



EQUIPPING FOR... **CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**

The Role of Grandparents and Caring Adults in Faith Formation of Children and Youth

“I proclaim your might to all the generations to come.” — Psalm 71:18c

Produced by Canadian Ministries

Church researchers and leaders suggest that grandparents and caring adults in our faith communities can play a significant part today in the faith formation of young people. This resource explores that role and how to equip adults for it.

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Psalm 71:17-18.

Reflect on your relationships with children and youth in your family and faith community. How do you share your faith with them?

Sing or read aloud “We will tell each generation” #46 in the Book of Praise.

Pray: Loving God, help us reach out to the young people around us, to listen to one another, to share our stories of your love and compassion for all creation. Amen.

“More than any single program or event, kids were far more likely to feel they were a significant part of their local churches when adults made the effort to get to know them.” From the Fuller Youth Institute’s (FYI) College Transition Project graduate student surveys. See <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/sticky-faith/research-overview>



Grandparents can provide a stabilizing influence in their grandchildren’s lives in situations of parental divorce, incapacity, addiction or emotional distancing. In these contexts grandparents’ influence may be highly salient for the development of children’s religious values and beliefs. In other situations, grandparents may play a larger role in influencing children’s religious orientation simply because they have more time to do so, or religious instruction is not a priority for parents, or parents are religiously indifferent...” Vern Bengston, researcher. See <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/twenty-ideas-for-grandparents>

Nurturing Grandchildren in Christian Faith

by Peter Bush, minister at Westwood Presbyterian Church, Winnipeg,
and representative with Evangelism Connections for The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The 3 p.m. Christmas Eve service was about to begin and a woman in her 60s was pacing the entry area of the church building. She muttered to me, “My daughter is running late.” Suddenly there was a smile and relief on her face as a woman with two children in tow, ages ten and seven, came up the walkway. Grandma, as I discovered her to be, said, “Thank you for having this service for the whole community. It lets my grandchildren be part of a Christmas pageant.”

This grandmother is not alone in struggling to find ways to nurture her grandchildren in the Christian faith. In situations where parents are often apathetic to faith – or even mildly hostile – many grandparents feel a deep desire to reach their grandchildren with the good news of Jesus.

In November 2015 I attended the World Council of Churches event “Reclaiming Evangelism: Celebrating Change and Collaboration” where I heard a presentation by Tanya Eustace, Director of Children and Intergenerational Ministries, Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church. I was struck that her model for nurturing faith in children does not require a church building or even a classroom setting. Neither does it require a church minister or Christian educator. Any adult of faith can use Eustace’s model with children with whom they have a relationship, such as grandchildren and neighbours. The following description of Eustace’s model is what I gleaned from her presentation which was based on her doctoral dissertation *Experiencing God Together: A Practical Theology for Ministry with Children*.¹

Eustace began her presentation and her thesis with this story:

It was a normal Sunday morning. As the children’s minister at a United Methodist church, I was scurrying around trying to make sure everything was ready for that morning’s planned ministries. As I raced to check the copy machine I saw a

family (mom, dad, son) standing in the hallway looking slightly lost. I slowed my pace, walked up to the family and introduced myself. Both parents looked at each other, then at their son, and finally their eyes focused on me. The mom took a deep breath and said: “He has a question for you” (motioning to their son). I quickly got down at eye level with the child (who looked about 3 or 4) and said: “Hi, I’m Tanya. I’m the pastor for children here at this Church. I’m so glad you’re here. Would you like to ask me a question?” The child looked down at the ground, scuffed his feet and said: “How do I know I believe in God?”

This story reminds us that children ask profound spiritual questions; and they look to the adults they know for answers. The responsibility to respond to questions of faith extends beyond the church and Sunday school leaders. Grandparents and other adults can be the wise, caring adults that help children understand their experiences of God. Eustace highlights four ways children experience God: they *engage* with God, *recognize* God, *claim* their experiences of God and *respond* to God.

Caring adults help children engage with God

Using liturgy and story, adults can help children recognize that God engages with them and that they can engage with God. Each Advent an older woman took an Advent calendar home from church to use with her neighbour’s children. Each day after school she served them hot chocolate and used the calendar’s daily devotional.

- Adults can develop routines through liturgy (e.g. lighting a candle before reading a Bible story), by repeating phrases (e.g. “The Lord be with you”, “And also with you”), and by praying (e.g. The Lord’s Prayer or grace at mealtime), which mark God’s engagement with us.

¹ Copies of Tanya Eustace’s dissertation can be ordered from ProQuest at: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1626388144>

- Wise adults will tell stories of their own lives when they experienced God. Children need to know God is at work in the lives of people they know; in this way they learn that God was active in the Bible and is *still* active now. And it's OK to talk about it.

Caring adults help children *recognize* they are in relationship with God

Jesus' summary of the Ten Commandments – “You shall love your God” and “You shall love your neighbour” (Matthew 22:36-40) – reminds us that we are in relationship with God and other people.

- Children are called to recognize they live in relationship with others, and that these relationships are for the good of the other person as well as for the good of themselves. Children may need, and welcome, direction on how to behave in ways that enhance relationships.
- Caring adults help children know God is in relationship with them (eg. instead of “goodbye”, say “God loves you, God goes with you”). Before children leave for school or to be away for a any reason, say to them, “Remember who you are, and whose you are; you are a child of God.”

Caring adults help children *claim* their experiences of God

Children are concrete thinkers. They claim experiences of God by linking those experiences to places and objects that are with them at the moment they are aware of God's presence.

- Wise adults help children claim aloud their experience of God with place, time and object. Claiming sentences sound like this, “I experienced God when (*describe the event*); I had that experience at (*name the place*); this (*name the object*) reminds me of that experience.” Teaching children to claim spiritual experiences invites adults to be examples, claiming their own experiences of God.
- Eustace tells the story of a young girl who said, “I remembered that God loved me when Daddy gave Mommy roses this week. The flowers remind me that God loves me.” Astute adults listen for

these stories, using concrete objects to remind children at a later time of their experiences of God.

Caring adults help children *respond* to their experiences of God

Wonder and work (or service) are important components of responding to God.

- In wondering, the adult is quiet so children have the space to talk about their faith experiences and to ask their questions. Wonder is about both awe and questions. Space and encouragement are required for these to emerge.
- Work is closely linked to wonder. As children claim their experiences of God they will, if given a chance, often suggest how they want to respond. At times the responses will be actions that reach out to the wider community and into the creation; adults may need to offer assistance while resisting the desire to take over.

Grandparents and neighbours, together with parents and teachers and ministers, have opportunities to connect with children and help children to *engage* with God, *recognize* their relationships with others and with God, *claim* their experiences of God and *respond* to God with wonder and work.

Supportive relationships

Decades of research show that a youth's relationships with adults play a critical role in their successful development and thriving. It is recommended that each youth has supportive relationships with three or more nonparent adults. This is one of 40 “developmental assets” identified by Search Institute. For the essential elements of a meaningful relationship with a young person go to www.search-institute.org/downloadable/Dev-Relationships-Framework-Sept2014.pdf

Tips for grandparents or caring adults wanting to be spiritual guides

- Think through your own attitudes and philosophy concerning this role.
- Decide how to implement this role most authentically.
- By word or example, let the family know your beliefs and intentions.

- Coordinate with the parents what you intend to do.
- Spend time alone in nature with the child.
- Engage in a charitable activity with the child.
- Share your own spiritual experiences with the child.
- Listen to the child's conceptions of the meaning of life, nature and God.
- Discuss the "fruits of the spirit" (i.e. tangible and intangible qualities like love, tolerance, compassion, reverence, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith and kindness).
- Demonstrate spiritual values in action and language.
- Transmit religious beliefs when appropriate and with the parents' consent.
- Even those grandparents and caring adults who profess no spiritual beliefs can teach goodness. Set an excellent personal example by teaching generosity, kindness and concern for others.

From Grandparents as "Spiritual Guides" <http://grandparenting.org/resource/grandparents-as-spiritual-guides/>
See also Grandparents/grandchildren – Spiritual Connections <http://grandparenting.org/resource/grandparentsgrandchildren-a-spiritual-connection/>

Tips for congregational leaders

- Provide resources from a church or home library, or from Sunday school material.
- Find ways to affirm grandparents, great-grandparents and caring adults as people of faith, role models and mentors (e.g. involve them as mentors in a confirmation program).
- Facilitate relationships between adults and children and youth, whether they are family-related or not (e.g. Bible reading partners).
- Invite and support adults of all ages to lead the children's time in worship.
- Encourage members of an adult Bible study to join a youth gathering or event.
- Ask the women's group to plan an event (e.g. a weekend tea) for teen girls, the men's group to plan an event for teen boys.
- Suggest that mission and outreach committee members pair up with youth in serving at a homeless shelter, out-of-the-cold meal, boarding home, etc.
- Hold services and programs to which community groups and members are invited.

Resources

Church school curriculum sometimes includes with it, or as a supplement, materials for use at home for parents or other adults: e.g. *Dwell* has "Faith Modeling" tips that help adults share faith stories with kids (www.DwellCurriculum.org); *Spark* has a quarterly magazine for families and a web link for parents to stay connected to lessons (www.activatefaith.org); *We Believe* has enrichment resources for home use (www.thepresbyterianleader.com); *SeasonsFusion* has a quarterly publication that includes suggestions for home activities (<https://www.seasonsonline.ca/412/413/>).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has resource suggestions that can support faith practices and conversations between young people and adults – whether these are parents, grandparents or other adults – in the home, congregation or community. These include family devotions; annotated lists of children's picture books; books about praying and ministry with children and youth. See the Intergenerational section at <http://presbyterian.ca/ce-resources/>.

Books & Websites

Families and Faith: How religion is passed down across generations by Vern Bengston, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Mingled Roots: A Guide for Grandparents of Interfaith Children by Sunie Levin and Dahlia Schoenberg, URJ Press, 2003.

Opening Doors to Discipleship www.odtd.net – An online Christian education resource

The Grandparent Guide: The Definitive Guide to Coping with the Challenges of Modern Grandparenting by Arthur Kornhaber, M.D., Contemporary Books/McGraw-Hill, 2002.

Canadian Ministries wants to hear from YOU!

What parts of this resource are most useful? Share your experiences with building intergenerational relationships. Recommend a resource! Make a suggestion or ask a question!

Contact us at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca or call 416-441-1111 or 1-800-619-7301 Ext. 271. Find us on Facebook at facebook.com/pconnect.