

2007
christian
education
week

Making Disciples of Jesus Christ Preparing the Way



Listen, children, to a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight:
for I give you good precepts:
do not forsake my teaching.

When I was a son with my father,
tender, and my mother's favorite,
he taught me, and said to me,
"Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
Get wisdom; get insight:
do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
love her, and she will guard you."

Proverbs 4:1-6, NRSV

A few days after my brother and his little daughter had visited me, he called, laughing, to say that, apparently out of the blue, she had asked him, "Daddy, do angels wear under-pants?" After some brain-wracking, he finally realized she had seen my Anne Murray album cover that had a playful model of little "angels" on one side and little "devils" on the other side. (All of these otherworldly creatures were in cute and appropriately discreet positions and clearly had no clothes.) My brother's question, at least, was answered. He discovered the source of his daughter's inquiry.

The other mystery is by far the more important one. My little niece brought up what, for her, was a sincere theological question. She used

language she knew based on her interpretation of the "religious" art she had seen. Somewhere along the line, she had been introduced to an image of angels. She had sufficient background, even at her tender years, to be able to pose the question. She needed and deserved a sincere response. Being taken seriously at that point would help build a foundation of trust and a willingness to explore further what God's family looks like and what it means to be in that family.

This may present one scene in every parent figure's nightmares: How to answer respectfully what seems unanswerable and to do so in understandable language and images. How do we share our faith with each other and with younger generations even for easier questions? How do traditional, blended, extended, and communal families learn the stories and vocabulary of our faith so that we prepare the way for our young ones and our new ones?

The Purpose of CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

"When we join The United Methodist Church, we promise to support it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. This is our response to God's call in our lives.... Because we live every day knowing we have been freed by the forgiving love of God, we are empowered to share that love with others and to work for justice in the world. All of us grow in our own faith when we offer it to others and when others nurture our faith. Christian education is the lifelong journey of teaching and being taught, of growing and encouraging others to grow."

Foundations: Shaping the Ministry of Christian Education in Your Congregation, page 53).

christian **EDUCATION** week

"Children can surprise us with the immediacy of their spiritual perceptions. What they need most from adults are the affirmation and support of those perceptions, the context of religious tradition by which to understand their own experience, and a language with which to express their faith," writes Marjorie Thompson in *Family: The Forming Center; A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation*. While the church professionals or "experts" may be expected to carry the weight of these nurturing duties, the first and more intimate venue is within the family. The question is not **whether** our family forms us spiritually, but **how well we do it**. It is the responsibility of the larger community of faith, the congregation, to help equip families to excel at sharing their faith rather than to refuse or miss the opportunity.

Diana L. Hynson is the Director of Learning and Teaching Ministries at the General Board of Discipleship, Nashville, TN.



How Do Families Prepare the Way?

“Who is my family?” Jesus asked (Matthew 12:48-50).

For our purposes, we will also define family expansively to include those who share a household and are bound by covenant and/or kinship. We may further recognize the family ties that are forged in the wider community of our congregations. The family, as “domestic church,” has primary responsibility for the faith formation of their children. The “communal church,” as the body of Christ living out its baptismal vows, is to provide support and resources to the domestic church as families prepare the way for a faithful future.

The summary of the landmark Search Institute project, *Effective Christian Education: A National*

Study of Protestant Congregations (1990) states that for youth, “The particular family experiences most tied to greater faith maturity are the frequency with which an adolescent talked with mother and father about faith, the frequency of family devotions, and the frequency with which parents and children together were involved in efforts, formal or informal, to help other people” (page 38). The communal church will do well to consider these four areas of religiosity for all ages in supporting the domestic church: family devotions, rituals, talk, and mission.

FAMILY DEVOTIONS

“If faith formation is not attended to—if it is not a natural and normative part of life in the home—there is a strong likelihood there will be a dichotomy in the Christian faith journey between what happens in church and what happens in everyday life.... The forming center of our life is that orientation out of which our lives are lived” (*The Faith Sharing Congregation*, by Swanson and Clement. Discipleship Resources: 1996; page 68).

First, let us recognize that home is intended to be a sacred place—created by God, touched by God’s grace, where God’s presence is

seen and felt in both routine and extraordinary happenings. This recognition is fostered by the practice of family devotions. Saving and scheduling time to be together regularly, to reflect on the day’s ups and downs, and to hold that in mind while engaging together in Scripture reading and study enables a family to contextualize the Word and listen for the message sufficient for the day. That, in turn, will provide ample ideas and situations for prayer. Having set the practice at home prepares an easy way to extend devotional reflection and practice beyond to community and nation.

FAMILY RITUALS

Even the most disjoint, independent family has (perhaps unrecognized) habits and rituals. We tend, for instance, to celebrate Christmas or Thanksgiving the same way each year. Creating Christian rituals carries an enormous power in elevating the ordinary to the sacramental realm. We typically observe birthdays, but what if we were to take a special time on the anniversary of baptism to reflect on how well we are fulfilling our baptism vows and how we have seen God’s hand at work. We can also sacralize mundane activities, such as sending family members off to school or work by adding a blessing for them, holding inviolable one evening for a whole-family meal together that includes time for a family devotional, or time together before going to bed or upon arising.



PRAYER

O God of our Fathers and Mothers: We praise you for the power and inspiration you have breathed into us to make a church on earth. We thank you for the faith, nurture, and persistence of our own family who have taught us to pray, to learn and live out the Scriptures, and to stand up for your Kingdom. Through the families of church and home, we have both heritage and future. Lead us in preparing the Way so that all may find life in the household of God. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our brother. **AMEN.**

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

- Psalm 78:1-8 The importance of passing on our faith stories
- Matthew 5:17-20 Teaching the way of God is a matter of life and death
- Ephesians 6:1-4 Radical household rules for mutual nurture in faith
- 2 Timothy 2:3-14 Hold fast to faith received through family and others

Worship RESOURCES

HYMNS

O Lord, May Church and Home Combine	#695	UMH
Go, Make of All Disciples	#571	
Pass It On	#572	
At the Font We Start our Journey	#2114	TFWS
The Family Prayer Song	#2188	
For All the Saints	#2283	

UMH: *United Methodist Hymnal*
TFWS, *The Faith We Sing*

A LITANY *for*

Church EDUCATORS *and* LEADERS

Invite the teachers and other education leaders to stand or to come forward as you say their names.

LEADER:

We gather as a family of God to affirm and offer back our gifts of teaching and leading to those in our care. Will you nurture them to cultivate a mature devotional life in Christ?

Educators:

We will, as God shows us the way.

LEADER:

Will you celebrate their rituals and rites of passage so that they

feel the presence of God in both daily and extraordinary events?

Educators:

We will, as God helps us prepare the way.

LEADER:

Will you engage in and teach them practices of Christian conversation so they will learn to hear God's voice and speak from a heart of love?

Educators:

We will, as God talks to us along the way.

LEADER:

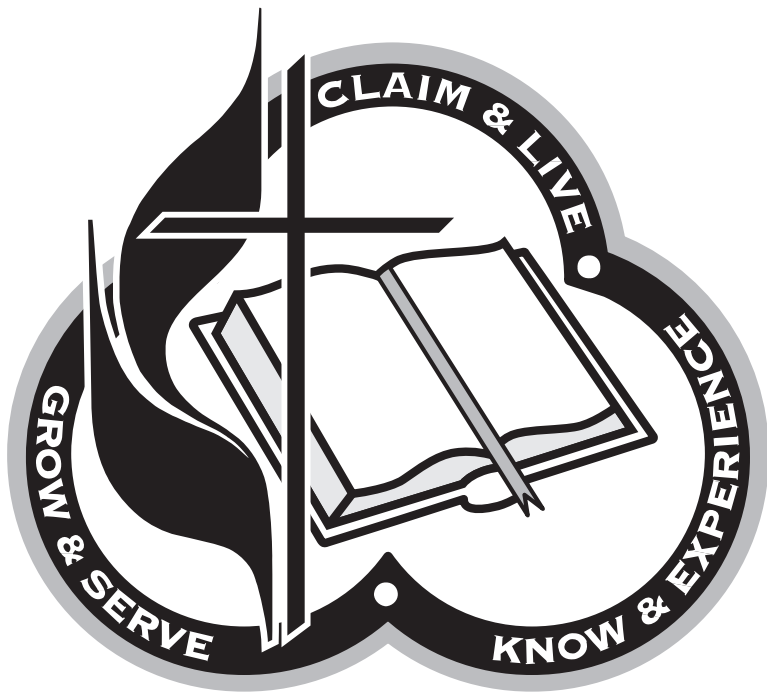
Will you commit yourselves to ministry and mission so that they will see how to put their faith into action?

Educators:

We will, as God empowers us to lead the way.

LEADER and CONGREGATION:

May God bless and keep you all as you travel the Way with Christ. Amen.



family devotions

family rituals



family talk

family mission

Sunday School



it's for life!



Prepare the

WAY

family devotions

family rituals



Sunday School



it's for life!

family talk

family mission



TIME: About 90 minutes

PURPOSE: To recognize the faith-forming potential in various family events and circumstances and then to make theological meaning of it in age-appropriate ways.

PREPARATION: The area needs to be large enough for four learning centers with a little privacy. Set the date and time for the workshop and advertise it in at least five different ways. Invite teachers, educational leaders, and parents (or other responsible adults). The workshop can also be an intergenerational family event.

SETTING UP *the* WORKSHOP

Set up four centers, each with a **sign** for the type of center. Include an **instruction sheet** for each center for each participant so that they can keep notes and the suggestions. Needed supplies are in **bold**. If participants attend with other family member, have them together for each center. They will need a **pen** and **paper** for notes.

Center One: Family Devotions

Engage in a devotional practice together such as prayer, singing from a **Hymnal**, or **Bible** reading and reflection on a passage from the Worship Resources on page 3. Use something tactile, such as a **rosary** or **prayer stick** to help focus. Then list ways to engage in devotional practices in a family setting.

Suggestions: **A)** Keep a Sabbath one day a week. Plan for devotions, taking turns with who leads, prays, reads, and sings. **B)** Plan for a family fast, whether from food, certain activities, or particular practices, then reflect as a family on what that experience has meant. **C)** Make a family prayer list with contributions from each member. Post it and devote a specific time each day to pray.

Center Two: Family Ritual

Recreate one family ritual. Choose an item that suggests one of the rituals, holidays, celebrations, or rites of passage that your own family observes (such as a **Christmas ornament, birthday candle, diploma, car keys, or food item**). OR, make a representational item from the assembled **art supplies**. In turn, share with each other the basic ritual or practice your family observes related to your item. Indicate how you help each other see the presence of God (or how you could sacralize the occasion).

Suggestions of other observances: **A)** First day of school; **B)** Dealing with the death of family member or pet; **C)** Moving to first home away from home; **D)** First Communion or Confirmation; **E)** First sleep-over; **F)** Anniversary of a relationship or other significant events, such as recovery/ healing.

Center Three: Family Talk

Practice speaking and listening in pairs or triads. Use an **egg-timer or stopwatch** so that the speaker has two minutes. Choose a “universal” topic, such as how your day was or a favorite subject / project at school, work, or home. During the two minutes, the listener(s) may ask a prompting or clarifying question (but NO judgments or analysis), if it does not interrupt the speaker. After the two minutes, the listener may offer some affirmation or thanks for the speaker and for the information. Then reverse roles. For a final few minutes, reflect on how God’s presence is or can be known in conversation.

Suggestions for other family talk: **A)** Have a parent-child day apart with both fun and conversation; **B)** Study something together; **C)** Discuss a shared medium, such as a book, movie, or video; **D)** Review the day together. In each instance, talk about the connections between the activity and your faith and values. Include how you perceived God’s presence.

Center Four: Family Mission

Turn your daily life activities into opportunities for service. Select a **picture or photo that suggests a routine life activity** for all family members. Identify the activity and in turn brainstorm all the ways that it can be extended into a related service opportunity in which all ages can participate. For example, grocery shopping may extend to volunteering to supply an evening meal at homeless shelter at which young children can help set tables. Plan for one activity in the coming month to do as a family and be sure to engage in family talk before and after.

Suggestions for family missions: **A)** Clothes shopping / clean out closets for a clothes ministry; **B)** Reading / share books or buy books for a literacy program; **C)** Watch the news / “adopt” a child in a troubled country; **D)** Empty the trash/pick up trash in a local park; **E)** Do homework / tutor or provide supplies for a tutoring program.

Leading the Workshop

Opening (5 minutes)

Briefly introduce yourselves if not all group members are acquainted. Then sing or say together one of the hymns on page 3.

Explain the Process for

Using the Centers (5 minutes)

Divide up to balance the numbers evenly at each Center. Family members should be together.

Spend about 10-12 minutes at each Center. The leader will signal when to move to the next Center and when to gather after the last Center.

Engage in Family Devotions, Rituals, Talk, and Mission (45-60 minutes)

Encourage participants to try out each Center. At the end of the designated time, bring everyone together.

Compare Experiences (15-20 minutes)

Ask: What new ideas do you have for family interactions? How may these activities help you cultivate your awareness of and relationship with God? When can you try one of these opportunities with your family? How might you use these practices or others to nurture the spiritual maturity in your family or students?

Close With Devotions (5 minutes)

Sing or say another hymn from page 3 and close with one of the prayers.

HOW DO FAMILIES PREPARE THE WAY?

(continued from page 2)



FAMILY TALK

How we talk to and about each other makes a huge difference in how we are formed. When we validate conversation, like my little niece's question about angels, we create a safe place for talking about other things, from the superficial to the pro-

found. When the elders of a family tell their stories and formational remembrances, they affirm that personal and “ancestral” truth and experience matter for the story and experiences of those who come after them.

We see in Scripture examples of how families structured their practices or rituals to ensure that family talk would follow. “When your children ask you...” anticipates that conversation and learning are to occur in the family for the express purpose of faith formation (see Deuteronomy 4 and 6). These conversations also serve to teach children the vocabulary and images of the faith. It's one thing to want to talk about what happens when we die, for example, but quite another if there is no concept of an afterlife, if the language of “heaven” and “resurrection” is not available, or if the subject of death is taboo. Or, to use a more local example, a faithful discussion of cheating must also include the spiritual concept of justice as not mere fairness, but as a universal spiritual inheritance and birthright worth dying for.

Christian conversation is the next step in family talk. Often referred to as “conferencing,” this spiritual practice involves deep respect, listening, and attentiveness to the participation of all. Akin to consensus, conferencing implies that every member of the household deserves a respectful hearing and acknowledges that the majority voice is not necessarily the one that carries the day, given our commitment to justice and grace. When children learn this discerning pattern of conversation at home, they are able to apply it in all aspects of life. Such conversation offers a mature alternative to society's typical win-lose / might-makes-right stance.

(continued on page 8)

HOW DO FAMILIES PREPARE THE WAY? (continued from page 7)

FAMILY MISSION

Faith talk necessarily moves us to mission and service (though mission may also lead to faith talk). By "mission" we mean some extension beyond self, home, and church that has a more global view. "Mission" certainly implies a sense of God's calling to be in service to others and to advance the church of Christ further into the world.

When a sense of service is cultivated in children by the time they are in about the third grade, a life-long attitude and pattern of behavior will easily follow, though it will be necessary to nurture and sustain it. Mission-minded families model for the younger ones that service is something that adults and children do together and intergenerationally, not just for people they know, and with some sacrifice.

THE COMPLETE CIRCLE

Clearly family devotions, rituals, talk, and mission weave together into a faith-forming whole. The mission and ritual provide the subject for family devotions and talk, and so on, as each practice nurtures and reinforces the others.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Making Disciples of Jesus Christ Preparing the Way

The resources published by Discipleship Resources and Upper Room Books are available through www.upper-room.org/bookstore or by calling 800-972-0433. Others may be obtained through www.cokesbury.com or by calling 800-672-1789.

- _____ *FaithHome for Parents, African American Core Topics*. (Abingdon Press, 1999)
- Cloyd, Betty Shannon. *Parents and Grandparents as Spiritual Guides*. (Upper Room Books, 2001)
- Garland, Diana R. *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families: Living the Faith in Daily Life*. (Jossey-Bass, 2003)
- Hutton, Lynn. *FaithHome for Parents Group Study Guide*. (Abingdon Press, 2001)
- Miller, Craig and Norton, MaryJane Pierce. *Making God Real for a New Generation* (Discipleship Resources, 2003)
- Norton, MaryJane Pierce and Ball-Kilbourne, Debra. *FaithHome*. (Abingdon Press, 1997)
- Norton, MaryJane Pierce. *Questions Parents Ask About Confirmation: A Handbook*. (Cokesbury, 2004)
- _____. *Your Baby Is For Loving*. (Abingdon Press, 2005)
- Strommen, Merton P. and Hardel, Richard A. *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry*. (Saint Mary's Press, 2000)
- Thompson, Marjorie. *Family: The Forming Center, Revised Edition*. (Upper Room Books, 1997)

christian EDUCATION week

is authorized by General Conference,
but its observance is set by each Annual
Conference. Please check with
your conference office for your date.

THE GENERAL BOARD OF DISCIPLESHIP

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

PO Box 340003

Nashville, TN 37203-0003 • (877) 899-2780

Diana L. Hynson, Editor

Rev. Vance P. Ross, Associate General Secretary

Karen A. Greenwaldt, General Secretary

Sunday School



it's for life!

Look at this web-site
to see how your
Sunday School can be a
place of faith formation.

www.sundayschool.cokesbury.com

♻️ Printed on recycled paper.

All articles in this leaflet may be reproduced for free distribution.