as children begin to hear and understand their place in God’s bigger story. Imagination begins to take root as a child internalizes the words and images of faith.

A metamorphosis occurs as a child grows physically, emotionally and spiritually, and the ideal environment for that growth and change to take place is in the home. The home is the primary place where a child spends their first few formative years of development, and important foundations are laid with their parents. Home is the place where a child develops a sense of trust and a sense of autonomy. It is within the walls of their home, within the love and affection of their family, that boundaries are tested.

Parents have a great responsibility to guide and nurture a child through all aspects of life. As Marjorie Thompson, a Presbyterian pastor and educator, writes:

It seems reasonable to conclude that the family of origin is the first place of spiritual formation. For better or worse, whether intentionally or haphazardly, it is within these ‘given’ families that, as children, our hearts and minds are fundamentally formed. Here we develop a sense of identity and heritage; here we learn patterns of relating intimately with others; here we hammer out our values, ideals and habits day by day and year by year.

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7 Ibid., 122-134.

The Role of the Church

Since the birth of the Sunday school movement in the late 1700s, the Church has gradually taken on the role of educating children in the fundamentals of the Christian faith. These fundamentals are most often taught to children as they listen to the Bible story and the moral lesson that accompanies it, memorize key Bible verses and rote prayers, all while participating in a game or craft activity that reinforces the lesson. Over the years, the method of Christian education has changed, but not the educational model used: a teacher imparting knowledge to the student. The result of this type of educational experience, taking place in classrooms on Sunday mornings, is not often teaching for spiritual formation. Teaching for formation is best achieved through sharing life together: recounting the highs and lows of the day, seeking out teachable moments, taking time to pray together and incorporating aspects of faith into everyday life. The typical one hour a week spent in the Sunday school classroom is not enough time for cultivating faith, though it helps to develop a foundation on which faith can be built.

In recent years, Christian education, specifically children’s ministry, has become increasingly more about making church fun by increasing the entertainment factor rather than focusing on long-term spiritual formation. The reality is volunteers, who are most often the ones doing the teaching on Sunday mornings, do the best they can with the resources they are given and the abilities they possess. Paid professional church staff take their jobs seriously, but can only do so much with the time and resources allotted.

Though the church does seek to provide educational opportunities for the entire family on a typical Sunday morning, it is fragmented at best. As the family arrives on campus, everyone goes their separate ways to the appropriate church program geared just
for them. Children head to their Sunday school class, teenagers go to the youth room, and the parents proceed to the various educational opportunities offered for adults prior to worship. Following the education hour, the family is reunited briefly as they enter into the sanctuary for worship. The teenagers splinter off and head to the balcony where they sit with their peers. The younger children sit with their parents until the children’s moment in the service when they come forward for an object lesson then head back to the Sunday school building for age-appropriate activities for the remainder of the worship hour. All of this results in limited family interaction at church on a typical Sunday morning, which continues to fragment the faith formation process. Each age group is learning something different, and therefore, what is gleaned at church is not necessarily being reinforced outside of Sunday morning.

“The Church,” according to Edward Hays, “is the communal church while he calls the Christian home the domestic church.” He writes, “The first altar around which primitive people worshipped was the hearth, whose open fires burned in the center of the home.” Home is the place where children learn and their worldview is shaped. The home, or domestic church, is not designed to exist on its own nor is the communal church meant to be self-sufficient. The home by design is a sacred community, and the church, also by design, is to support that community as it gathers together for the purpose of teaching and encouraging one another in the faith. Both the domestic church and the communal church are necessary as each is dependent on the other for continual spiritual growth and development. Marjorie Thompson writes,

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To function “as church” in the home does not mean taking on all the functions of a congregation. Rather it means living together in ways that express Christian faith and promote spiritual growth within the context of domestic life. The family is not a substitute for the congregation but a vital part of its larger structure. Therefore the family cannot afford to ignore the worship, teaching, and fellowship of the church any more than the church can afford to ignore the spiritually formative impact of the family. Each needs the other to fulfill its particular mission in a complementary manner.10

Somewhere along the generations, the centrality of the home and the organic nature that occurs in the spiritual formation of children switched to that of solely the church where professionals have taken on this role.

A gap in spiritual formation occurs between the church and home. While children learn the basics of the biblical concepts, ideas, and moral teachings within the context of the church, the application of faith into how it is lived out in the real world is often missing. A deficit exists in the way the church provides opportunities for family spiritual formation. Ultimately, parents are lacking the tools they need to reinforce what their children are being taught at church, while at the same time churches are missing the opportunity to equip them for the task.

Children are naturally inquisitive and full of difficult theological questions. Sophia asked her mother one Sunday after singing a song in Sunday school, “If God has the whole world in his hands, where are his hands holding on to the world?” Her mother, Angela, not knowing how to answer such a question simply dismissed her deep theological question leaving Sophia to think questions about faith were not important. In the meantime, Angela asked me Sophia’s question. We laughed about all the possible answers, but in the end decided that the question should be given back to Sophia to

10 Thompson, *Family: The Forming Center*, 137.
answer. So, a few weeks later, when she sang that simple song in Sunday school, Sophia asked the question again, this time demanding an answer. Angela’s reply, very different from the last time, “That is a very good question. Where do you think God’s hands might be?” Sophia, thought a moment and joyfully responded, “In the water of course! But, do you think the sharks bite him?” This simple conversation between Sophia and her mother opened the door for faith to enter their everyday lives and a few months later when Sophia asked, “Why did God give Grandma cancer?” the family was able to support each other with the tough questions, not having the answers, but knowing God was bigger, and God was with them always.

The church’s role in the spiritual formation of children is to teach the what of faith. In the classroom children are taught the fundamentals of what the Bible says, what our theological traditions teach, and even what it means to be a Christian. However, it is the continued spiritual formation that occurs outside of the walls of the institution in the context of the family that teaches children the how and why of faith. As a family goes through life together, members work out how to incorporate what they have learned at church into their daily lives. Through this process of living out their faith as a family, children begin to learn why faith matters, how faith can make a difference in their lives, and even how to practice their faith. It is through “shared experience, storytelling, celebration, action, and reflection between and among ‘faithing’ selves within a community of faith that best helps us understand how faith is transmitted, expanded, and sustained.”

11 Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 89.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS
CHAPTER 2
A LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past few decades, the topic of the spiritual formation of children has generated various resources for both parents and church leaders. Through the development of this project, several of these resources have provided insight and guidance to the author. This chapter explores some of the literature in support of the project thesis.


Statistics have shown that there has been a shift in American family life, more specifically childrearing responsibilities, as the maternal employment rate has increased over the years. The image popular culture once portrayed of a mother was as a cheery, devoted stay-at-home mom like Mrs. Nelson from the television series _Ozzy & Harriet_. Now that image has shifted to the frantic, sleepless, overworked and underpaid mother like Sue Heck from the television series _The Middle_. The book _The Changing Rhythms of American Family Life_ seeks to examine some of the trends in parenting, the shift of mothers into the work force, and the quality and quantity of family time over several
decades from 1965 to 2000. Suzanne Bianchi, a sociologist, and her colleagues used information gathered from a time diary study in the United States in 1965, 1975, 1985, and again 1995 to track sociological trends in family life. They also utilized a number of other data sources, such as census materials, labor force trends, the Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and telephone interviews conducted by the National Survey of Parents.

The major focus of this book is on the shifting dynamics in the family, particularly in regards to children, with increased maternal employment outside the home. The authors sought to dispel the myth that with the increase of time a mother was now spending working outside of the home, children were being deprived of time with their family. By looking at the empirical data, Bianchi and her associates were able to show that time spent with children has not in fact decreased over the years. In comparing the data from 1965 to 2000, a major shift occurred in the role a father takes in the life of the family. In a dual-income home, as a mother’s time in the workplace increased, a father’s time of nonmarket work in the home also increased.¹ This nonmarket work includes household chores as well as childcare responsibilities. In 1965 and 1975, a father averaged a little over two-and-a-half hours per week in childcare activities. By 2000, that number almost tripled to seven hours per week of sole responsibility of child care time with no other secondary activities taking place, such as watching television. To put this number in perspective, between the years of 1965-1975, a mother’s time dedicated to

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child care was an average of ten-and a half hours per week which only increased to thirteen hours per week by the year 2000.²

Another trend of note in this study is the mindful decision of women and men to postpone childbearing. According to their research, more and more married couples are choosing to have children once they have completed college and are financially secure or have achieved a level of success in the workplace. This shift, in children being “planned” versus parenthood “just happening” in the later years of this study, has also shown an emphasis on a child-focused family where both parents take a more active and hands-on role in all aspects of family life.³ Some who have studied the trend of more mothers in the workforce conclude that this phenomenon causes a negative impact on children. This sociological study showed that though a parent’s work time has increased, time spent with children has increased as well.⁴ Much of the time adjustment comes from less time mothers spent on household chores and an increase in parents’ leisure time spent with children creating quality family time.

The findings in this book were helpful in the overall scheme of assessing how the American family manages time. With the increase in the cost of living and the need for more and more families to have both parents working outside the home, it is important to recognize that family time is not being sacrificed. Families recognize the value of spending time together for all members of the family. Even though family structures are shifting and changing, the bonds that hold children and parents together remain strong.

² Ibid., 63.
³ Ibid., 4.
⁴ Ibid., 85.
Time is valuable, and time together as a family is limited. The Church must take this into consideration.

“How American Children Spend Their Time” by Sandra Hofferth and John F. Sandberg

This article published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* in May of 2001 used the research data available from the 1997 Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and sought to examine how American children under age thirteen spent their time. The study examined 2,380 households which contained 3,563 children over a period of eight months. It took into account the various factors of a child’s life affected by his or her parents’ characteristics and decisions. Such factors include whether the child came from a married or single-parent home, a parent’s employment status, as well as the number of children in a child’s family. These factors not only have a great influence on a child’s life circumstances, growth and development, but ultimately have an impact on how a child spends their time.

This article considered four key areas of a child’s activities to determine where his or her time was spent. The first area was the amount of time spent in school. The age of a particular child determined whether he or she spent time in a formal school setting or a daycare or after-school care program. In 1997, the American child spent approximately twenty-one hours per week in school and another four-and-a half hours in daycare or a before or after-school program.²

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The second area of focus was the amount of discretionary time in free play versus organized activities. These discretionary activities include the broad category of play, indoor and outdoor group activities, as well as solo activities like computer games and surfing the internet. Some of the more structured activities included sports programs, church sponsored events, as well as participation in non-church related youth clubs and organizations. This discretionary time amounted to fifty-one hours of a child’s week. More specifically, fifteen hours were spent on unstructured play, twelve hours watching television, and thirty minutes spent on outside play. While a child’s structured activities accounted for eight hours and forty-five minutes per week, four hours and forty-five minutes were spent in organized team sports, one hour at church, and three hours in other organized groups.7

The third focus area was on out-of-school learning activities such as studying, reading, and watching television. Times varied in this area depending on the specific age of the child. Study time for children from ages six to eight showed to be two hours, while children from nine to twelve years old studied for three hours and forty-five minutes. When it came to the amount of time spent reading, there was very little differentiation. The study showed one hour total regardless of age, as young children were read to by a parent while older children read to themselves. For the purposes of this study, television was seen as both a learning and a free-time activity depending on what the child was

7 Ibid., 301.
watching. In 1997, the average child watched twelve hours of television a week, slightly less than two hours per day.\footnote{Hoffirth, “How American Children Spend Their Time,” 301.}

The final area of focus was family activities which included household work, conversations, and family mealtime. Household work, which also included accompanying parents shopping, accounted for five and a half hours per week. Time spent eating meals together in 1997 equaled about nine hours per week, while family conversations averaged about forty-five minutes. The remainder of a child’s time, which did not fit into the above categories, included sleep which occupied seventy-four and a half hours per week and eight hours was spent on personal care.\footnote{Ibid.}

A child’s division of time is also seen in light of the caregiver’s presence in the child’s life. In a home where the mother is working, whether a single-parent or dual-income household, a child is likely to spend more time in a daycare or after-school extended care situation than a child who has a stay-at-home mother. Also, children from a higher income bracket are more likely to spend more time in daycare because of the family’s greater ability to afford private programs.\footnote{Ibid., 302.} There was also a difference in structured free time activities between children with a stay-at-home parent and working parents. Children with a stay-at-home parent spent more time participating in sports and organized group activities.\footnote{Ibid., 304.}

When it came to the subject of faith or church, the amount of time a child spent at
church, one hour per week, did not change in terms of family structure or economic status. The one factor that made a difference in the amount of time a child would spend at church was that of ethnicity or age of parents. Children of African American families and families with an older head-of-house spent more time in church. One note of interest offered by Hofferth reads, “Although busy schedules are part of the story, [lack of church attendance] is not simply a matter of having a busy schedule because children in families with no breadwinner or with a non-employed female head also spent less time in church.”

Family time is perhaps the biggest influence on a child’s overall achievement in life, though it accounts for the smallest amount of time spent—only fifteen of the 168 hours in a week. The study concluded children who spent more time in family activities had fewer behavioral problems. Those children who ate meals with their family and received the right amount of sleep had lower levels of behavioral problems. Overall, children need a balance of out-of-home and home-based activities, but the most beneficial time in a child’s development is time at home and with family.

“A Historical Introduction to Religious Education” by Marvin Taylor in

Religious Education: A Comprehensive Survey.

In the first chapter of Religious Education: A Comprehensive Survey, Marvin Taylor gives a brief overview of the progression of religious education since the beginnings of the Christian Church. Though this article is only the beginning of a lengthy

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12 Ibid., 303-304.
13 Ibid., 306.
volume on the subject of religious education, it puts into perspective the major eras in the
history of the Church and details the educational goals that developed. Taylor begins,
“Religion and education are inevitable companions of each other; for wherever any
religion exists as a living, vital experience, its adherents wish to guarantee its
perpetuation. Education is the means most often utilized for initiating both the mature
convert and the young into the practices and beliefs of the religious fellowship.”14

The story of religious or Christian education was not something new that began at
the dawn of Christendom. Rather it was transformed from what was already familiar to
the early Christians with the teachings and customs of Judaism. Followers of Jesus would
have included three main emphases from their Jewish educational heritage.15 The first is
the importance of the Torah, a term meaning both instruction and the scriptures. The
teaching of the Holy Scripture was central to the worship life in the synagogue. The
second inherited trait was the essential role of the family in religious education. Arising
from a nomadic culture, the family was central, and parents had the responsibility of
being the first teachers of their children. The family was almost exclusively the agency of
religious education in the Jewish culture. It was not until the establishment of the
synagogue that this role shifted. This sense of family responsibility was no doubt
engrained into the customs of the early church. The final educational emphasis was the
emergence of formal schools for teaching the essentials of the faith. “Thus, early


15 Ibid.
followers of Jesus possessed this full inheritance of an educationally-advanced religion as they carried on their ever-expanding witness to the gospel.”\textsuperscript{16}

As Christianity began to develop and build upon its Jewish heritage, the need for further teaching and instruction arose as pagan converts began to join the church. As the influence of Greek thought and culture became more prominent, Catechetical schools were established in Alexandria around A.D. 179.\textsuperscript{17} These instructional institutions became places where secular subjects were taught alongside Christian theology giving young Christian scholars the opportunity to explore secular truths from a Christian viewpoint.

The Medieval Church emerged following the fall of Rome and became the sole institution with continuing influence. During this era, worship became the key medium of education. Apart from the occasional mention of the role of parents in teaching their children, daily Mass, praying the hours, and attending occasional mystery plays based on great themes of Christian tradition were almost the sole education received by people through the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{18} Formal education was reserved primarily for training select young men for the religious life.

Simultaneous with the growth of universities toward the end of the Middle Ages was the rise of the Renaissance movement which produced a reawakened interest in the ideas, values, and literature of the Greco-Roman world. According to Taylor, “No single facet of this movement was more important to Christianity than the rediscovery of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 14.
\end{flushleft}
ancient literature, for the Latin of the Vulgate was set aside, and the study of the original biblical languages produced a vast new interest in scripture for specifically religious reasons.\textsuperscript{19} This was the beginning of the reformation as scripture was made accessible to the people once again. Martin Luther found faith after reading and studying the Bible for himself. He then translated the original scriptures into the German vernacular and established schools so people could learn to read the Bible and believe for themselves.\textsuperscript{20}

Religious education in America adopted the concept of the Sunday School, which originated in England in 1780, with the First Day Society of Philadelphia in 1790. The purpose was “to instruct the rising generation by teaching them from the Bible and from such other moral and religious books as the society might from time to time direct.”\textsuperscript{21} It was during this time that religious content was being gradually eliminated from public education, and an interest in church school grew. In 1824 the American Sunday School Union (ASSU) was formed with the primary tasks of publishing suitable materials for Sunday School, selecting biblical outlines and teaching aids, and evangelizing the nation by sending and supporting Sunday school missionaries.\textsuperscript{22} In its beginning the primary curriculum was catechisms such as the Westminster Shorter Catechism. By 1825 there was a shift in teaching methodology, and the emphasis became memorization, and effectiveness of teaching was measured quantitatively. Students were encouraged to memorize large portions of scripture, and contests and rewards were used to stimulate

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
interest. Since so much time was devoted to memorization, no class time remained to understand the meaning and value of such passages. This led to the publishing of a standard curriculum and other teaching aids on select lessons of scripture and their meanings. The ASSU became the standard for all religious education resources for curriculum writing, creating a seven-year cycle of teaching scripture in a systematic approach that would lead to a complete survey of the Bible.\textsuperscript{23}

The twentieth century saw the development of religious education as a full-scale and multi-faceted movement. It was during the 1900s that the scope of the church’s educational interest was widened, and the range of educational opportunities expanded. The uniform curriculum based on scripture began to change as new educational methods were developed. Some of these changes were age-level gradation while others were experienced based. The middle of the twentieth century also saw a new profession arise as the active local church was no longer willing to leave the program of education strictly to volunteers.\textsuperscript{24}

This brief overview of religious education Taylor presents helps create a picture of the power and authority the Church has had since its inception. The shift away from the basics of religious education, as seen in the Jewish heritage with the importance of the home as the primary place of religious teaching, is very apparent through this historical progression and into the 1960s when this book was written. Still the Church has placed

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 22.
great importance on the institution of religious education that a new profession of religious educator has emerged.


Michael Anthony and Warren Benson explore the history of Christian education with an emphasis on the future. Their goal is to present the reader with more than a history book. It gives the reader a narrower view of the significant contributions to the field of Christian education during each historical period and how that has an impact on Christian education in the twenty-first century. They state, “We desire to review the past so that the ministry leader will be better equipped to serve in his/her future ministry location, and that, having learned some valuable lessons from those who have gone before them, the readers will, in turn, be better prepared to meet the challenges that await them.”

The origins of Christian education are deeply embedded in the Hebrew customs of nurturing and education. From the beginning, as depicted by the Hebrew Scriptures, “God’s desire has always been to see His children mature in their faith and pass that faith on to subsequent generations.” Family was the center of the Hebrew culture and life itself was the content of instruction as teachable moments arose. The scriptures and stories of faith were shared by parents as required by the Mosaic Law. Even as the Hebrew people moved from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land and then into exile,

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26 Ibid., 17.
this oral tradition remained, and the home and family was the central place for teaching and passing on the faith.

Anthony and Benson lay out a proper historical overview and progression of Christian education along with the early influence Greek and Roman education and philosophy had on Christian thought and teaching methods. Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle advocated for a pedagogical or hands-on approach to the education of children. During this era, the Greeks developed educational institutions with age-appropriate teachings and highly paid instructors. In contrast for the Romans, home was the primary place where values were instilled in their children. As educational opportunities developed during the Roman era, parents still held a responsibility for all their children to learn whether taught by a tutor in the home or later in an educational institution.

Advancing thousands of years through much of church history and various manifestations of Christian education, Anthony and Benson highlight a movement that dramatically changed the shape of Christian Education. In 1781, Robert Raikes Jr., an influential newspaper publisher in Gloucester, England, wanted to find a way to use his influence in the community to draw attention to the plight of those in desperate need of assistance. He set out to address the needs of the juvenile delinquents who were running wild on the streets after work and specifically on Sundays, their one day off per week. Raikes was not a trained theologian nor were the women he recruited to teach these street

27 Ibid., 72.
28 Ibid., 92.
29 Ibid., 261.
children. They were simply laypeople who possessed a love for children in need and a desire to see the Great Commission fulfilled in their own neighborhoods. The first priority of these Sunday schools was to teach basic reading and writing skills using the Bible as a textbook which then led to sharing of the gospel. Raikes’ Sunday school had two distinct purposes: “first, to instruct the children in the basic educational aims of reading, writing, morals and manners; and second, to evangelize those who were in desperate need of new life within. Transformation of morals, values, and ethics came about as a natural consequence of spiritual conversion.”30

As the Sunday school movement crossed the Atlantic, it began to take many different forms from that of mandatory teaching of children in common schools in New England, to the education of slaves in Virginia.31 As time went on a unified effort for religious education was created, and as Anthony and Benson note,

During the colonial period there can be found a changing view in the role of family in the Christian upbringing of children. Colonial Americans had a deep conviction about the role of the family and its foundation in the religious instruction of children. In time, however, the church and the state took over the family and assumed the role of chief religious instructor for the parents.32

A significant person Anthony highlights in the modern era of Christian education is Horace Bushnell. Bushnell strongly believed a child should grow up a Christian and never know anything different. It was his desire that Christian parents would raise their children in this manner. For Bushnell, the home played a significant role in the faith and lives of children. “It came through the nurture process that children were taught to

30 Ibid., 264.
31 Ibid., 292-297.
32 Ibid., 310.
respond to God in faith and love to do His will. As a result of this type of training in the home, the child would never have to experience a radical conversion of any kind.”

Henrietta Mears is another person who had a significant role in the Sunday school movement. Mears saw great value in scripture and the importance of integrating it into one’s life. At the young age of eleven she began her teaching ministry leading an in-depth Bible study for new believers. As a gifted teacher, organizer, and administrator, she wrote her own curriculum and founded Gospel Light Publications. Not only was Mears influential in writing Bible-based curricula, but she also was convinced of the benefits of Christian camping and helped to establish the Forest Home Camp and Conference Center in Southern California, a program that encourages faith development in children and families.

It is important to be familiarized with the history and progression of Christian education to know how to proceed into the future. Anthony and Benson do a fine job of painting the history of Christian education as well as ending each section with how this affects what the Church does today. The need for the Church to be mindful of the past is often overlooked and, as seen clearly through this book, the past is so often repeated.

Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children

by Elizabeth Caldwell.

In her experience as a minister, Elizabeth Caldwell has tended to many questions

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33 Ibid., 324.
34 Ibid., 376.
35 Ibid., 367-368.
and concerns parents raise about their children and faith. She seeks to answer these questions as well as offer resources for faith to be taught both at home and at church. She believes that parents should partner with the congregation as they seek to nurture their child’s spiritual development. “It is essential that faith communities support people in the articulation of their belief systems [and] imperative that congregations support and educate adults in ways that will enable them to set tables of faith in their homes.”

The premise of *Making a Home for Faith* is for parents, through the support of the church community, to create time for rituals and practices in their homes that nurture and sustain faith as a child grows and eventually leaves home.

The important task of faith educators and trained professionals within the church, according to Caldwell, is to help adults grow into their role as primary faith educators as they parent for faith expression. “The role assumes a certain amount of knowledge, a commitment to faithful Christian living in the world, and most important, a way of being in the presence of God.”

Parents take this task to heart, and they often realize it is not an easy one. It is an important endeavor of the community of faith to walk beside parents and better equip them for their journey. Parenting for faith expression is intentional parenting, seeking nurture not results. Caldwell gives examples of various Christian practices that can take the family beyond just a table blessing. Such practices include observing the Sabbath as a day of rest together, seeking teachable moments of faith, taking opportunities to serve together, sharing the story of faith through reading scripture,

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37 Ibid., 13.
praying together often, observing holy days and making holidays into holy days together.\textsuperscript{38}

It is only in understanding the partnership of the home and the church that parents can truly begin to understand their role in nurturing faith in their child. Both elements are essential as one cannot suffice alone. Caldwell states, “A faithful ecology is formed in both contexts where faith, hope, and love are practiced. We learn to speak by being spoken to, and later we learn the rules of grammar. We learn about love by being loved. We learn about God by singing our faith, practicing our faith, praying our faith, and being faithful.”\textsuperscript{39}

**Family: The Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation**

by Marjorie J. Thompson

Marjorie Thompson is an ordained Presbyterian minister who serves as the director of Pathways Center for Christian Spirituality at the Upper Room in Nashville, Tennessee. In her book, *Family: The Forming Center*, she seeks to lay out the important role of family in the spiritual formation of children, while at the same time pairing the church with the family as an integral partnership in spiritual nurture and formation.

Thompson begins with the premise that family is at the center of our formation as human beings. We are all born or adopted into families which provide the context for our daily lives, our relationships, and the development of our worldview during our most

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., a complete list and description of faith rituals are given on page 80-95. An entire chapter is dedicated to a list of resources for the church to have on hand to better equip parents for their role as faith educators can be found on pages 97-104.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 72.
formative years. Therefore, she writes,

The family of origin is the first place of spiritual formation. For better or worse, whether intentionally or haphazardly, it is within these “given” families that, as children, our hearts and minds are fundamentally formed. Here we develop a sense of identity and heritage; here we learn patterns of relating intimately with others; here we hammer out our values, ideals and habits day by day and year by year.\(^\text{40}\)

Family is not the only influence on a person’s formation as life is full of other contexts that influence an individual’s worldview. Although this is true, the importance of family in the early stages of a child’s development includes important factors to keep in mind. The factors are not just the physical, emotional, and mental development of the child, but also the spiritual development. Family is the incubator of faith. It is within the bounds of family that values and visions are conveyed through “natural opportunities of life together, occasions that simply characterize the relational fabric of family life. And also through intentional practices which are simple but specific structures and patterns that support the spiritual potential within families of faith.”\(^\text{41}\) Thompson emphasizes, “Christian spiritual formation requires conscious choice and a responsive awareness to the presence of the risen Lord in all life.”\(^\text{42}\) Spiritual formation is intentional not accidental.

There are two distinctions that Thompson makes about the church. One is the domestic church, which is the family. “The first altar around which primitive people worshipped was the hearth, whose open fires burned in the center of the home. The next


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
altar-shrine was the family table where meals were celebrated and great events in the personal history of the family were remembered. The priests and the priestesses of these first rituals were the father and mothers of families.”

The second distinction is the gathered or communal church which is the body of Christ gathered together for teaching and encouraging one another. Somewhere in our history, there was a switch from the centrality of the domestic church and the organic development of spiritual formation to that of the communal church where professionals have taken on this role. The premise of her book is to recreate the narrative of the Christian family as a sacred community and identify the communal church as the support of that community. Each is dependent on the other as both the domestic church and the communal church are necessary for continual spiritual growth and development.

To function “as church” in the home does not mean taking on all the functions of a congregation. Rather it means living together in ways that express Christian faith and promote spiritual growth with the context of domestic life. The family is not a substitute for the congregation but a vital part of its larger structure. Therefore the family cannot afford to ignore the worship, teaching, and fellowship of the church any more than the church can afford to ignore the spiritually formative impact of the family. Each needs the other to fulfill its particular mission in a complementary manner.

Families, according to Thompson, are to be sacred shelters—a place of acceptance, nurture, and growth that empowers family members to participate in God’s ongoing acts of compassion and salvation. These sacred shelters are places where family members have opportunities to reflect God’s love through being present with one

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44 Thompson, *Family: The Forming Center*, 137.

45 Ibid., 57.
another, demonstrating unconditional acceptance, extending authentic affirmation, holding one another accountable, participating in forgiveness, and practicing hospitality. All of these characteristics combine together in the way a family relates not only to one another, but also to the world. The way we relate to one another must be identified as the quintessential spiritual discipline of family life.\textsuperscript{46}

Thompson also gives some practical spiritual practices that families can incorporate into their daily lives. They are simple and do not take much effort to integrate into the family routine. The first is prayer, which is an essential and indispensable element of the spiritual life.\textsuperscript{47} She gives some examples of the types of prayers a family may incorporate into their lives such as simple conversational prayer which is an easy type of prayer for children. This type of prayer can progress from single words or short phrases such as “holy,” “thank you,” and “bless the Lord,” into less familiar words of prayer like “alleluia” and “shalom.”\textsuperscript{48} Another form of prayer Thompson describes is a breath prayer, a simple one sentence prayer one can continue to recite, such as “Lord, show me your love” or “Be still and know that I am God.”\textsuperscript{49} Silence is another concept of prayer that is good for families to foster. “The more we turn our attention Godward, the more our eyes grow accustomed to recognizing the risen Lord in our ordinary walks of life. We develop ‘ears of the heart’ by listening for the Lord’s voice in the midst of all the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 59-68.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 80.
other voices clamoring for our attention.”

Thompson also talks about celebrating God’s presence in the home through worship and rituals. Family worship is nothing elaborate, but intentional time spent together as a family worshipping God. This can be in the form of morning and evening prayer, reading scripture together, or singing songs. For Thompson, the important aspect of family worship is to incorporate elements of faith into the everydayness of life. Seasonal rituals are another way to integrate faith into the lives of families. “A ritual is an intentional ceremony, a repeatable rite that uses symbolic acts with or without words to express and carry the meaning of our faith.” Seasonal rituals include holy days like Advent/Christmas, Lent/Easter as well as holidays like Halloween/All Saints Day and Valentine’s Day. Thompson also highlights other opportunities to celebrate unique rites of passage in the context of family. For example, a family can celebrate annually the baptism anniversary date of their child or make the rite of Confirmation a celebration in the family more akin to that of the Jewish tradition of the Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah as a rite of passage into adulthood.

Family is the forming center when it comes to a child’s spiritual development, but family is not the only factor that contributes to that developmental process. Church, the family of God, is an essential element of the family’s spiritual development. The

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50 Ibid., 82.
51 Ibid., 87.
52 Ibid., 88.
53 Ibid., 91.
54 Ibid., 97-102.
communal church, as Thompson describes it, is a crucial component of the domestic church as it offers “families the recovery of fresh, experiential language for faith. If one of the most fundamental gifts a parent can give a child is words to articulate inner experience, one of the greatest gifts a church can offer its families is faith language that is real, meaningful, and uncontrived.” 55 The conclusion Thompson reiterates is “The primary ministry of the communal church to the domestic church is to remind the family of its graced task and to support it in its essential vocation. In this way, the church sets the family free for mission instead of using up family resources for institutional maintenance.” 56


by Marcia Bunge.

In this article, Marcia Bunge highlights theological insights about parenting, children, and best practices for faith formation found in Scripture and Christian tradition. Crucial to this discussion is the understanding that church leadership needs to include parents and caregivers in their programs for children and youth because “Faith formation is a cooperative effort between home and congregation. They must continue to find ways to engage and support parents so that faith formation is part of everyday life and

55 Ibid., 142.
56 Ibid., 142-143.
Bunge highlights three theologians who spoke of the importance of the role of the home and the sacred role of parents in the spiritual nurture of children. First, John Chrysostom spoke of the family as a little church, or the place where parents should read the bible, pray, and be good examples to their children. Along with these actions within the home, being a little church also means reaching out to the poor and needy in the community. The second theologian is Martin Luther who believed that parenting was a divine calling and not something to be taken lightly. Luther taught that parents, as the priests or bishops to their children, had the responsibility to nurture their child’s faith and to help develop their child’s gifts of service to others. The third theologian Bunge highlights is Horace Bushnell, who believed that the primary agent of grace is the family and not the church. He envisioned the spiritual formation of a child as a natural process that takes place in the everyday practices and routines of daily life within the family.

Furthermore, Bunge outlines four theological perspectives of children that seek to remind us of the complexity and dignity that children possess as we strive to work within the confines of the church and ministry to children. First, children are vulnerable beings who need parents and other adults to care for their most basic needs. Second, children

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58 Ibid., 351.

59 Ibid., 352.

60 Ibid., 351.

61 Ibid., 352.
are a gift from God made in the image of God, and caring adults are to respect them, enjoy them, and be grateful for them.\textsuperscript{62} Third, children are developing beings, sinful creatures and moral agents in need of instruction and guidance which calls for adults to nurture their faith and guide them in the right direction.\textsuperscript{63} Last, children are models of faith, sources of revelation, and representatives of Jesus so adults need to listen and learn from them as well.\textsuperscript{64} Each of these theological and biblical perspectives together can play a role in strengthening the church’s religious education programs, “restructuring them in ways that not only cultivate children’s growing moral capacities and responsibilities but also honor their questions and insights.”\textsuperscript{65}

The second part of this article is filled with practical and “valuable ways of creating a space for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of children and adults.”\textsuperscript{66} Bunge writes of ten practices in total; four of which she states are familiar and are emphasized the most in the Christian tradition. First and most prominent on this list is reading and discussing the Bible with children, followed by praying and worshipping together.\textsuperscript{67} These are all important practices as a family since children learn by watching and imitating what they see. It is through participating in prayer and worship as a family that children are able to practice the ritual and to learn of its importance. Next is for adults to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 353.
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be a good example of Christian faith by seeking to live out their faith in their everyday lives, followed by the practices of participating in service projects and teaching financial responsibility. Bunge states, “Parents and other caring adults teach children much about their faith and values when they find ways to help the poor or carry out service projects together with children.”

The remaining practices on Bunge’s list for nurturing a child’s faith are less commonly taught in the church, but no less important. The list includes the activity of singing together. “Martin Luther believed that music was not simply an ornament for worship but rather a vital element of human existence, an instrument of the Holy Spirit, and a powerful vehicle for spreading the gospel.” The next activity is cultivating a reverence for creation or developing an understanding of stewardship and our role in the care of creation. Next is educational and vocational discernment which is the process of helping children develop their gifts and talents. Another lesser known practice Bunge focuses on is fostering life-giving attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and marriage. The author reasons that “Because young people are bombarded with messages about sex in the media, parents and other caring adults therefore should help children understand from an early age that taking care of their bodies is part of honoring God and God’s gifts to us.” This practice includes conversations about expressions of sexuality and presenting

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 355.
71 Ibid., 356.
72 Ibid., 357.
a Christian understanding and expectations of marriage and sexual activity. The next practice is that of listening and learning from children which occurs as adults listen to their questions, insights, and concerns, and explore those mysteries together.\textsuperscript{73} Finally, the author mentions the importance of recognizing the limits of parental authority. Parents are given authority over children, but it is limited as children are given as a gift from God and parents are instructed to care for them.\textsuperscript{74}

According to Bunge this list is incomplete. These ten practices can serve as a guide for church leaders and parents as they seek to nurture a child’s faith. There is a need for the significant adults in a child’s life to work cooperatively to nurture their faith. As the church partners with the home, these practices can serve as a reminder that “All members of the congregation, whether or not we are parents ourselves, need to work diligently on many levels and in many ways to nurture the faith of children in our midst; and, at the same time, to be open to all the ways that children themselves nourish and strengthen the spiritual formation of adults.”\textsuperscript{75}

\textit{Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives}

\textbf{by Karen Marie Yust}

Karen Marie Yust begins her book with a sense of urgency in why faith matters in the lives of adults and especially children. She states that “Faith is significant for childhood because it is the place where spiritual journeys begin and healthy young lives

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 358.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
are nurtured and sustained.”  

She then seeks to offer a new definition for faith that does not depend on particular human capabilities or beliefs. “Faith is a gift from God. It is not a set of beliefs; nor is it a well-developed cognitive understanding of all things spiritual. It is an act of grace, in which God chooses to be in relationship with humanity.”  

In presenting this new definition of faith, Yust holds that children are “recognized as fully religious beings from birth,” which changes the way we go about nurturing their spiritual lives. Faith, when seen as a gift from God, becomes the means of information and transformation in our spiritual lives.

One of the challenges presented with Yust’s definition of faith is for adults to remember that “children are already gifted with faith while also remembering that they do not automatically acquire the words and actions to express that faith.”  

The task of adults and others who care for children is to equip children to live in a bicultural world, to learn the language and actions of faith as they begin to develop the language and actions of the secular world as well. She writes, “Every time our children encounter vestiges of religious culture, their spiritual identity is clothed just a bit more in a particular garment of faith that can become a well-worn and comfortable outfit for life’s journey.”  

In the second half of the book, Yust lays out for the reader a number of spiritual practices that can enhance the spiritual life of a child. Chapter three is about the power of

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77 Ibid., 4.
78 Ibid., 7.
79 Ibid., 18.
80 Ibid., 39.
the Story.\footnote{Ibid., 42.} Central to our faith as Christians is God’s story, and when we live out Scripture, that story becomes our story. Using Walter Brueggemann’s concept of story-linking, Yust presents five ways that the biblical story can nurture a child’s spirituality. First, children receive the story through the embodiment of the faithfulness of God by adults who show a similar faithfulness to them. Second, children need to hear not only the biblical story, but also the story of their spiritual tradition. The third activity of story-linking is celebrating the story of faith through everyday celebrations as well as special holidays. Next is presenting children with opportunities to tell their spiritual stories in their own words as the story becomes familiar. Last, children need to become the story by living faithfully and engaging life in a way that puts it into an awareness of daily practice. Through story-linking children are presented with the language and practices of our faith traditions which in turn provides them with a foundation for a sustainable and intentional identity as compassionate people.\footnote{Ibid., 42-67.}

Building on the concept of giving children the language necessary to live a life of faith, chapter four focuses on the importance of immersion of children into the faith community. “Children are terrific imitators of those around them, but they cannot imitate what is outside their experience. Participating regularly in the worship life of a community of faith provides exposure to religious language that they can imitate as one aspect of learning to be bilingual.”\footnote{Ibid., 71.} Participation in corporate worship is key to children’s spiritual development. By involving children in our corporate worship, they
are exposed to the full breath of the language of faith through reading scripture, singing songs and hymns, corporate prayers, and an awareness of God in the midst of community. This foundational piece also helps children learn of its importance to their lives as they grow older.\textsuperscript{84}

Chapter five is specifically about the importance of prayer in our spiritual lives and gives numerous ways children can be engaged in this essential element of our faith. Prayer in its simplest form is conversation with a friend, which children seem to easily grasp. Along with the importance of spoken prayers, it is also essential to convey to children the role silence plays in a balanced life of prayer. This can be achieved through centering prayer or meditative prayer.\textsuperscript{85} Prayer, according to Yust, is “a shared life with God which includes our speech about events and concerns for our days, but it does not end there. In order to make room for God’s presence, we must create spaces empty of our own noise and invite God to ‘speak’ to us in the silence.”\textsuperscript{86} Whether it is in silence, in motion, or in words, prayer is a conversation with God that is essential to the nurture and continued support of our spiritual lives.

All that we do and say is being processed by children through the lens of faith that they possess as they begin to shape their worldview. Natural curiosity occurs and questions are asked, but Yust reminds us, “We need not be expert answerers in order to nurture our children’s spiritual awareness. Instead, we bring our own inquisitiveness to bear, reading books that explore our faith tradition, talking with other adults about issues

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 83-92.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 94-105.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 94.
our children raise, and researching with our children possible answers to their questions and to ours.”\textsuperscript{87}

Community plays a crucial role in a child’s spiritual nurture as they explore their world and interact with others. As parents, educators, and those who interact with children, it is imperative that we continue to provide age-appropriate language and vocabulary to nurture the spiritual lives of children. Yust makes this important foundational statement: “The spiritual world that we create for our children to inhabit, with its content of religious stories, language, and prayer, enables our children to think spiritually. It sets the stage for the cultivation of spiritual awareness.”\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 136.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 123.
Towards the end of the twentieth century and continuing into the first part of the twenty-first century, there has been a cultural shift which has influenced the American middle-class family. Advances in technology, an unstable economy, a higher cost of living, and the pursuit of living the American dream have all had an impact on shaping how the twenty-first century family is defined and how it relates.

**A Working Definition of Family**

In the 1950s the ideal family was brought to life by the invention of the television. *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* brought that ideal into the living room of the American family. In that portrait of a traditional family, which consisted of a father and a mother along with their two children, dad went off to work and mom stayed home to care for the affairs of the family while the two children went to school and played outside with friends. That ideal representation of what a family should be began to create a culture shift as American families strived to become that picture-perfect family that visited their living rooms.
By the 1980s the ideal family portrayed on television looked very different as the traditional family dynamic shifted. The model American family was now presented with options as parenting took on a variety of different roles and endless possibilities. Shows like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* depicted two successful working parents who worked outside of the home. Gender roles were also switched in television shows like *Growing Pains* that featured a mother who worked outside the home while the father remained at home to care for the children and household responsibilities. An unconventional family was also brought to viewers with successful single-working mothers on shows like *Murphy Brown* and *Who’s the Boss*. In real life, the portrait of the American middle-class family was also being altered. Two-income families were becoming necessary in order to maintain the family lifestyle as the economic recession came into effect and parenthood took on new forms. This decade also saw the beginning of the disconnect within the average middle-class American family as both parents worked outside the home, and the children became more active in organized after-school activities, widening the gap of family togetherness.

Advancing another thirty years to the 2010s, the television portrait of a typical American family has once again shifted as the ideal family is now non-traditional, unconventional, and multi-generational. Shows like *Modern Family* and *Parenthood* portray the family in a broader sense with single parents, same-gender couples, divorced, and remarried couples. Along with the change in the makeup of the family unit, these television families portray relationships with the extended family as normal: parents relating with their grown children who in turn are struggling with their own marital relationships, raising children, and dealing with their aging parents. Other television
families, such as *Malcom in the Middle*, depict children as smart, cunning, and in control of the family while painting the parents as bumbling fools. The portrait of the American family in this decade of television is anything but typical.

It is very evident that pop culture has created a changing narrative that not only shapes the working definition of family through television and movies, but also has continued to influence the way a family interacts and relates to one another. Over the decades, the ideal middle-class American family has evolved from the traditional family of four living their ordinary happy life, to an unconventional family consisting of different configurations of parents or family members who are related to one another in varied ways. This atypical television family struggles to live life together under one roof in a crazy fast-paced world. It is no longer easy to get a distinct picture of what a family should look like or a clear definition of family based on what is presented on the screen.

Family, according to the common dictionary definition, is “a basic social unit consisting of parents and their children, considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not.”\(^1\) The traditional family, also known as the nuclear family, was the ideal family portrayed on television in the 1950s consisting of a father, a mother and their two children. While this definition is a good starting point, it is in many ways incomplete as modern family structures have changed over the years. A second dictionary entry defines family as “a social unit consisting of one or more adults together with the children they

care for.” This definition encompasses the vast majority of modern and postmodern family units in the twenty-first century.

In today’s postmodern American culture, families take on a variety of forms as the traditional 1950s nuclear family is no longer the majority. According to the 2010 United States Census, fewer than half of all households (48 percent) were husband-wife households. This is the first time that husband-wife families have fallen below 50 percent of all households in the United States since the data on families was first tabulated in 1940. All other forms of family households, according to the census, have seen a steady percentage increase since 1990. Along with the traditional family, consisting of a father and mother, are families with same-gender parents, single-parent families, and multi-generational families where children are being raised by grandparents or other family members who are not their biological parents.

Not only is there a transformation in the parental makeup of the family, there is also a shift in the traditional composition of the family. What was once the standard family model with two parents and their biological children is no longer the norm, as non-traditional families have continued to emerge. Blended families, formed when two households have been merged together by marriage or co-habitation of two adults, are on the rise. According to the census, they have increase by 40 percent as the divorce rate has

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2 Ibid.


4 Ibid., 2.
continued to increase over the past decade. With the increase in the divorce rate among American families comes the creation of alternative family arrangements as separated parents share custody of their children, consequently creating two separate family systems in which children must now function. Another unconventional family unit includes foster and adoptive families. These family units consist of parents, either individuals or couples, who chose to open their homes to children who are in need of a safe and loving environment. Foster families provide a temporary home for these children while they are in transition between returning to their biological family or until they are found a permanent home. Some foster families become a permanent family for children as they are adopted by their foster parents, and these non-biological children are welcomed into the family system.

So much of how one thinks about family is based upon one’s own experience, family background, and family of origin. It is difficult to come up with one image or definition that truly fits the middle-class American family, as families come in every combination imaginable. Perhaps the best definition comes from Dr. Ruth Westheimer:

A family is a group of people linked together by some combination of love, commitment, cohabitation, children, bloodlines, memories, and thoughts about the future. It’s a matter of connection—with each other, with a shared past and future, and with generations before and since. And it’s a matter of responsibility. When you’re a family, you don’t need to see each other every day, or even every week, but you need to know, unconditionally, that if necessary, those people will be available to you.  

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5 Ibid., 6.

However one chooses to define family, the foundation for a healthy family is love, commitment and dedication.

**Family on the Edge**

Our family of origin plays an essential role in who we are, for better or worse. It is within our family system that we shape our character, form our values, and develop our sense of self. As we observe family members we begin to form our own sense of morals, standards, and values that regulate our lives. Family is the place where we learn what is important and what holds value. It is within the confines of family that we first learn about responsibility—both for ourselves and for others.

The pendulum has begun to swing away from the family as the major influence on a person’s development as popular American culture not only prescribes how we depict the concept of family, but it has also begun to define how the family interacts and what it values. The middle-class American family is on the edge of crisis and the influence is more than just those of economics, materialism, and greed fueled by visions of the American dream. The infection is more than politics and the promise of a better tomorrow has far outweighed the drive to succeed no matter the cost or consequences. The middle-class American family has been fractured by the demands of culture.

Success has always been at the core of the American ethos. From the very founding of our nation, as the Pilgrims settled in the new land, they were in pursuit of a better and more successful life than that which they left behind. Over a century later, the authors of the Declaration of Independence penned the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of
Happiness.” Since the birth of our nation in 1776, Americans have held tightly to that
threefold unalienable right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as the keys to
success. Though in reality, “the pursuit of happiness” has dangled an unattainable goal of
success in the face of Americans ever since those words were penned. Families in the
twenty-first century, as they pursue a drive to succeed at any cost, have come to realize
that the cost is greater than anyone could have ever imagined.

Success is defined as “the fact of getting or achieving wealth, respect, or fame.”
Though it is easily defined, success is difficult to quantify as it can be measured in many
ways: how big your house is, what kind of car you drive, what job you have, how much
money you make, or the school you attended to name a few. The drive to be successful,
however one chooses to define it, places an expectation upon the future generation to be
more successful than the past generation. The result of this unrealistic expectation is
stress in marriages, in family dynamics, and in other areas of life as the pursuit of success
and happiness becomes all consuming.

As parents strive to have their children succeed at any cost, often the result is
stress upon the children who have become overscheduled. Quality time together as family
is dismal. According to a study that concluded in 2000, school age children from ages
five to eighteen spent thirty-five hours per week at school, between eighty and eighty-
eight hours per week on sleep and personal care, and between thirty-eight and forty-three

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hours per week on free-time activities which included watching television, reading, sports or hobbies, organizations, religion, playing, and other more passive leisure activities. More specifically this free time breaks down to fifteen hours spent in unstructured play, twelve hours watching television, and one-half hour spent on outside play. While a child’s structured activities accounted for eight and three-quarter hours per week; four and three-quarter hours were spent in organized team sports, one hour at church, and three hours in other organized groups.

Advances in technology have also created a great amount of stress on today’s family. With the accessibility and affordability of readily available technology via personal computers, tablets, and cellphones, it is no wonder this new standard of communication is becoming a necessity in family life. For busy families, it has become an essential element in the dynamics of the family system. As the family continues to splinter in several directions, it has become crucial for every member to have a cellphone in order to maintain contact and to coordinate schedules by tracking the various activities of family members. For most family members, cellphones also provide a sense of built-in security as one is able to be in constant contact with loved ones in case of an emergency.

While cellphones have become a great resource, they also possess a devastating downside. Having an unlimited source of on-demand data with limited safeguards in place, temptations such as pornography and gambling are also just a click away. These

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addictive behaviors unchecked can fracture the trust and security that is at the core of the family system.

Pocket technology is also a constant tether which creates a need to be continuously connected and for many people forms a false sense of importance. The social world readily at one’s fingertips can foster a false sense of belonging. One easily feels a strong connection through social media and a strong pull to be connected to the world on a digital device, but that device is creating a deeper sense of isolation as face-to-face interactions diminish. Technology is easily becoming a barrier placed between people as the constant need to check for messages, updates, or replies on phones becomes all consuming. This barrier keeps individuals from being in the moment—physically present with family or friends. As technology continues to advance and screens are becoming a normal part of daily life, families are having to implement screen-free times when they schedule family interactions that are face-to-face and distraction-free. Spending time together is essential to developing a healthy family, and putting boundaries and limitations on technology is healthy for all members of the family.

According to a study published in 2010, “Media (television, computers, video games, music, print, cell phones and movies) are among the most powerful forces in young people’s lives today. Eight to eighteen-year-olds spend more time with media than in any other activity besides (maybe) sleeping—an average of more than seven-and a half hours a day, seven days a week.”¹¹ This is an increase of over an hour from the same study conducted five years prior. Children are heavily influenced by the TV shows they

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watch, video games they play, songs they listen to, books they read, and websites they
visit as they have become an extensive part of their lives. Personal media devices offer a
constant stream of messages about families, peers, relationships, gender roles, sex,
vviolence, food, values, and clothes, to name a few.

With this perpetual exposure to media, the middle-class American family is faced
with an unhealthy expectation about what being successful looks like in today’s culture.
Marketing research shows that media heavily influences buying trends which then have
an effect on how people view themselves as a success or a failure in life. Consumerism is
becoming the driving force in what determines how one perceives success. In order to
appear successful to one’s peers, people feed the desire created by the saturation and
influence of the media to acquire the latest and greatest possessions no matter the cost.
The term for this epidemic which is plaguing the middle-class American family is
“affluenza:”

Affluenza is the unhealthy and unwelcome psychological and social effects of
affluence regarded especially as a widespread societal problem: such as extreme
materialism and consumerism associated with the pursuit of wealth and success
and resulting in a life of chronic dissatisfaction, debt, overwork, stress, and
impaired relationships.12

Consumerism is the root of affluenza. As middle-class American families have
sought to gain happiness by increasing their wealth and acquiring more belongings, the
results for many is an increase in consumer debt. Because of the increase in consumer
debt, parents may need to extend their work hours in order to make ends meet financially.
Consequently, children are learning the lesson that money is what makes people happy

and fulfilled because with money you can acquire more things. In turn, more parents are working hard to give their children all the things that they ask for and then some. This mindset causes a vicious cycle. The “pursuit of happiness” is more about what one can buy than on spending quality time together as a family.

Family time is perhaps the biggest influence on a child’s life, though it accounts for the smallest amount of time spent. According to a research study on how children spend their time, approximately fifteen hours of the 168 hours in a week is spent as time together as a family. That breaks down to less than 9 percent of a child’s week being spent with his or her family, whether that be eating a meal together, being together while running errands, watching television, or having a family conversation. The same study also showed that children who spend more time in family activities have fewer behavioral problems than children who do not spend adequate time in family activities.13

Family together time is becoming extinct as more and more outside influences are crying out for family members’ attention. Goals and drive are important keys to success, but they should not be the only components of a successful life. A balance of scheduled and unscheduled time is an important element in a child’s growth and development as well as time spent together as a family. The American definition of success needs to be redefined to put happiness back into perspective. Fame and fortune are fleeting. Measuring one’s success against unreal expectations does not equal happiness. The family one creates, invests in, and is present for is the best measure of success. In conclusion, family equals success.

CHAPTER 4
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

In the attempt to try to reimagine the partnership between the home and the church in the spiritual formation of children it is essential to examine the theological foundations of key scripture passages. It is also necessary to take a glimpse at the history of the Sunday school movement in the Protestant Church. It is also useful to delve into the historical teachings of the Church on the significant role parents play in a child’s spiritual development.

To establish a biblical theology for nurturing a child’s faith, one must look at the essential teaching found within the pages of Scripture. This is done by first examining key passages that support the important role generations play on impressing faith to the next generation. Then, it is imperative to look at examples of parenting, for better or worse, and the role of faith in the home.

**Impressing Faith: Generation to Generation**

Within the biblical narrative of God’s people are interwoven teachings which lay a foundation for the environment in which faith is cultivated. The Bible depicts parents as having been given an essential role by God of instilling faith in their children. The call to
impress faith from one generation to the next is undeniable as the entire community of faith is tasked with the responsibility.

Teachable Moments: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Perhaps one of the most widely read and quoted of all the scriptures and one that best demonstrates the parenting directive is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This passage, known as the Shema, is not only the foundation of Jewish prayer and teaching, but also gives instructions to parents to teach the laws, decrees, and faith stories to their children.

It is a part of Moses’ address to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Promised Land:

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 (Dt 6:4-9).

The command, “recite or teach them to your children,” is found throughout the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Moses repeatedly implores God’s people to pass on their story of struggle and salvation not only to their immediate children, but also to each new generation that was to follow. As the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land and begin a new chapter in their story, Moses was reminding them there was still a powerful story to be told. The Israelites’ story of faith is one that is full of struggle, persecution, redemption, and salvation, and, when shared from one family member to another, builds a connection to the past. Their story becomes our story. The responsibility given to parents to tell their story was vital to the continuation of faith.

14 All Scripture quoted is from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
for succeeding generations. Moses’ charge was such that each new generation who heard the story became connected to the faith story of the community and learned of God’s amazing love.

In looking carefully at Moses’ exhortation to the Israelites, one can see there is action required in communicating the faith story. A big responsibility was placed on parents and the older generations to teach the faith story to succeeding generations. Faith conversations were not just to take place at home around the table or saying prayers at bed time. These conversations were to come from teachable moments where faith was to be modeled by behavior and intertwined into the fabric of daily life, such as walking along the road or doing chores around the house. We learn from this passage that parents can find opportunities to infuse the faith story into the mundane tasks and the simple everyday conversations parents share with their children.

Along with instructions for parents to seek teachable moments to share their faith story, another direction gleaned from this passage is for there to be a visual reminder of the community’s faith in the home. Moses’ instructions have a physical aspect that is required. Whether literally tied to the wrists and foreheads or inscribed on the doorposts of the home, the Israelites were to have a tangible reminder of God’s faithfulness and presence. A child’s primary mode of learning is visual as a child sees the world around them and begins to make sense of that world. In having a physical faith symbol present, there is a tangible help to further assimilate faith into everyday life. A good example of a tangible faith symbol is a Mezuzah affixed to the door frame in many Jewish homes. The
Mezuzah holds a piece of parchment containing the Shema in a decorative case.\textsuperscript{15} The Mezuzah is a physical symbol for the family and all who enter the home to remember that that family belongs to the bigger picture of God’s story. The Mezuzah becomes a constant reminder of God’s continual presence in the family’s life as well as providing a visual prompt for additional teachable moments.

Teaching both faith and its meaning in concrete ways to children is conveyed in this passage. Children first need to learn the faith story, which is God’s story, to better understand the foundations upon which our faith is built. When children learn the basics—the who, what, and how of the story—faith becomes tangible, and they are better equipped to live out the greater story. The Shema also reminds the greater faith community that everyday instruction of a child cannot be confined within the four walls of a classroom; the act of impressing faith onto a child grows out of both context and practice. Within the Shema is held a teaching that brings the community of faith into a deep awareness that the starting point for learning faith is within the family context where it is impressed on a child through continual and creative telling of the faith story.

Remembering our History: Psalm 78:1-8

In the oral tradition of the people of Israel, the Psalms were often used to teach the generations about God’s faithfulness. Psalm 78 recalls their history as a nation from Moses to David. It is believed that in song format the story would be passed on to the next generation easier because hearing it sung, rather than merely told, would have a

greater effect on the listener.\textsuperscript{16}

The first eight verses to the psalm command our attention. It gives orders for the present generation to remember their faith story and to continue to share that story with the generations to come:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God (Ps 78:1-8).

Within this preface is an exhortation to listen intently to what is being shared so future generations can learn from the past. It is an exhortation for parents and grandparents to tell their children and grandchildren the things that God has done for their family. The psalmist lays out the blueprint for what is to come as he tells the reader that he speaks in parables and riddles of the stories of the faith. Stories filled with deeper meaning and understanding are brought to life through their retelling. The stories within the Psalm tell of Israel’s history, their shortcomings, and how they repeatedly failed to follow God. Through the words of the psalmist that history becomes a parable by which God’s wondrous works are shown through his interactions with Israel. It is through these failures that are shared with the children rather than packed away from sight, that the

bigger picture of the amazing love of God is shown and continues to be known. God’s faithfulness to the generations is made known in the teachings contained within this Psalm. It is not about Israel’s faith but rather about God’s continued help and presence in their lives.

There is a strong reminder within these first eight verses that we are to continue to share our faith story and to continue to share how God has worked in our lives and of those who have gone before us. It is their history that the Israelites were directed to share—their testimony of God’s work among his people as far back as the promise God made with Abraham. Verse six states, “That the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children.” There is a perpetual loop being set here for the story to be told. The first generation was to hand the knowledge on to the second, the second to the third, and so on. This cycle naturally leads to a sense of hope found in faith in God. As depicted in verse seven, “That they might set their hope in God.” Through knowing God’s instructions found in the Law and God’s faithfulness to the previous generations, believers would naturally come to the conclusion to put their hope in God who has done so much for them thus far.

With such knowledge continually being shared, one could not forget God’s faithfulness and in turn would want to seek to keep God’s teachings and commandments. If we were to keep God’s acts in our thoughts, we would be the more inclined to be obedient. It is in knowing where we come from and being a part of the faith story, that we are able to be prepared for what is to come. The lesson that can be taken from this Psalm is one about knowledge, sharing knowledge, and passing it on to those that follow after us. Verse eight warns the reader to not be like the rebellious generations that did not
prepare their hearts to encounter God. It is when we fail to share our part of the faith story with our children that we become like our unfaithful and fickle Israelite ancestors who found themselves lost without faith.

This Psalm is a good reminder that it is through the oral tradition of telling of God’s work in our lives from one generation to the next, that those faith stories become real. The faith journey continues as facts are recounted and memories are shared. This is as much true in today’s culture as it was in the time of Moses or David. The facts of Christianity we hold on to today are not only from the pages of the Bible we have read and studied but those we have heard passed on from others—our faith heritage and individual history. We are to share our encounters with God as they continue to evolve, and as we share them with others we all grow together in our faith.

Teaching and Instruction: Ephesians 6:1-4

Turning to the New Testament and the teaching of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, we see another example of the importance of nurturing the spiritual formation of our children. Throughout Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus, there is an underlying theme of identity, a reminder to the recipients of who they are and to whom they belong. As Christians and participants in the life of the Church, this letter is reminding them of the greater call they have received and to live their lives in a manner worthy of their identity. This reminder is seen particularly in the section about conduct in household relationships found in Ephesians 5:21-6:10 and, more specifically for our
purposes, in chapter 6:1-4:17 “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

‘Honor your father and mother’—this is the first commandment with a promise: ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’ And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Much can be gathered from these few verses of the nurturing role of parents in the spiritual formation of their children. The first is the importance of the relationship between a child and his or her parent. The beginning of this passage holds two commands directed at children. Paul’s first command is for children to obey their parents, with the reason that it is what is right in the sight of God. In the Jewish tradition, a child’s attitude toward their parents was “set alongside and seen as a part of their relationship to God.”18 Therefore, a child’s respectful and obedient relationship to their parents creates an environment in which they can carry out their reverence and obedience to God. To emphasize the importance of obedience, the second directive given to the children is one found in the Ten Commandments, “Honor your father and your mother” (Ex 20:12). This would have been an essential teaching and tradition that continued to play an important role in Christian homes.

The second half of this passage, verse four, is directed towards parents of children, specifically speaking to fathers but not to the exclusion of mothers. Custom

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17 Andrew T. Lincoln, et al., *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 42.* (Waco, TX: Word Books, Pub, 1990) lxxiii-lxxxvii. There is much scholarly debate about the authorship and recipients of this letter which are not pertinent to this discussion. What is of note is the purpose of the letter, which is also the topic of much dispute, is a reminder of the recipients’ identity as the Church and their calling as new creations in Christ.

18 Ibid., 402.
during this time was for fathers to hold all authority for their children’s wellbeing.\(^{19}\)

Therefore, fathers were made responsible for ensuring that they did not provoke anger in their children.

This was a vital task and involved avoiding attitudes, words and actions which would drive a child to angry exasperation and resentment. Thus, it ruled out excessively severe discipline, unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child’s needs and sensibilities.\(^{20}\)

Within the teachings of this letter is an appeal for the restraint of parental authority, guarding against its abuse and focusing instead on the Christian training that parents should provide. Paul is adamant that parents bring up their children in a distinctively Christian way and take a stand against the norms of culture. Parents were to take a nurturing tone with their children in their training and education, rather than the harsh and severe tone that was acceptable in the pagan culture. In bringing up a child in the instruction and training of the Lord most likely meant children were to be included in house church meetings. Children were invited to participate in the Christian instruction that was taking place in their homes with extended family and be incorporated into the body of Christ.

Overall this passage is not about exercising parental authority, but about parental responsibility which is tightly connected to our faith. Children are given the instruction to honor and obey their parents, recalling the fifth commandment proclaimed by Moses. As a child learns who God is from their interactions with their parents, he or she shows them

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 398-401.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 406.
honor and respect, and then sees it as being the same honor and respect for God. In return, parents are given the instruction to not provoke anger in their children by abusing their authority, but instead to teach them about their faith. A parent’s interactions with his or her children should be marked with the same kind of training and discipline that is determined by their relationship to God. That in turn will educate their children in the faith tradition and further their relationship with God.

**For Better or Worse: Parenting and Faith.**

In a conversation about the role of parents in the faith formation of children, one must also look at a few of the examples of parenting found within the pages of scripture. Some of the instances are exemplary of how one generation passed the faith on to the next generation. For example, Timothy’s mother and grandmother were praised by the Apostle Paul for bringing Timothy up in the faith. Other examples are not so grand, like the Israelite judge Jephthah who sacrificed his daughter to honor his vow, but they still serve as an illustration of a parent’s faith in action and teaching that dedication to their child.

**Jephthah’s Faith and Dedication: Judges 11**

Jephthah is first introduced in Judges chapter eleven. The author explains he was from Gilead, an illegitimate son who was disowned by his family and cast out to make his own way in the world. In a strange turn of events, Jephthah, who was also known as a
brave warrior, was sought by the very same people who cast him out to lead them into battle when the Ammonites attacked.\textsuperscript{21}

As Jephthah took the lead of the army to fight valiantly against the Ammonites, he paused and made a vow to God. His vow was in line with the ancient customs of the Greeks which was for generals on the eve of battle to promise their god a costly offering of some valuable plunder from the spoils of victory. Vows were also common practice among the Israelites, asking God’s favor to be with them so they could come out victorious in battle.\textsuperscript{22} The story of Jephthah’s vow starts when:

The spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, “If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.” So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the Lord gave them into his hand (Jgs 11:30-32).

The flaw in Jephthah’s vow to God is twofold. First, there was no need to make the vow at all, as the Israelites were already winning. God’s spirit had come upon him, granting him wisdom in decisions, strength in the fight, and courage to lead the troops. This brought victory in two provinces before he made his vow. Second, there is a problem with the vow itself. Jephthah promises to sacrifice whomever first greets him upon his return. The word used in this situation is most often translated as “who,”\textsuperscript{23} so

\textsuperscript{21} J.P. Lange, et al, \textit{A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Judges} (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software) 164.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 170.

clearly Jephthah’s vow intended to result in a human sacrifice to God. As he was being raised in a region of Israel that was far from the tabernacle, it is possible that religious practices were a bit looser and rituals from the heathen countryside were incorporated in small ways into the Israelites’ worship. With his loose religious upbringing, it is possible that Jephthah may have been ignorant of the knowledge that, according to Levitical law, human sacrifice was unacceptable to God (Lv 27:28). So, Jephthah, caught up in the adrenaline of the battle, engrossed with the prospect of a contest and the fate of his country in the balance, in a moment of vulnerability, was influenced by superstition and dedicated an object, unknowingly dearest to him, to ensure success.

As Jephthah returned home from war in triumph, he came face-to-face with the reality of the vow he made to God. It was an ancient custom for the women of the town to greet the warriors returning home in victory with dancing and music in the street. Leading this procession of women was Jephthah’s only child, his beautiful young daughter. Upon seeing her, he was overcome with grief and the irrevocable truth of what he must do to honor his promise to God.

Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.” She said to him, “My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites.” . . . At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made (Jgs 11:34-36, 39).

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The vow was full in his mind. It is evident it had not been communicated to anyone. Otherwise precautions would have been taken to keep his daughter safe by placing another object in his path. In an instant, joy is replaced with sorrow. The grim reality of what was to come enveloped Jephthah in deep despair and his daughter willingly accepting what was to come. There is a heroic spirit present in her, an understanding of the importance of a promise made to God. She feels her doom in her father’s passionate, though vague words and answers with tragic heroism, “So let it be!” With a woman’s tenderness and courage, this young girl gives strength to her father for what was to come.

Jephthah’s actions do not make him eligible for father of the year nor does he win an award for great parenting skills, but what we see in him is an amazing dedication to his faith and a willingness to keep his promise no matter the cost. The lesson that can be drawn from this moment of bad parenting decisions is the significance of faith and God in one’s life. Jephthah could have taken back his promise. No one heard it but God. He could have amended his vow to not include the huge sacrifice it entailed. He chose to honor a promise made in the heat of the moment, but a commitment he made to honor God. His daughter understood his dedication and accepted her fate without question. She could have fought him, told him his vow was impulsive, defied his faith, or even run away, but she did not. Jephthah’s faith, the dedication and importance of God in his life, was a message that had been conveyed to his daughter and as a result she shared that dedication and love for God.
Hannah’s Prayer and Perseverance: 1 Samuel 1

Hannah is another example of a parent whose faith and dedication to God was evident and passed on to her offspring. It was through Hannah’s faith and persistence in prayer, that her heart’s desire was finally met, and she was granted a son whom she in turn gave back to God. When Hannah was first introduced in the opening chapter of the book of 1 Samuel, the reader is told she is one of the wives of Elkanah, and that she was barren. In the ancient custom of Israel, wives were considered property. Their true value was in their ability to bear children, specifically male children. The reader is also told that Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah who had several children, torments Hannah because of her barrenness.

Hannah’s devotion to God is seen through her presence in the tabernacle as she accompanied her husband on his annual pilgrimage to Shiloh to worship God. On this occasion, she presented herself before God, distraught and afflicted, and pleas to God in prayer making a promise for when her prayer is answered. Hannah’s faithfulness was evident as God granted her request and she fulfilled her vow.

She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head” (1 Sm 1:10-11).

Hannah’s prayer was heartfelt. She was troubled and greatly grieved by her lack of a child. Yet, her prayer was modest. She did not ask for children, but simply petitioned God a male-child. If God was to grant her petition, she promised to not only dedicate him to God as was the custom of all first-born males, but also physically give him back to
God so he would serve him all his life. It is Hannah’s persistence that is of note. She did not give up but continued to plead with God even when others mocked her or looked down on her. She continued to have faith and know that God would not only hear her prayer, but also grant her request. Her perseverance paid off. God heard Hannah’s prayer and she conceived a son.

When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh; and the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.” She left him there for the Lord (1 Sm 1:24-28).

The child Hannah had longed for had finally come, and she kept her promise. Her integrity and devotion to God was evident as Hannah and Elkanah went once again to the tabernacle with great gifts of sacrifice and honor and dedicated Samuel to God. As Hannah presented herself before Eli the priest, she gratefully acknowledged God’s goodness to answer her prayer and wanted to be sure all who were present knew of God’s grace and compassion. She reminded Eli of their encounter years earlier when she was distraught in prayer, but was now standing before him a joyful woman. Samuel was the child she continually prayed for, never ceasing, faithfully knowing God answers the prayers of the righteous.

The amazing testimony to Hannah’s devotion to God is that on that day in the tabernacle, she fully surrendered all her interest in this child she longed for and gave him to God acknowledging that he had granted her request. She possessed a willing heart, ready to honor God with the most precious gift she had ever received. Hannah was still
Samuel’s mother, and their stories would continue. Hannah did not abandon the child that she pleaded God for. She continued to visit him each year as she and Elkanah made their pilgrimage to Shiloh. Her testimony of faith in the God of Israel, continued to live on in the life of Samuel who became a priest and eventually anointed Saul, the first king of Israel.

Parents Seeking Jesus’ Blessing: Mark 10:13-15

All three synoptic gospels have an account of Jesus blessing the children, but Mark demonstrates a deeper understanding of the importance of children and faith. In his recalling of the event, children came freely to Jesus, and he actively embraced each one. On this occasion, following a discourse on divorce, Jesus not only welcomed the children and the family members who brought them into his physical presence, but he publicly declared their importance in the kingdom of God and used them as an illustration of faith for the adults who were present.

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them (Mk 10:13-16).

The knowledge about Jesus and his ability to perform miracles was known throughout the countryside at the time of this encounter. Earlier in Mark’s gospel, people were brought to Jesus who were in need of physical healing or freedom from demonic possession. In this text it is unclear what these children may have needed, and as people brought children to Jesus, it was not about healing but simply wanting the children to meet Jesus with nothing expected in return. The caregiver’s actions demonstrated an
awareness of who Jesus was and a longing to be in his presence. Jesus, in response, welcomed the children not based on anything the children can do or offer, but solely on the basis of their helplessness. Judith Gundry writes, “It is not any particular quality of the child, but simply the child’s littleness, immaturity and need of assistance, though commonly disparaged, that keeps the way open for the fatherly love of God.”

In this significant gathering of the children around Jesus, a new perspective is given about the wonders of depending on someone greater than oneself. It is the caregivers who bring the children to Jesus; children did not, and most likely could not, seek Jesus on their own. Young children have a posture of dependence upon those who care for their every need; this is also the posture of faith. We learn from this passage that dependency evidenced by children is foundational for spirituality.

Jesus applied the children as an object lesson when he said, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mk 10:15). The word commonly translated “receive” can also be translated as “to take ahold of,” or “to take with the hand.” These other possible translations create an image of openness when connected to children as they possess a willingness to accept what is physically handed to them without question. With Jesus’ lesson on the importance of having faith like a child also comes an implied warning to care for a child’s spiritual wellbeing. Children possess an innate sense of openness, an eagerness to receive

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affection, instruction, and direction from trusted adults. This implies a huge responsibility for their caregiver to provide those things. Children are innocent, trustworthy, and willing to submit to their caregivers. This is the same concept that Jesus was talking about in receiving the Kingdom of God.

Jesus embraces each child at the end of this encounter, and this is where Mark’s account differs from those of Matthew 19:13-14 and Luke 18:15-16. Mark expresses that not only did Jesus lay hands on the children and bless them, which was what the parents were wanting, but he also embraced them one by one. Jesus’ actions demonstrated a great sense of care and compassion for the children by his public display of affection. In a time and place where children held very little value in society Jesus took time to hold each of them. The children in return displayed a longing to be in Jesus’ presence with a willingness to be fully embraced by his love and compassion. There is a sense of intimacy that comes with an embrace, and it is through the embrace of a caregiver that young children gain a sense of belonging and find connection with the other.

The parents brought their children to Jesus for him to bless them. They had heard of his teachings, miracles, and healings and wanted their children to be able to interact with this man of God. The depth of their faith was unmistakable as they faced opposition from the disciples who turned them away from Jesus’ presence. It was their persistence and deep desire to have Jesus lay hands on their children that in the end resulted in greater faith and understanding in a God who loves them. Jesus’ interaction with the children and their parents created a sense of compassion, understanding, and belonging that one can infer they continued talk about as the children grew.
Sincere Faith of the Generations: 2 Timothy 1:5

In the Apostle Paul’s second letter to his friend and protégé Timothy, he provides a snapshot of Timothy’s faith. Though it is a single verse and a brief mention of Timothy’s heritage, the importance of a parent instilling faith in their child is seen: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you” (2 Tm 1:5).

This letter of encouragement Paul wrote to Timothy is a reminder of the important role parents play in laying a faith foundation. Timothy’s mother, Eunice, was a Jewish woman who was believed to have been converted to Christianity by Paul in his first visit to Lystra.27 This woman of faith raised her son in the customs, traditions, and foundations of the Jewish faith which most likely included the teachings of the coming of the Messiah. Not much is known about Timothy’s father other than he was not Jewish, but Greek.28 Timothy’s faith was not influenced by his father; however, it was his mother and grandmother, Lois, who raised him in the faith.

Timothy did not inherit faith as many brought up in the Jewish religion would have. Instead, the matriarchs instilled in him something much more meaningful than rituals and customs. His mother and grandmother were ladies of great faith who were known in the community by name and reputation. They demonstrated to Timothy a steady, persistent faith and nurtured in him love and devotion to God. There is a sense of continued learning, a deep longing in the words Paul uses to describe Timothy’s


28 This is mentioned when Timothy is first introduced as a travel companion of Paul in Acts 16:1.
It is that strong faith foundation Paul is imploring Timothy to recall as he continues in his ministry.

**Once Upon a Time: A Glimpse of the History of Sunday School in the American Protestant Church.**

The original thirteen colonies were established by immigrants who came to America. Some were fleeing religious persecution while others were seeking financial gain or dreaming of greener pastures. No matter the original reason for their arrival, all came with a desire to build a better life for their families. As the colonization of America began and the immigrants began to settle into their new communities, there was a desire for the next generation to know about God, but religious education took many different forms.

Those that settled in New England Colonies were primarily Calvinists, and the religious ideals of Geneva became the ideals of New England. Education was of extreme importance for the New England colonies, and laws were quickly established that provided for the education of children. In 1642, Massachusetts passed a law that required parents to teach their children to read, so they could read and understand the principles of Scripture and the laws of the country. This law was replaced by the Old Deluder Satan Law in 1647, which required each township to create schools and employ teachers. The establishment of these common schools were to “thwart the influence of Satan, whose chief project was believed to be the keeping of men’s minds in ignorance.”

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29 Jamieson, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, 422.

mandated state schools were both religious and civic in their focus but the Bible and the English catechism were primarily used as the textbooks.

The Middle Colonies varied in their ethnic and religious makeup with no church as the majority as in the New England Colonies. Nevertheless, the Middle Colonies were quick to establish schools which included religious instruction and a close connection to the local church. In New Netherland the teachers were not only required to include religious instruction, but their services went beyond the classroom to that of assistant to the pastor.31 While in Pennsylvania, a predominately Quaker colony, knowledge of the classics was not seen as a high priority, but rather spiritual understanding was an essential. Schools were developed as important agencies for the transference of values, traditions, and biblical morals.

The Southern Colonies were settled mainly by Anglicans who came to the colonies seeking wealth. Anglicans were of the mindset that education was a private matter, and religious education took on a different importance as wealthy landowners established private schools for their children and employed local ministers without a church as teachers. In most of the South, education was seen as a luxury for only the wealthy as there was a benefit for the slave owners to not provide education beyond apprenticeship to the children of indentured servants and slaves.32

Colonial Americans possessed a deep conviction about the role of the family and its foundation in the religious instruction of children. As Colonial America took shape,


32 Ibid., 298.
there was a strong factor in favor of religious teaching in the schools, and as time went on, a unified effort for religious education was created. Eventually, the schools in partnership with the church began to assume more of the responsibility for the moral education, values-based learning, and spiritual instruction of the children in their community. As this unfolded, people began to change their views in regards to the Christian upbringing of children.

The early origins of the Sunday School movement as is known today were conceived in 1781 by an influential newspaper man from Gloucester, England named Robert Raikes, Jr. He wanted to use influence in the community to draw attention to the predicament of those in desperate need of assistance, specifically the juvenile delinquents who were running wild on the streets after work and on Sundays, their one day off per week. Through his passion and desire to help those orphan children become better citizens of the neighborhood, he began a movement that would dramatically change the shape of Christian education.

Raikes worked to raise awareness of the needs of the young men and began to recruit women to aid in their education. These recruits were simple laypeople who possessed a love and passion for children in need and more importantly, those who possessed a desire to see the Great Commission fulfilled in their own neighborhoods by teaching street children. Raikes’ Sunday school was established with two distinct purposes. First was to teach basic reading and writing skills using the Bible as textbook which then led to the second purpose, to present the gospel. The result of this experiment

33 Ibid., 261.
was the transformation of morals, values, and ethics in the boys because of their spiritual conversion.\textsuperscript{34}

As Raikes’ Sunday school program grew, it gained international acclaim. People from across Europe came to study the methods and practices implemented for the social, civil, and spiritual reform of street children. As the Sunday School movement crossed the Atlantic, it diversified as it flourished in a strong religious culture where the religious content of public education curricula was decreasing. With the shift of public education no longer offering religious education, many denominations began to offer religious classes taught by local clergy, based on Raikes concept, as a supplement to religious teaching in the home.

As church schools began to flourish, city unions were organized to sponsor and support their growing needs. In 1824, these local unions joined together to form the American Sunday School Union whose purpose was threefold: first, to publish Sunday school materials, second, to select biblical outlines and teaching aids, and third, to evangelize the nation by sending and supporting Sunday school missionaries.\textsuperscript{35} What began in the Northeast continued to grow throughout the country, and by 1900 the United States was almost completely organized by regional Sunday school unions. The unions continued to grow and develop curricula for the local church and its Sunday school program. Eventually differences arose, and the unions began to divide over denominational lines resulting in the abundant growth of curriculum options.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 264.

\textsuperscript{35} Taylor, Religious Education: A Comprehensive Survey, 17.
As the twentieth century began and the Sunday school movement continued to grow, Henrietta Mears played a significant role in how it would continue to be shaped for the next generation. Mears saw great value in not only reading Scripture, but also in the importance of integrating it into one’s life. She was born in 1890 into a family that provided her a rich spiritual heritage that can be traced back generations. It was, however, her maternal grandparents who had the greatest influence on her faith formation. The youngest in the family of seven, she received special instruction and a firm faith foundation from her mother. At age seven she professed her faith, and at age eleven she began her teaching ministry with an in-depth Bible study for new believers.36

In 1928 Mears accepted the invitation to become the Director of Christian Education at First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, California, a position she held for thirty-five years. She believed it was essential to build the educational program on a strong foundation of prayer, hard work, a high degree of organization, and a commitment to Christ-honoring excellence. She worked diligently to make that a reality. In her first five years of ministry, the Sunday school grew from 450 to more than 6,000 attendees in 1933, and later to 6,500—the largest Presbyterian Sunday school of its time in the world.37

Mears thought it was vital in order for the educational program to flourish that there be a department for every age grouping and a separate class for every age. This meant that there was a need to maintain a complete curriculum at all levels and to


develop teachers with the same quality and caliber found in public schools of the time. She considered a teacher training program a key ingredient to the success of Sunday school and viewed thorough preparation and planning as an indispensable element to successful teaching. She believed this was best accomplished when accompanied by prayer and hard work. Mears used the newest available technology and educational philosophy to vary her teaching methods while being sure that the clear message of the gospel remained the same. Under her leadership, the Sunday school at the Hollywood church quickly outgrew its facilities and more classrooms were built.38

Mears continually analyzed the Sunday school materials and curriculum offered from publishers and discovered nothing was adequate enough to meet her students’ needs. Though the biblical focus was present in the material available, she noted they were not closely graded to match students’ abilities and interests and were often poorly organized. Mears took it upon herself, along with a few of her fellow Christian educators, to begin to write material that focused on specific learning outcomes for each age level. Over time word spread about her materials, and the demand for these lessons grew to such an extent that they were requested by churches throughout the country. Mears and her colleagues founded Gospel Light Press, later Gospel Light Publications, in 1933 in an attempt to meet this demand. Gospel Light Publications also began publishing books and other church school materials. Their publications were known for their quality, student appeal, emphasis on life application, and for taking into account current educational

understanding about how students best learn while still remaining biblically focused and Christ-centered.³⁹

Mears altered the landscape of Sunday School through her teaching, training, and curriculum development. She taught from the Bible and always took the lesson to the point of personal application: “She endeavored to make a person come to the point of commitment. She would ask, ‘What are you going to do with this information?’”⁴⁰

Through her curriculum and publishing company, churches began to offer age-graded classes with an emphasis on learning styles and developmental differences of the students in each class. Sunday school began to take on a new life as parents began to understand the importance of Christian education and to bring their children to Sunday school class. Over time, as the church has continued to develop its Sunday school programs and offerings for the moral and religious education of children, it has usurped the role of chief religious instructor resulting in some parents abdicating their God-given responsibility as primary nurturer of their children’s faith.

**A Historical Look at the Teachings of the Church**

As seen throughout Christian history, from the time of Moses to the Early Church fathers, to the Reformation and continuing through our modern-day era, the role parents hold is crucial in a child’s faith development. Three key theologians saw the responsibility of a parent as crucial in the nurturing of a child’s faith and development in three different time periods of church history. Each of these men were theological


⁴⁰Zoba, "The Grandmother of Us All: Henrietta Mears had a Vision for Conquering the World for Christ," 44.
scholars as well as ordained clergy who, throughout their respective ministries, emphasized the high calling of parenthood and the vocation parents inherit as the primary faith nurturers of their children. For John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, and Horace Bushnell, the home was the central place where the foundation of faith was laid, and parents instilled the most valuable faith lessons in their children.

The Early Church—John Chrysostom (347-407)

Saint John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople (398), was a great orator and passionate about the importance of a parent’s role in the development of a child’s faith. Along with Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Athanasius, he is considered one of the greatest of the early Eastern Church fathers. Chrysostom has been given the title Doctor of the Church because of his many writings, including nearly six hundred sermons and two hundred letters that have been recorded and preserved, and the value they have continually held throughout the history of the Church.41

Chrysostom’s upbringing construed his passion about the role parents play in the faith development of children. He was born into an upper-class family in Antioch and raised primarily by his mother, as his father died shortly after his birth. His mother valued education and provided every opportunity for Chrysostom to receive the best education in both secular and sacred realms. He was ordained as a priest in Antioch in 386 and he became the Bishop of Constantinople in 398.

As a priest and later as Bishop, Chrysostom was involved in the lives of his parishioners and worked to elevate the importance of marriage and the role of parenting in particular. The moral decay of the community disturbed Chrysostom, and his disgust extended to the so-called Christian parents who seemed to lack concern for their children’s spiritual well-being. Seeing the need for a higher calling in the role of caregiver to children, he became an advocate for the important role a parent plays in the “concern for spiritual things that will unite the family.”

Chrysostom’s understanding of parenthood was biblically inspired and deeply grounded in Trinitarian and Christological teachings. Vigen Gurioan states, “He believed human parenthood and childhood mirrored the life of the Divine Persons of the Trinity. The fatherhood of God and the Sonship of Jesus are found in love and reciprocity, and it is the Holy Spirit who cultivates and carries that love toward and between the two.” Therefore, Chrysostom believed that parents who are worshippers of the triune God are called to emulate God’s love for Jesus, while children should love and obey their parent as Jesus loves and obeys God through the Holy Spirit. Together, through love, parents and children participate in the triune life of God.

His message began to elevate family life and the role of parents in the upbringing of children. Drawing upon his own childhood experience, with a mother who saw the importance of moral teaching and education, and his experience of the monastic rule of life and disciplines, he worked to translate a rule of life that would work within the

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context of family. Chrysostom implored parents to take the spiritual lives of their children seriously by teaching the importance of discipline, worship, telling the faith story through reading scripture, and prayer.

Chrysostom was not afraid to ask parents the important questions about their desire to raise obedient children. In one such address, Chrysostom stated:

Then from the beginning bring him up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord... Even at their age they are exposed to all sorts of folly and bad examples from popular entertainments. We are so concerned with our children’s schooling: if only we were equally zealous in bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord!... Let us give them a pattern to imitate; from the earliest of years let us teach them to study the Bible. 44

Chrysostom understood that through a parent’s modeling of faith, living out in word and deed what one believes, a child would have a better grasp of the importance of a life of faith.

With the laxity in the moral standards of the fourth century, Chrysostom took a strong stand on the moral and spiritual development of children. He became outraged with the lack of responsibility self-confessed Christian parents expressed in regards to the moral and spiritual formation of their children. Parents were focused on what he called “vainglory” or worldly success resulting in lax moral standards that led to laxity in faith development.45 Chrysostom saw parents preoccupied with material possessions, entertainment, social status, and political influence, and as a result, neglected spiritual and moral formation.

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This erroneous quest for vainglory prompted one of his most quoted works that stresses the need for a deeper sense of responsibility to be taken when it comes to children. Parenthood is not something to be entered lightly, according to Chrysostom. His teachings demonstrate that parents are assigned a sacred responsibility of the formation of their children. Children are a great responsibility created in the image of God, and they are innocent and incomplete and need to be shaped and molded. Chrysostom argues that it is the role of the parent to help the child grow into the complete knowledge and image of God. His address states:

To each of you fathers and mothers I say, just as we see artists fashioning their paintings and statues with great precision, so we must care for these wondrous statues of ours . . . Sculptors working in marble, proceed in a similar manner; they remove what is superfluous and add what is lacking. Even so must you proceed. Like the creators of statues do you give all your leisure to fashioning these wondrous statues for God.46

He compares children to the imagery of a blank canvas or slab of marble waiting for the craftsman to create a masterpiece. The effort of the artist is one that takes time and patience to achieve the end result, so it is with children.

Throughout his ministry as priest in Antioch and Bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom was vigilant in his pursuit to hold Christian parents to a higher standard of raising children. He believed that children were God’s greatest work and should be cared for and treated as such. In one of many homilies on the subject he wrote, “Let everything take second place to our care for our children, bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”47 There was nothing else more important in parenthood,


47 Chrysostom, On Marriage and Family Life, 68.
according to Chrysostom, than raising God-fearing children—not professions, wealth, power, or position. If children were brought up knowing God, the result would be a life sculpted to please the Creator.

The Reformation—Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was a scholar, a monk, a priest, a professor of theology, a loving husband, and an adoring father. He is perhaps best known for the ninety-five theses he nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. His words and actions on that day fueled the Great Reformation that was speaking out against the Roman Catholic Church. Luther’s influence, however, goes much deeper than his ninety-five theses, and his numerous works continue to shape the Church and families almost five centuries later.

Luther was passionate about parents’ taking responsibility for teaching their children the fundamentals of faith. His own faith was nurtured by his hard-working god-fearing parents, Hans and Margarethe. Though Luther began his path to faithfully serve God in a manner that he never expected to include marriage and children, he married and had six children with his wife Katherina as well as eventually taking his sister’s orphaned children into their home.

Luther believed parents were stewards accountable to God for all the gifts that he has so generously bestowed upon them, not the least of which was their children. As a response to that gift, parental responsibility to serve one’s children as their “apostle and bishop” manifested itself in four crucial duties: to provide infants with the sacrament of
baptism, to form children in the true faith as they mature, to attend to children’s education for vocation, and to provide them with a suitable spouse in a timely fashion (before lust interfered).  

    

    Luther also held a high view of children as an integral part of the kingdom of God. He was a staunch advocate for the practice of infant baptism while some of his contemporaries supported believer’s baptism. The practice of infant baptism was crucial for Luther as he believed that for the community of faith to uphold the Great Commission, children must be included in the sacrament. He argued that baptism, no matter the person’s age, was not made valid by the faith of the recipient, but rather by the promise of God attached to the sign.  

    Luther believed that not only did the parents play a vital role in bringing their precious child into the faith community for baptism, but the community itself entered into the sacrament as God’s Spirit becomes manifest. Therefore, for the community of faith, infant baptism became the measure of the graciousness of the good news of the gospel and of the corporate faith’s trust in God to bring to completion the good work God had begun in the sacrament.

    Luther took his role as spiritual head of the family very seriously and implored other fathers to do the same. William Henry Lazareth explains, “After a day’s labors were over, Luther would often gather his family around him to tell stories, play melodies on

    

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48 Jane E. Strohl, “For what Purpose do we Older Folks Exist, Other than to Care for ... the Young?” in The Child in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 141.

49 Ibid., 141.

his lute and teach them little songs, games, and prayers. It was also around the family hearth that Luther patiently taught his children the fundamentals of the Christian faith.”

Luther stressed the spiritual headship of the father and the important responsibility that was entrusted as that spiritual leader of his family. In his effort to bring faith into the community and realizing a lack of resources available to teach the essentials of faith in a plain and simple manner, he constructed a systematic approach to teach core moral and religious truths. A major contribution Luther brought to the context of family was his *Small Catechism* and the important role the home played in the nurturing of children’s faith. Luther prepared the *Small Catechism* specifically for the religious nurture of common people that was filled with evangelical interpretations of the Ten Commandments, the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Sacraments.

Along with Luther’s use of the *Small Catechism* to teach the essentials of faith to his children, he also initiated the tradition of “table talk” with his children and the students who often stayed in the Luther home. His nightly informal conversations around the table, later known and recorded as *Table Talk*, were not just conversations about religious doctrine and history but also instructions regarding government, church and the academic university.

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52 The *Small Catechism* was developed in response to Luther’s disgust at the lack of religious education found in the rural churches and the misuse of Scripture by those who are familiar with its words but not their meaning. His answer to this crisis was to develop this short version, and later the longer catechism, to teach the fundamentals in a small, plain, and simple form. Each of the major sections of the *Small Catechism* begin with the inscription, “As the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to his household.”

Martin Luther was an advocate for children. He wanted children to have the opportunity to be well-educated in all aspects of life, including faith. He wanted them to be cared for with great love and responsibility. Ultimately Luther was convinced that if a child was properly nurtured and cared for, then he or she could grow, with God’s grace, into a responsible Christian and contribute greatly to society. He understood parents to be the tools God used to impart faith to their children, to teach the essentials, and nurture their children’s spirituality.

The Modern Era—Horace Bushnell (1802-1876)

Horace Bushnell was a congregational pastor from New England from 1833-1859. He was a scholar and the quintessential American theologian on the subject of childhood. He was instrumental in developing an understanding of childhood faith and the important role parents play in that development. In many respects, Bushnell was ahead of his time as a late nineteenth century thinker, but he still had a Victorian frame of mind with his romantic and optimistic assumptions about childhood.54

Family was at the core of Bushnell’s theology which was built from his strong family upbringing and raising of his own family in partnership with his wife. One of his favorite places to be was at home with his family where Bushnell saw seeds of faith being sown, nurtured, and taking root as spiritual lives blossomed. He believed that families were the ideal little churches. Bushnell elaborates, “They are more private, closer to the life of infancy, and more completely blended with the common affairs of life . . . Here it

is, above all, that they who are born into life, are led up, in their gracious training, to knit the green tendrils of existence to God.”

In Bushnell’s book, *Christian Nurture*, which continues to be as relevant today as it was in the 1800s, his premise and the goal of Christian nurture was for a “child to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise.” According to Bushnell, the ideal environment in which to raise a child was one where faith was deeply imbedded in the life of the family. In *Christian Nurture* he writes:

Parents should seek to teach a feeling more than a doctrine; to bathe the child in their own feeling of love to God, and dependence on him, and contrition for wrong before him . . . to make what is good, happy and attractive, what is wrong, odious and hateful; then as understanding advances, to give it food suited to its capacity, opening upon it, gradually the more difficult views of Christian doctrine and experience.

Bushnell believed parents were to be the models of faith by living out what they believe and making faith tangible for a child to understand. He imagined that in the best of circumstances, faith, in the context of family, was to become like breathing, second nature and an innate part of life.

As a preacher and theologian, Bushnell was a champion for children and the need to raise them in the faith. He continually stressed the importance of steady, spiritual growth. He adamantly spoke out against the dominant religious practice of revivalism and the fear tactics often used to convert children. He referred to this type of parenting as “ostrich nurture,” comparing those parents who lack a sense of genuine gentleness to an

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56 Ibid., 4.

57 Ibid., 39.
ostrich that buries its head in the sand leaving the eggs to hatch alone and undefended.\textsuperscript{58} Revivalism endorsed a dangerous passivity in parents, which often resulted in serious moral frustration as well-meaning evangelical Protestant parents concentrated their efforts on breaking a rebellious child’s will with harsh and sometimes abusive means. Bushnell advocated that true Christian nurture could only happen in a Christian atmosphere within supportive social ties. He explained that gentleness was needed to bring a child into a relationship with God, which was better achieved through good family communication. He taught that the events and teachings that happened in childhood were not merely preparation for life but a truly integral part of life. This was better done with an emphasis on the need for early encouragement of a child’s spirit.\textsuperscript{59}

To counter this ostrich nurture, Bushnell taught the importance of parents being living examples of what faith is truly about: “Before [children] are of an age to understand the teaching of words, the gospel, is really wrapped up in the life of every Christian parent, and beams out from him as a living epistle, before it escapes from the lips or is taught in words.”\textsuperscript{60} He envisioned true Christian nurture as a natural process in the life of a family. As faith is lived out it becomes an authentic sign of a godly home.

Bushnell believed the die was cast for faith formation at an early age as a child matured and became able to exercise choice and free will. If the proper nurture was administered during those impressionable years, the child’s early faith encounters would

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 52-73.


\textsuperscript{60} Bushnell, \textit{Christian Nurture}, 14.
help to shape feelings and experiences throughout adulthood. Ultimately, parents’ responsibility to their children was to nurture faith in their children not produce it.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 358, 378, 381.
PART THREE

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE
CHAPTER 5

REIMAGINING THE PARTNERSHIP

Family is the center of a child’s growth and development. As has been presented thus far, there is a God-given directive of duty and responsibility for parents in the nurturing of children’s spiritual formation. It involves laying a spiritual foundation upon which children will continue to build as they grow and begin to develop their worldview. This is not an easy undertaking and is one parents cannot do alone, no matter how confident they are in their own faith and faith practices.

By design the church is a community of faith that is to work for the spiritual formation of all its family members. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.

What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.¹

The church and the home are Christian communities that work in support of each other. The church is to support the faith formation that takes place in the home, and the home is to work in support of the faith formation that takes place in the church. These two institutions are not mutually exclusive and neither can stand on their own without the encouragement of the other. Acknowledging the reliance of one upon the other is the first step in reimagining the partnership between the church and the home. This partnership then becomes about finding new ways of working together, sharing responsibilities, and providing support and encouragement for the task—all for a common goal: providing children with a firm faith foundation.

**Giving it Back: Returning the Home to the Central Place of Faith Formation**

In a week’s time, 168 hours, a child spends an average of thirty-five hours at school, eight hours in after-school activities, one hour at church, and the majority of the other 124 hours are spent at home.\(^2\) Home has the potential to be the greatest influence on a child’s life because of the amount of time he or she spends there, but sadly with all that vies for a family’s attention, what happens in the home is not always the influencer of a child. Home is a powerful tool in a child’s development and parents are the laborers that use that tool.

The family, whether individuals are born into it or brought into it, is a child’s first classroom and how they form identity. For better or worse, purposefully or haphazardly, it is within the confines of family that children’s hearts and minds are fully formed. It is

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here identity is developed and one’s heritage is learned. Family is the place where children learn how to relate to others, communicating their wants and desires, learning social skills and boundaries. It is here they work out values, ideals and habits. It is within the walls of the home that children learn about love, develop a sense of belonging, and are prepared to face the world.³

Elizabeth Caldwell says that children who are brought into a Christian family are born with two marks, one invisible and the other visible.⁴ The first is the invisible birthmark of faith, formed by family experiences and the hearing and telling faith stories. The second is a visible watermark that comes with the waters of baptism. It is imparted upon the child by their family of faith, and is the mark that claims them as a child of God. These powerful marks, both visible and invisible, serve as signs and symbols that link the family together in faith and as a community, joining in the common goal of laying a spiritual foundation for the child.

The important role of the home cannot be conveyed strongly enough. Throughout the history of our faith from Moses to Martin Luther to James Dobson, the family has been at the center of the story. It is the place where we belong and are loved unconditionally. Twenty-first century parents are stressed and stretched thin as they work hard providing for the wellbeing of their family. They are working long hours, running family members back and forth to soccer practice and piano lessons, fixing meals, and helping with homework. They worry about their children’s future, who they will become,

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and how they will get along in the world once they are grown. They worry about their education, social skills, talents, and faith. And they worry that they, as parents, are inadequately equipped to help their children develop the life skills needed in order to be successful. This is where the church comes alongside in support of parents: encouraging them in their role as parents and providing them with resources to be able to equip their children for life. The church works in support of what is already happening in the home, giving the tools and language to faith, so the moments of faith happening in the home every day are not being missed. The church is to be present in a way that helps parents feel empowered and equipped, not embarrassed, guilty, and ashamed.

**Journeying Together: Equipping Parents with the Tools Needed**

The church has long been the center of the community of faith, but as time has passed and the busyness of life outside of church has become more demanding, it has caused the role of the church to change. As a family’s typical weekly schedule has become jam-packed with various events and activities, the time spent at church has become less and less. Sunday mornings, which used to be time set aside from all other activity, are no longer sacred. Families are faced with making decisions about what has priority in the family schedule, and a sad reality is that church often gets cut.

We also must consider the complicated relationship between the church and the home as the idea of church comes with baggage that makes it easy to not be made a priority in the family’s life. For some parents, church was never a welcoming place where there was a sense of belonging. Instead it was a place of judgement and condemnation, where there were too many rules and unrealistic expectations that set them up for failure.
Others’ experience of church was boring, stiff, and stuffy, where the music was slow and reminiscent of funeral dirges, and the sermons were delivered by pastors who liked to use big words and hear themselves talk. For still others, church was simply the ritual of attending one hour of worship and/or Sunday school each week—a hollow and meaningless ritual. While on the opposite end of the spectrum, church provided other people a sense of belonging as an extended family which had a significant influence on how they lived their lives. No matter their past experience, it is important to convey the message to parents that church plays a significant role in a child’s spiritual growth and that the church does its best to provide a positive experience for the entire family.

“Children are terrific imitators of those around them, but they cannot imitate what is outside their experience. Participating regularly in the worship life of a community of faith provides exposure to religious language that they can imitate as one aspect of learning to be bilingual.”

Considering this shift in culture, the role of the church in the lives of the family needs to change to support what is happening in the home. The community of faith has a role to play in the spiritual nurture of a child. In the Presbyterian church when an infant is presented for baptism, the congregation makes a promise to help nurture him or her in the faith and to teach the child about Jesus. They also make a promise to support and encourage the infant’s parents in their role of raising their child in the faith. It is with this promise in mind that the church needs to adjust its role in the life of the typical middle-class American family.

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Responsibility for the spiritual nurture of children needs to be given back to parents as the primary faith nurturers of their children. While at the same time the church needs to relinquish that role and take on the supporting secondary role. “The primary ministry of the communal church to the domestic church is to remind the family of its graced task and to support it in its essential vocation. In this way, the church sets the family free for mission instead of using up family resources for institutional maintenance.”

Home is a place that reinforces what is being taught at church. Home is where the teachings from the Bible story or biblical concept come to life as they enter into daily conversations. But, this is where the church and the home need to work together to give parents the language to bring those concepts to life. There is an assumption at times that everyone knows the Bible story, and that everyone grew up going to Sunday school, but in my experience, more often than not, that is not the case. This could easily be rectified by providing parents with the lesson information the children are learning in Sunday school. This could be done in the form of a Sunday school class that follows the same lesson as their children or by providing a brief synopsis of the lesson with key talking points. By providing faith education opportunities for parents, the church is able to equip parents with the confidence they need to engage their children in faith conversations.

Marjorie Thompson, in her book *Family: The Forming Center*, writes:

One of the most serious tasks of the church at large is to help its member families to be the body of Christ within the home—to become the setting where unconditional love, affirmation, challenge to accountability, and forgiveness are known; to learn and share rituals, symbols, and stories of faith; to recognize and claim their special gifts and mission in the world. Then, as particular expressions

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6 Thompson, *Family: The Forming Center*, 142-143. Italic original.
of the all-inclusive family of God, church families become redeeming communities and thus sacraments of God’s grace.\textsuperscript{7}

It is important to remember the church is not in competition with the home since both entities have the same end goal. As the church, we should commit to resource, equip, and empower those who have the capacity to have the greatest impact on a child’s spiritual formation rather than criticize their lack of skills.

One of the ways I have found that the church can be in support of the home is by hosting family faith events. These events not only give language to faith but also the tools to bring faith into the home. The faith events I hosted were filled with fun activities for all ages and geared for the family to experience growing in faith together. The idea behind these events was to introduce spiritual practices in new and entertaining ways, making them accessible and attainable to draw the family together.

Prayer stations events are designed to introduce different ways of incorporating prayer into the home. The goal of the event is to provide a variety of prayer experiences using different modes of learning styles to help the family expand their prayer vocabulary and repertoire. The event includes eight stations that offer different prayer experiences ranging from silent meditative prayer to body prayer, which uses the body to offer prayer. At the end of this event, families are given cards for each station they experienced so they may take the prayers home and weave them into their family’s prayer life.

Advent/Lent workshops have taken place to help families prepare for the season of advent or lent, not just the holiday of Christmas or Easter. The goal of the event is to create a deeper understanding of the season so the family can experience a more

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 144.
meaningful time of preparation. Each year the event has varied on what projects are offered, but there is always a craft activity of creating an advent/lent wreath which helps bring the liturgy of the church into the home and facilitates conversation around the created centerpiece. One of the stations I have found important to this event is one which connects families to the community of faith. Our last Advent event had an adopt-a-grandparent station with photos of shut-ins, inviting families to find ways to care for another throughout the season by writing notes or stopping by to visit. Story also plays a big role in these faith events. The birth narrative or the holy week narrative is read in some form whether straight from scripture, a story book with beautiful pictures, a short movie or a reenactment with puppets or people, reminding those present what the meaning behind the season in all about. The events end with the family taking home a devotional that included instructions for using the centerpiece they created.  

Service days are events designed to help provide families with an opportunity to serve others. The goal is to bring awareness to the needs of the local community or wider community while providing families a chance to serve together. These faith events are intergenerational all-church events, but focus on service projects in which young children can participate. Several events are hosted at the church while others start at the church then move off campus to a food pantry or soup kitchen. These faith events range in activities depending on the season of the year or what the need of the community is at the time. One event focused on making fleece blankets to take to a homeless shelter at Christmas time, another event brought people together to assemble health kits for those

8 See Appendix B for a sample devotional.
affected by a natural disaster, and “blessing bags” to hand out to the homeless families may encounter on the street. Each event includes a short lesson which focuses on our call as Christians to care for others. Prayer is a big part of these faith events. Once the project comes to an end, we would lay hands on all that we did and pray for the people who would be receiving our gift. These events end with the family receiving a prayer card to take home which would remind them of the project we worked on and invite them to continue praying for the recipients.

Next, family retreats are all-church faith events designed to provide the family with an opportunity to spend time together. The goal of this event is to create opportunities for families to unplug from life for the week or weekend, focus on being together, and learn together as the body of Christ. An important piece in this event is the all-church aspect, the church family interacting with one another outside of the church walls. There was a balance between fun faith-based activities, focused Bible lessons, and both free and organized recreation. The teaching time includes a combination of large group worship with a lesson, usually an introduction to the theme for the day and small age-appropriate in-depth teaching. The retreat comes to an end with the family creating a memento of the event to reminded them of their experience and encourage them to continue talking about it once they return home.
CHAPTER 6
REIMAGINING FAITH FORMATION AT WORK

Once the relationship is reimagined between the church and the home, the fun part of doing ministry comes together. There is a concept that says church and home can be represented by two colors—the church is yellow symbolizing a bright light, and the home is red symbolizing warm hearts.\(^1\) Each of these entities have an influence on the spiritual formation of a child and when these two influences combine, orange is the result. “When you think orange, you see how two combined influences make a greater impact than just two influences.”\(^2\) What this partnership becomes is orange, blending life at church and life at home into life together. This reimagined partnership becomes a bridge that links the great divide between the church and the home.

**Sculpting Faith: Celebrating Milestones**

As we journey through life, there are many significant milestones that we celebrate: birthdays and anniversaries, graduations and weddings, and beginnings and endings of life. There are also smaller milestones that are just as significant but perhaps

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\(^2\) Ibid., 23.
not as celebrated: a child’s first lost tooth, a teen obtaining his or her driver license, or receiving a college acceptance letter. There are also milestones that become rituals year after year such as the first or last day of school or the celebration of advancing to the next grade.

As a church there are generally two significant milestones in child’s faith journey that are celebrated: baptism and confirmation, but the church is missing an opportunity to enter deeper into life together as family. Celebrating other milestones in a child’s life brings with it an opportunity to shape the partnership between church and home. It is recognizing significant events and bringing God’s presence into the home and connecting the rituals of daily life with the life of the congregation. The idea behind celebrating milestones is to celebrate the moments of life together: child, family, and congregation. It is to give language and tools to the parents, so as these milestones occur, they have the tools to celebrate the moment and naturally weave God into the conversation as a teachable moment.

Four significant aspects are present in celebrating milestones within individual families and as a congregation: naming and marking sacred and ordinary events in congregational and daily life, equipping others with the necessary tools to celebrate these milestones, blessing the individual in worship and blessing in the home, and finally, giving a tangible gift as a symbol and a reminder of the milestone being celebrated.³ In my years of ministry, I have celebrated many milestones with members of my church.

family through both corporate worship and during fellowship. They include: walking with them from births, baptisms, first days of school, third grade Bibles, preparing for adolescence, first mission trips, confirmations, graduations, sending youth off to college, and weddings. Then the cycle begins again for a new generation. These moments that gather families to celebrate together are moments of great testimony to our faith as we acknowledge God’s presence. Celebrating smaller milestones has helped to draw the church family into the life of the child and strengthen the promise that was made at that child’s baptism.

These are some of the ways in which I have been able to celebrate milestones with both the family and the church. For example, the church gives a welcome basket to welcome a child into a family either by birth, foster, or adoption. The contents of the basket vary, but there is something for everyone inside. For a new baby, there are a few bedtime books and a stuffed toy, for a new big brother or sister there is a book specifically for them about the important role they now have as the older sibling, and finally, there is a daily devotional written specifically for new parents as well as a gift card to either a restaurant or grocery store.

Next, when it comes time for baptism, the church ladies knit a prayer shawl for each child. During worship the morning of the baptism, those present in worship are invited to come forward, lay hands on the shawl and say a short blessing or prayer for the baby. As the infant is baptized, he or she is wrapped in the prayer shawl, symbolizing being wrapped in the love of their church family. Each child also receives a special story Bible that encourages the parents to share the great stories of our faith with their child as he or she grows.
As each school year begins we hold a blessing of the backpacks during worship. We invite all our children, teachers, and administrators to bring their backpack or school bag with them to worship that morning. During worship, they are invited forward, and the congregation blesses and prays for them. Everyone who comes forward then receives a luggage tag for their backpack that includes a short prayer they can pray each day as they go to school. This milestone event also includes a backpack and school supply drive for one of our local schools.

Next, every year the students who are in third grade receive a Bible from their church family. The presentation of the Bible occurs during worship and includes a prayer of blessing over those children as they grow in wisdom and stature, referencing Jesus’ boyhood (Lk 2:52). For two weeks after the children receive their Bibles, we hold Bible boot camp helping them learn the basics of using their new Bibles. Parents are also invited to join in this class.

The preparing for adolescence milestone occurs as a child is on the verge of becoming a teenager. It is a milestone for both parents and preteens as they seek to navigate the new territory of adolescence. This is a class that usually takes place outside of a typical Sunday morning schedule. I have offered it on Sunday afternoons and have also done it as a weekend retreat. We use James Dobson’s *Preparing for Adolescence* curriculum.4 This has been a helpful course for both parents and preteens marking a significant milestone in the life of a young person.

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The confirmation milestone usually takes place when a child is entering ninth grade. This course is offered anywhere from eight weeks to eight months for teens to learn about the history of our denomination, the core truths of what we believe, who we are as a local church, and how they can become a part of the church. During confirmation class the students are paired with a mentor, a member of the church family, who works with them on their requirements outside of class. The students and their mentors participate in several activities and service projects both inside and outside of the church.

Graduation is the final milestone we celebrate with the children, as it marks the transition to adulthood. During worship, we recognize all our high school, college, and graduate school graduates. This recognition includes a time of prayer and blessing as they begin their new adventure. The high school graduates receive a blanket, recalling their baptism and the promise their church family made that day. As these seniors are wrapped in their blanket they are reminded that we as their church family love them and are always there to support them in their journey.

**Imparting Faith: Spiritual Practices for the Family**

Spiritual practices are a great way for parents to incorporate faith into the home. For some even the mention of the words spiritual practice brings feelings of frustration and/or failure, but it does not have to be that way. Practices or disciplines are actions and activities we participate in to cultivate our spiritual growth and development. They are ways of working out our faith as both individuals and as a community of faith. Practices can range from uncomplicated and effortless, such as a breath prayer, to more challenging and thought-provoking, like fasting from social media.
The concept of incorporating spiritual practices into family life is to enrich our faith and understanding of God as well as strengthen our relationship with God. This can be done by integrating practices into family routines and providing various opportunities for family members to try different disciplines in the hope one or more will become a part of the family ritual of faith. “The more we turn our attention Godward, the more our eyes grow accustomed to recognizing the risen Lord in our ordinary walks of life. We develop ‘ears of the heart’ by listening for the Lord’s voice in the midst of all the other voices clamoring for our attention.”

There are several easy ways to start bringing spiritual practices into the life of the family. There are several books and resources available to equip parents for this task. Perhaps one of the most important starting places for spiritual practice is creating a space where the sacred and the everyday can mingle together. This may be a physical space, like a comfy chair in the living room or a lawn chair on the back deck or in the backseat of the family car. This may even be a specific place set aside for quiet moments with God, like a family altar set with a Bible and a candle or the dinner table with the family gathered around or beside the bed where nighttime prayers take place. “Human beings tend to locate the sacred in concrete locales where a sense of ‘the more’ has been experienced. The same is true in families. A given family might name the dinner table as the place where the ‘more’ is palpably present, that is, where the family is felt as more

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6 See Appendix A.
than the sum of its parts.”  

Creating a space is the beginning of all spiritual practices. It is quieting the noise that surrounds us to gather our thoughts and concentrate on encountering God. Intentionality is the key to this discipline, and when quiet space is cultivated, one is able to not only find themselves, but experience God.

Closely connected to creating space is the practice of Sabbath-keeping. This discipline is found in the teachings of Moses as given in the Ten Commandments, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” (Ex 20:8). But, the concept of Sabbath-keeping is also seen in Jesus’ own actions as he goes off by himself to find a quiet place to pray and rest (Luke 6:12). Sabbath-keeping is not only about the observance of one day in a week of seven. It is about the cultivation of a certain quality of time: time that is gracious and still, and time that is intentional, spacious and restorative. It is not merely a day off to refuel or run errands and is certainly not to be confused with noisy entertainment or frantic recreational activity. Sabbath time can be anytime “if it allows deep, rhythmic rest and rejuvenation to occur. Time set aside for gentle prayer or retreats, walks by the seashore, in the garden or through the woods, quiet afternoon moments sipping a cup of tea or reading a poem before a warming fire—all these and many more moments can be Sabbath time.”

Sabbath time is also a time to be together as family, uninterrupted by the demands of life, unplugged and enjoying the company and fellowship that comes with being together.

Prayer: Perhaps one of the easiest, and at the same time most difficult, disciplines

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8 Ibid., 55.
is that of prayer. Prayer is the easiest because there are many ways, and certainly no wrong way, to pray. It is in prayer that we are able to talk with God. For children, this comes naturally as they are uninhibited in their approach to God. Prayer can be intimidating when one thinks about what words should be said, but at its core, prayer is simply a conversation with God. One of the difficulties in prayer is found in the actual execution and practice of praying: finding time to pray. One of the best ways to begin this discipline is to set a specific time and place for prayer to happen daily. This could be at meals together, at bedtime, or in the car on the way to school. The key to establishing prayer time as a family is consistency and keeping prayers short and simple.

Once a pattern of daily prayer is established, other forms of prayer, different places, and times can be folded into the mix. In addition to mealtime or bedtime prayers, one can incorporate spontaneous prayers. One example is a breath prayer or “The Jesus Prayer.” This type of prayer is made up of a few words or a simple phrase and should be short and simple enough to say in a breath, such as “Lord, have mercy,” or “Lord, show me your love.” The beauty of the breath prayer is they can be repeated at various times throughout the day in all kinds of situations and over time, the prayer will become lodged in the subconscious mind and surface on its own accord. Another example are “javelin prayers, short prayers spoken as encounters with people occur and various needs arise.”

This could be a prayer spoken for a homeless person on the street corner, or a frantic mom screaming at her children in the grocery store or lifting up a friend who has come to

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mind during the day. This prayer is informal, one or two sentences asking God to intervene in a situation where little information is gathered, yet these prayers become powerful tools for families as they build prayer muscles.

Story telling is another activity to incorporate into daily family life: An important element of our faith is our story, both the biblical story and our individual story, and how our story is connected to the bigger story of God. Knowledge of Scripture is an essential piece of our faith foundation, for the Bible tells us the great story of God from its beginning to its end. It tells us of God’s work in the creation of the world and the promises God made with his people. We read about God’s fulfilling those promises in Jesus and how those promises were lived out in the people of God. Without telling the biblical story, we would not know God. Even in the basic Bible stories that are taught to children, God’s love is apparent. But, the story needing to be told is more than the biblical story. It is also our story, the family’s story, and the church’s story. It is taking to heart Moses’ teaching in Deuteronomy 6 and telling of God’s faithfulness in our lives. It includes sharing faith stories with the family of times when God answered prayer or times when we heard God speak into our lives. When stories are shared, faith becomes tangible, and children are able to see their place in the bigger faith story.

Next, the simple act of sharing a meal together as family once a week is a wonderful spiritual practice. The table is the center of the home, and the center of our worship as Christians. As a community of faith, we take a moment to celebrate Jesus life, death, and resurrection through communion as we gather around the table. As a family, sharing a meal means taking a moment to celebrate God’s working in our lives. As the family gathers for this dedicated time together, they are to unplug from any distractions
that may pull family members away. Eating dinner as a family is an opportunity to have a conversation about how each family member saw God at work throughout the highs and lows of the past week. It is a time to share words of encouragement and appreciation for each member of the family by going around the table and one by one and sharing a word or event for each member of the family. Pray together, not just thanking God for the meal, but for each family member, for God’s faithfulness during the week, and for answered prayer. Ask God to replace any of our fears or sorrows with confidence and joy. This weekly ritual has the potential for becoming the highlight of the week, something to look forward to as the family draws closer to each other and closer to God.

Next, finding opportunities to serve the community as a family is a great way for children to see faith in action. Robert Coles has noted, “Our children add up, imitate, file away what they’ve observed and so very often later fall in line with the particular moral counsel we wittingly or quiet unself-consciously have offered them.”\textsuperscript{11} If a child sees their parent regularly go out of their way to help someone in need, whether in the grocery store helping someone reach an item on the shelf, or on the street corner giving food to a homeless person, or in the church on Sunday morning assisting an elderly person to their seat, children interpret those actions as important aspects of faith and seek out chances to serve in that manner. There are also opportunities for families to serve together, including participating in community park clean up, volunteering at a food bank or serving meals at a soup kitchen, collecting items for a food and clothing drive, sending notes to shut-ins or going on visits to the nursing home. This spiritual discipline creates an attitude of

generosity, gratitude, and responsibility when it is tied with our faith and Jesus’ words to care for “the least of these” (Mt 25:31-46).

Emanating Faith: Living Faith in All of Life

The result of sculpting faith and imparting faith is emanating faith, establishing a faith story that weaves into every part of everyday life. We are not called to be Christians who talk about Jesus only on Sunday or pray and read our bible only when we are at church. These essential aspects of faith are to be everyday topics of conversations and habits we participate in daily. Our faith ultimately is to be a part of who we are, and it is to be so instinctive it becomes like breathing. Like Horace Bushnell wrote:

Parents should seek to teach a feeling more than a doctrine; to bathe the child in their own feeling of love to God, and dependence on him, and contrition for wrong before him . . . to make what is good, happy and attractive, what is wrong, odious and hateful; then as understanding advances, to give it food suited to its capacity, opening upon it, gradually the more difficult views of Christian doctrine and experience.12

Nurturing a child’s faith is about finding ways of incorporating the simple actions already being done within the context of family into the language of faith. It is giving words, like charity or stewardship, a deeper meaning by connecting them to our actions and pointing towards what, as Christians, we believe and are called to do. It is taking Deuteronomy 6 to heart, “Repeat [these words] again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up” (Dt 6:7, MSG). These are simple and intentional actions, not deep theological lessons. Some examples of faith in everyday life are

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stopping and praying when sirens are heard, “God, be with those first responders, protect them from harm. Be with the people they are going to help,” giving a blessing each morning before everyone heads off to school or work, “God be with us this day, guide our steps and all we say,” taking a moment to thank God for the little things we might take for granted by saying, “Thanks God for the leaves on the tree that provide us shade,” or taking the time to clean up trash while out on a walk around the block or at a play date in the park. These actions teach children about our relationship with God, and our call to be good stewards who care for everything around us.

There are also simple actions that can be taken to foster gratitude, generosity, and charity in our everyday life. For example, giving lunch bags packed with snacks, a bottle of water, and a note of encouragement to people standing on the street corner begging for money makes an impression on all involved. Donating toys or clothing when new items are received as birthday or Christmas gifts, and collecting bottles and cans and donating the money earned to charity teaches generosity.

The spiritual world we create for children to inhabit, with its content of biblical stories, language of faith, and simple prayer, enables children to think spiritually. It sets the stage for the cultivation of spiritual awareness. This is our task as church leaders, members of a community of faith, and as parents. We are called to instill in the children God has entrusted into our care a language of faith and an awareness of God in their lives, equipping them with the tools they will use to guide them later in life.

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Summary and Conclusion

The middle-class American family is busy, there is no disputing that fact, but the power of the home and influence of the family are no less crucial. With all the hours of homework that is assigned each night on top of the extracurricular activities children participate in, time spent together as a family is at a premium and still needs to be a priority. On a daily basis children are surrounded by peers and media, which constantly bombard them with ideas of what they should look like, how they should dress, and what they should think or not think. With the relentless outside influences that are working to shape a child’s self-image and worldview, it is imperative for parents to step up and take responsibility for laying a foundation of faith.

Our goal as church leaders is not to see our church attendance numbers increase, admittedly that would be nice, but our end goal is not a numbers game. As the body of Christ, our goal is to see the body alive and well in our communities, sharing the good news in the world we live in, and making a difference in the lives of others. As the family of God our goal is to continue to grow in our faith together—equipping and encouraging one another as we journey together.

There are many factors that impact who we become as human beings. From the time we take our first breath, we are engaging and processing the world around us, and for better or for worse, our family is where those lessons begin. From day one we are learning lessons of who we can trust, who loves us, and who will keep us safe. As we continue to assess our surroundings, we learn the harder lessons that build upon those early lessons learned. Our image of God is being shaped as our spiritual foundation is being laid.
Spiritual formation is not just morals and values, for our faith is deeper than right and wrong. Spiritual formation is about who we are as a child of God and how we chose to live our lives. It is the foundation upon which we build our lives. It is the filter that helps determine how we make decisions, how we treat others, and how we understand our place in the world.

It is through good intentions that the church took the lead in nurturing the spiritual formation of children. Sunday school was originally established as a supplement to what was already taking place in the home to help fill in the gaps of the deeper theological questions. Gradually, Sunday school became the primary source for spiritual formation, with the home, in limited capacity, supplementing what was taking place at church.

In my ministry experience, I have sensed a deep feeling of incompetency in parents as they seek to raise their children in the faith. I have witnessed a distraught single-father who, when posed difficult questions by his daughter, stopped coming to church because he was constantly reminded that he lacked the knowledge that accompanied his faith. “How can I raise her to be a good Christian if she always comes home from church with questions I have no idea how to answer? I have questions myself, and nobody to answer them. I just cannot do this faith thing anymore.” I have endured several conversations with parents who were under the impression that it was, my job to teach their children about Jesus, to answer all their faith related questions and to make sure their child knew all they needed to know to be good Christians. Ending the conversation with, “After all, isn’t that what we pay you for?”

I have also had the joy to witness what the church can do for children who do not have a faith-based home. For example, a brother and sister who brought themselves to
Sunday school every week were so full of questions. Their Sunday school teachers took the time to answer them one by one, exploring all the possible answers along with the rest of the children in their class. After about six months of this pattern, their mother began to join them in their Sunday school class, learning the answers to her children’s questions and building a faith foundation for her family. About eight months later, the three were baptized and welcomed into the church family.

Reimagining the partnership between church and home is about balance—finding that place where the church and the home can support one another. What happens at church every Sunday morning is an important part of our faith development, but it is not exclusive to the church. What happens at home every day is also an important part of our faith development. Both entities are about building a foundation for faith, giving words to express what we believe, providing guidance for making life choices, imparting knowledge, and creating a sense of belonging.

Nurturing begins primarily at home where the most time is spent. Moses’ charge to Israel puts into perspective the role of the home and the family. “Get [these commandments] 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” (Dt 6:7, MSG). Deuteronomy 6 is very clear about the role of the home. When it comes to faith formation, there is no denying the responsibility given to parents. Yet, when it is looked at as his charge to the extended family, as the nation of Israel was present, there is also a sense of corporate responsibility as all of Israel was told to inform future generations of all God had done for them. This sense of responsibility also carries over into Psalm 78 as the generations were instructed to continue to tell the
faith story: “Then [God] commanded our parents to teach it to their children so the next
generation would know, and all the generations to come—know the truth and tell the
stories so their children can trust in God, never forget the works of God” (Ps 78:5-8,
MSG). Within the pages of Scripture there is a common thread of shared responsibility
between the home and the faith community for nurturing faith in the next generation.

This struggle for balance is not new for the twenty-first century Church, as it has
been a topic of concern and conversation throughout Church history. The writings of
some theologians of the past, like St. John Chrysostom, are still relevant today. His
address, written in the late 300s, which voiced his concern for parents’ pursuits of
vainglory and their lack of focused concern for their children in spiritual matters, but
rather those of materialism and success, could have been written in 2017. Likewise,
Martin Luther (1500s) and Horace Bushnell (1800s) also wrote of their concern for the
lack of responsibility of parents in the spiritual nurturing of children. The cycle
continues.

The key to the spiritual nurture of children is in the reimagining of the partnership
between the church and the home. The church needs to relinquish its control as the
primary faith nurturer. A makeover is needed to convert the church’s image of the
professional with all the answers to that of resource person providing directions to help
others find the answers. The home needs to grasp hold of the biblical mandate and
become the primary faith nurturer. A shift in management style is needed to convert the
home into the place where faith can incubate, seeking assistance from the church and not
demanding service.
Through implementing family-faith events within the life of the church, I have begun to see a gradual shift in responsibility for the spiritual nurture of children. Following a faith event on prayer, I received great reaction from a parent who never felt comfortable praying with her children at home. With the tools she was given and a few of the written prayers, she was able to confidently pray with her children and was even able to incorporate several other spiritual practices into her home without making drastic changes in the family’s daily routine. Another example of a shift in responsibility was a grandmother who brought her grandchildren to an Advent event. The boys were so excited to create an advent wreath. She sent me several pictures of the entire extended family gathered around the wreath in her son’s home while each of her grandchildren lit a candle while their dad read the corresponding scripture. I was also told that through this ritual, the family began to talk together about the true meaning of Christmas and brainstorm ways of how they might celebrate differently that year.

Incorporating milestones into the life of the church has also brought about benefits. Over the past eight months, seven families in our church have had babies and one family has received a foster baby. Our church family is very excited for this baby boom and what that means for the future of our congregation. As each of these families came home from the hospital they received a welcome basket. This has been a great connecting point for the relationship between the church and the home. From the start, we are equipping these new parents with tools that will help them in their newly established role. We are also letting them know that we are there to support them on their new journey. This leads to the baptism milestone which is also a beautiful connecting point between the home and the church. As the congregation lays hands on a prayer shawl in
which the child is wrapped during their baptism, it becomes a tangible and visual reminder of the baptismal vow made by the church family: to love and support the parents and the child as he or she grows in faith.

I have also found that the church needs to become more mindful of the master calendar and not put more activities on the already taxed family calendar. This has meant hosting events or activities at times that can accommodate families while they are already at church or just after a Sunday service, with lunch provided. Another option is to host smaller events at a family’s home which gets the church out into the neighborhood. We have offered date nights once a quarter. This event invites children to come to church for a few hours on a Friday night for food and fun, while allowing their parents a few hours to go out to dinner and have a child-free conversation. Some date nights have included a pre-dinner speaker which provided the couple with a conversation focus for the evening.

The twenty-first century church needs to change to meet the needs of the twenty-first century family. The reality of the times is church is not central to the life of the family, but often one more task on a long to-do list. The relationship between the two needs to become one of support and encouragement, not one of guilt and shame. As professionals, pastors and educators need to make sure the church is a place of resource for the family: providing opportunities for questions to be answered, skills to be learned, and doubts to be set aside. For children, church is the place where they can come and learn about Jesus, memorize Bible verses, sing a few songs, and most of all be loved unconditionally by their church family. For parents, it is the place where they can come for support and encouragement as they journey in their parental role, receive tools for the
journey, fellowship with others who are on the same path but at different stages, and find a few answers to common difficult questions.

It is not an easy task to seek a partnership and make a change to the way church is done. Change is not easy, yet it is essential for the health and wellbeing of the children who are a part of the church. For our children to benefit from a strong faith foundation, the church and the home need to work together as partners. The partnership is not one of equals, for the home holds a greater calling, but each is necessary to achieve the final outcome. Reimagining the partnership comes down to a shift in focus for the church. Ultimately, the church is responsible for the spiritual nurture of the parents who are then responsible for the spiritual nurture of their children.
APPENDIX A

Resources for Parents


Christmas is full of cherished memories for me. I can remember gathering around on Sunday evening, listening to my dad tell the Christmas story, and week after week seeing the candles glow around the wreath in the hall. For me this is what Christmas is about—the birth of our Savior and sharing the joy of that baby's birth with my family. This devotional booklet is designed to help kindle that joy and excitement. It is my hope that as you gather with your loved ones on Sunday evening you begin to build wonderful memories. And week after week, as you take a step closer to the manger and watch the candles glow in the advent candle centerpiece, you will find out for yourself the true meaning of this wonderful season. This Advent may you discover the joy and wonder of Jesus' birth as you gather around and tell the beloved story with those you love.

In His Love,

Jenni

There are a number of items built into this devotional booklet from which you may pick and choose. I do not intend for this to be followed to the letter. Instead, I want to assist you and help guide you in leading your devotional worship this Advent. For example, there is at least one scripture passage for each Sunday evening, as well as a Christmas carol. Parents may read the scripture passages or have their children read them, or not read them at all, whatever is appropriate for your family. There is also a section after the devotion that is designed to make the story become real—both visible and tangible. It involves a Nativity scene with various pieces which you might set up next to your Advent candle centerpiece. I have made some suggestions about adding figures to the Nativity scene as you gather for the lighting of the candles. Be creative and add to or subtract from what I have provided. This is your time to be with those you love. May God bless this time and may you reap the fruits of your labor all year long.
The First Sunday of Advent

The Prophecy Candle
Micah 5:2-5 and Isaiah 40:1-5
"O Come Let Us Adore Him"

The season of Christmas begins today. It is the first Sunday of Advent, a time of preparation. As we light the first candle, we begin to see a change in the room around us. We see new things, like new shadows on the wall. We can also feel new things, like the warmth from the candle’s flame. There are many things the candlelight brings into our home.

The same is true with the season of Advent. There is a change in the air as we begin to decorate our house, hang the lights, and put our ornaments on the tree. These are changes we can see, but there are also changes we can feel… like excitement! We are all very excited about what is coming in a few weeks, the great celebration of Christmas when we give presents and get some in return. But, Christmas is not just about presents. It is Jesus’ Birthday! The people of the Bible looked forward to Jesus’ coming for hundreds of years. When that day finally came, many did not believe that a small baby born in a stable was what they were waiting for, but that small baby had a big job to do.

So tonight, as we light this first candle, the Candle of Prophecy, we begin to look forward to what lies ahead. As we prepare our house for Christmas, we also need to prepare our hearts for Jesus' birth and to remember what Christmas is really about. Let's pray...

Dear God, we thank you for this time of preparation, as we look forward to Jesus' coming. Lord, help us to remember what Christmas is about and help us to prepare our hearts for that special baby's birth. Amen.

*Place the stable of the Nativity scene on the table. This sets the scene for the story. Like the prophecy, which told of something in the future, the empty stable can help create excitement for what will come as the weeks unfold. Throughout the week, you can begin to add animals to the stable, making the scene move from prophecy to reality.
The Second Sunday of Advent

The Bethlehem Candle
"O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Tonight we light the second candle, the Bethlehem Candle. Bethlehem is the city where Jesus was born, but it was not the place where he grew up. Mary and Joseph, Jesus' mom and dad, had to go to Bethlehem because of a census. They had to go to the place where their great great great grandparents lived, the city of King David. The city was far from where they lived and it took them several days to get there. When Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, there was no place for them to stay. All of the hotels were full. What a horrible thing—to be about to have a baby and not have a place to stay. But, there was one man who showed Mary and Joseph a place where they could stay. It was a stable, a place where there were all kinds of smelly, stinky animals. Still, at least there would be a roof over their heads.

As we see the light of this second candle, we know we are getting closer to Christmas. We know what was said about the baby and we know where he will be born. We need to make room for the baby in our hearts. Sometimes we get so busy with stuff that we can't find room for Jesus. Just like that man who found a place for Mary and Joseph to stay, we need to remember to give Jesus a great big place in our lives this Christmas. Let's pray...

Dear God, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for this time of Christmas. Help us to make room for him in our lives and to remember that Christmas is about Jesus and not about us. Amen.

*Place Mary and Joseph in the stable with the animals. If your manger is a separate piece from the baby, place it inside as well. This is “making a place for Jesus.” You can also explain what the manger was used for (feeding animals), and how even the animals made a place for the baby.
The Third Sunday of Advent

The Shepherds’ Candle
Luke 2:8-20
"Go Tell it on the Mountain"

Another candle is lit and tonight we can feel the excitement growing. There are only two more candles left. Tonight is the Shepherds’ Candle because the shepherds heard about Jesus and came to see him. Then the shepherds went and told others about Jesus.

As we begin to have presents under the tree and receive Christmas cards from friends, sometimes we find it easy to forget what Christmas is about. Jesus’ birthday doesn't always come to mind, does it? But in the busyness of the season we can find a place to tell others about the baby Jesus—just like the shepherds who were busy doing their job, taking care of the sheep. They heard about Jesus and had to see him for themselves. The shepherds left their job to see the baby and tell others about what they saw.

We can do the same thing. Because we know about Jesus and have prepared a place for him, we can tell other people about the baby. Share the good news! After all, Christmas is also about sharing, sharing with people who might not know what Christmas is really about—giving rather than receiving. Let's pray...

Dear God, thank you for this season of Advent, thank you for Jesus. God, help us to share the good news with others who need to hear about Christmas. Amen.

*Place the shepherds in the stable as they came to see this great baby. You can also place the wise men in the stable because they also came to see the baby. Although the wise men did not arrive until much later, they still came to see Jesus like the shepherds and also told others about what they saw.
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

The Angels’ Candle
"Hark the Herald Angels Sing"

Tonight we light the last advent candle, the Angels’ Candle. The angels were God's messengers throughout the Christmas story. As we are now only a few days from Christmas the excitement is overwhelming. I can hardly wait until Christmas, when we can celebrate Jesus’ Birthday. Our time of preparation is almost over and our time of celebration is almost here.

The Angels had a very important part to play in the Christmas story. They let everybody know what was going to happen and when. An angel appeared to Mary and told her she was going to have a baby. Then an angel appeared to Joseph to tell him Mary was going to have a baby. A bunch of angels appeared before the shepherds and told them about the baby born in Bethlehem. And angels warned the wise men in a dream to return home without seeing Herod again.

Angels spread the good news of Jesus' birth. Without them, the shepherds would not have heard about Jesus and gone to see the baby, or Joseph would not have married Mary. God's story would not have been complete without these most important characters. Imagine a candy cane without its stripes or a Christmas tree without any decoration. Without the angels, the story would not be the same. There would be no one to tell of the great and wonderful news. But once one person knows, it is only a matter of time before everyone knows. Let's pray…

Dear God, thank you for the angels who shared the good news so that we could share it as well. Help us to remember that good news and to share it with others. Amen.

*Place the angel in the scene. At this point, all of the characters of the story except for Jesus should be present in the stable. Though all the visitors came after Jesus birth, it is the preparation and the telling of the story that we are recreating. We are building excitement toward the climax of Jesus birth.*
Christmas Eve

The Christ Candle
John 1:1-6 and Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-20
"Away in a Manger" and "Joy to the World"

*Start this time by reading the Christmas story in its totality. Until this point the great story has only been told piece by piece. But tonight, the entire story comes together. With this candle the prophecy is fulfilled, the city is silent, the shepherds are present, and the angels have told the good news. Christ is Born! Place the baby in the manger!

This evening we light the final candle, the Christ candle, because tonight is the night before the birth of Jesus. Tomorrow is Christmas and the day that we celebrate his birth. All the candles are lit and the light is shining bright, because Jesus is the light of the world. Let's pray...

Dear God, thank you for Jesus, thank you for bringing him to us as a baby. Please help us all year to remember the joy of this day. And help us to remember the light that is Jesus. Amen.
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