

Equipping for ...

Faith Formation Comes (Back) Home

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There is a quite a lot of talk in church circles these days about faith, families, and “family ministry.” What’s it all about? Why all the interest?

Over the past three decades, there has been a lot of research into what makes people have a lifelong faith. One of the consistent findings has been the significance of parental influence. For example, The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a large American study that looked at the faith of

young people, found that, “parents are most important in forming their children’s religious and spiritual lives . . . the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents do look like. Parents and other adults most likely will get what they are.”¹ This recognition may be empowering to parents, or alarming, or both, but it is a fact worth taking seriously.

¹Smith and Denton. *SoulSearching: The Religious And Spiritual Lives Of Teenagers*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2009 (reprint)





Consider this finding in light of the significant decline in church attendance among mainline Protestants. It has been suggested that one of the major sources of this decline has been our inability to retain our 'own' children. The two are intrinsically related and our churches will continue to decline unless something changes.

Family faith formation, teaching our children how and why to be Christians, seems low on the priority list of many families. But this has not always been the case. Michael Brewer, pastor, writer, and professor, reminds us that, "the earliest congregations met in homes, and the central act of worship was a family meal. Not surprisingly, we hear of whole families being baptized together as a shared declaration of faith and trust in the risen Lord (for an example, see Acts 16:25-34). We cannot possibly understand the beginnings of Christianity apart from the significance of family. Faith was lived and experienced within families, and each believer found a place within the extended family of the church."

In more recent history, even a couple hundred years ago, parents and extended family were primarily

responsible for teaching their children ... and this was not limited to Christian education, it was all education. Our society has shifted to a model where this is no longer the case for most families. Most of us don't grow our own food, make our own clothes, build our own homes, or educate our own children. Ours is a time of specialization. We have a 'specialty' and we rely on the 'specialties' of others. And, this seems to have extended to the realm of Christian nurture. Perhaps this is why parents have relegated the role of Christian education to others, to the experts!

Marilyn Sharpe knows firsthand the challenges of being a family. As a parent, grandparent, speaker, writer, and practical theologian, she aptly describes this change: "For the last fifty years, the congregation was placed in the centre, supported by its members. It was assumed that this is where all faith formation took place. In a time of professionalizing everything from education to fire fighting to coaching youth sports, parents looked to church professionals and those trained by church professionals to do all of Christian education, spiritual direction, and values inculcation for their children and youth. And we, who were church professionals, picked

up that mandate and did our level best to fulfill those expectations. Inadvertently, we led parents, grandparents, godparents, aunts, uncles, neighbours, and friends to believe that they weren't needed in this arena. But this isn't biblical."

Though our intentions were good, it seems that we forgot the importance of parents, and other close adults, in passing along their faith to their children. Family faith matters and we must become more intentional in passing along our faith to the young. However, many of us don't even know where to begin.

So, how can we as parents (and other caring adults) nurture faith in our homes?

Vibrant Faith Ministries (www.vibrantfaith.org) suggests that there are four 'keys' that can help this to happen (of course, the exact way this looks will depend on the ages of your family members).

The **first** is **caring conversation**. It is the foundation of the other keys. Jim LaDoux, a presenter and coach with Vibrant Faith Ministries, describes it this way, "caring conversations express an interest in others, their hurts, their joys, their concerns and dreams, their values and faith. Caring conversation requires time to be available to listen and to speak."

It can include talking about the highs and lows of our day, discussing current issues, reflecting on something we have watched or heard (a movie, or a song), and asking 'good' questions (If you could live anywhere, where would it be? What is your first memory of the church?)

Devotions is the **second** key. Families reading the Bible and engaging in faith talk models the importance of hearing God's Word and living out our faith in our day-to-day lives. The thought of family devotions might seem intimidating at first, but there are many helpful resources available—great children's Bibles, daily devotionals, and activity books (the helpful staff at The Book Room are a great place to start). Start by spending time daily reading the Bible together and reflecting on it. Try a daily devotional. Consider having morning and evening prayers together as a family. If your family loves music, listen to worship music and sing together.

Third, rituals and traditions draw our attention to God in the midst of our daily life. They form a rhythm and shape our identity as Christians. Family life is full of rituals and traditions (whether intentional or not): pizza and movie nights, a visit to Tim Hortons after hockey practice, Thanksgiving with relatives, bedtime stories,

annual vacations, and so on). Giving a blessing, saying a prayer, lighting a candle, and sharing a liturgy are just a few examples of faith rituals and traditions. When thinking about potential times for these practices, consider daily and weekly opportunities (meal times, bed times, arriving and departing, car time); church seasons (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost); and growth milestones (first day of school, becoming a teenager, new job, graduations, driver's license).

Fourth, Service gives us practice in "walking the talk." Family service projects have been shown to be a vital way to pass on faith. Children and youth are greatly influenced by what they see in the lives of others, especially in their families. Opportunities for families to serve are all around. When children are young, you can shop together for food to donate to a food drive, or a toy for a Christmas toy drive. When children are older, you can serve a meal at a shelter, sort food at a food bank, or rake leaves or shovel snow for a neighbour. You can also choose a project from The Presbyterian Church in Canada's Gifts of Change catalogue and save money together to contribute to a specific project. Children will get excited about saving their coins until they have enough to buy a family a pig, provide maize and beans to an orphan, or provide a meal to a homeless individual.

Finally, I do want to mention that there is a tendency among some in the current conversation about families and faith to place the entire responsibility on parents, but I believe this is neither helpful nor faithful. I believe the best way forward is to see faith formation as a partnership between congregations and households. Mark DeVries, a Presbyterian minister in Nashville, who has been working in the field of intergenerational and family ministry for much of his ministry, suggests we must "find ways to undergird nuclear families with the rich support of the extended Christian family of the church and for these two formative families to work together in leading young people toward mature Christian adulthood." The church family and the home family must partner together to pass along the faith.

To that, I say "amen!"

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A Focus on Leading with Care

Summer programs are one of the ways that we reach out and answer the call to help others grow in faith and the love of Christ. As we prepare for VBS, intergenerational events, camp, fellowship, etc. this summer, it is important to consider that many participants will be new to our congregations and buildings, and we must be prepared to provide them a safe place and offer a positive experience.

While it is important to evaluate risk and facilities, recruit and train leadership, and provide supervision in all cases, summer programs should consider the following from Chapter 3: Putting Policy into Practice of *Leading with Care*, specifically 3.7: Examine Safety and Prevention Areas, sections e-g, on pages 23-25.

The following sections are only part of the Church's policy on the protection of children, youth and vulnerable adults. Free copies of the policy are available from Canadian Ministries or at www.presbyterian.ca/leading-with-care

Off-site activities and overnight events

Special outings, day trips, service projects and weekend camps are an important part of children/youth /vulnerable adult ministry. They help people grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually, give youth a chance to learn social and leadership skills, and provide social opportunities for vulnerable adults. The following guidelines must be taken with these activities/events and an activity form signed (see 4.5).

Day excursions

- A teacher/leader must assess the risk of the activity and submit that assessment in writing to the Leading with Care or other appropriate committee for approval prior to the activity.
- Parents/guardians/caregivers must be notified prior to the outing.
- Written consent and medical forms are required for each child/youth/vulnerable adult participating in activities/events (see 4.5).
- [At least] One teacher/leader should have a cell phone and the phone numbers of where the parents of the children/youth can be contacted during the excursion. The teacher/leader should have a copy of the completed consent forms with them.
- All daytime excursions must be supervised by a minimum of two [non-related] teachers/leaders. Additional support workers might be necessary to accompany vulnerable adults.
- When transportation of children/youth /vulnerable adults is needed for an activity, all drivers must have a valid driver's license, valid automobile insurance and must be screened volunteers or paid staff. The number of persons per vehicle must never exceed the number of seat belts or car seats.
- [At least] one teacher/leader should have First Aid training.

Notifications to parents/guardians should be in writing. Complete and signed consent forms should be returned by the parents/guardians for every participant; this information remains confidential. These forms must be duplicated so that both the home site and leader of the excursion have copies.

Overnight activities/events

Follow all requirements listed in daytime excursions plus the following:

- Each children/youth/vulnerable adult is required to follow pre-established codes of conduct signed by the parent/guardian /caregiver and the child/youth/vulnerable adult.
- If the group is comprised of children/youth/vulnerable adults of both genders, teachers/leaders of both genders must be present.

- Each leader should have an assigned group of children/youth/vulnerable adults for whom they will be responsible during the overnight event.
- All facilities in which an overnight function is housed must be equipped with smoke detectors and inside release doors. All members of the group should be made aware of fire exits and fire procedures as required by provincial/regional standards.
- No adult should be alone with a single child/youth/vulnerable adult.
- If a day or overnight includes trips to a pool, lake or hot tub, all municipal/provincial/federal regulations regarding safety and supervision must be adhered to.

Billeting youth in private homes

Billeting reduces costs and allows youth to meet new people. Here are some things to keep in mind when billeting youth:

- Children under 14 years of age should not be billeted.
- The people offering billeting must be known, trusted members of the congregation.
- Billet youth in groups of at least two.
- The contact information (telephone number, address) of the individual with whom the youth will be billeted must be obtained by the group leader.

It may not always be possible to billet in groups of at least two. If it is necessary to billet a youth alone, hosts would require a police records check and the risk assessment guide and factors found on pages 20-21 should be considered.

Health

While congregations/ministries cannot always avoid having ill children/youth/vulnerable adults in their programs/ministries, several measures can be taken to promote good health and reduce infection.

i. Allergies

When children/youth/vulnerable adults register for a program, inquire about allergies. Post this information so that it will not be overlooked. If your program serves meals or snacks, post the menu so the parent/caregiver can see it. Avoid foods identified as serious allergens such as peanut butter, chocolate and nuts of any kind. Popcorn can be dangerous for young children.

ii. Injury

If a participant is injured while participating in a program/ministry or activity, the teacher/leader must arrange to get the person to medical care. If necessary, call 9-1-1. If the child/youth/vulnerable adult is bleeding, the teacher/leader should protect himself/herself and all others from the blood. For all injuries, even if the person does not need medical attention, a leader must complete a general incident report (see 4.6) and report the incident to the injured person's parent/guardian /caregiver. General incident reports should be stored in a locked metal cabinet.

iii. Infectious diseases

Teachers/leaders must ask parents/guardians to not let their children and youth attend church programs if they have symptoms and diseases which are known to be infectious, such as: diarrhoea, vomiting, fever, rash, open sores, skin or eye infection, scarlet fever, measles, mumps, chicken pox, whooping cough, head lice.

Ministries are encouraged to post helpful signs (e.g. "This is a nut free zone").

Whatever your congregation is planning this summer, remember to lead with care.

For helpful forms, checklists, and more information on *Leading with Care* visit www.presbyterian.ca/leading-with-care.

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