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PARTNERING HOME AND CONGREGATION IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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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.

DEUTERONOMY 6:6-7

Faithful parents bring their children to the nursery, Sunday school, VBS, confirmation, youth group and a dozen other wonderful programs at church. Surely, they think, that is enough! Isn't it?

After all, they reason, I am not seminary trained. I don't know all of Joseph's brothers by birth order and birth mother. I cannot spell or pronounce the names of the three men in the fiery furnace. I don't know what an Ebenezer is, much less whether it is okay to raise mine. And where is the parable of the prodigal son anyway? It's probably not safe to try this at home; let's leave it to the church professionals who are trained to do it.

We've professionalized faith nurture and Christian education. Parents now believe that their job is to drive their kids to the God Box, drop them off and let us nurture faith, instill moral values, and return to them a kid who will never talk back. Parents believe it will all happen in the congregation. They believe they don't know enough and can't do it. They are ashamed of their inadequacy and their own questions. They feel unworthy. But, isn't that okay? Isn't it enough to offer kids Christian education in the congregation?

No!

WHY NOT DO ALL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE CONGREGATION?

Well, there is that pesky Deuteronomy text above that seems to imply that parents have an enormous role – “Recite [these words] to your children ... talk about them ... at home ... away ... when you lie down and when you rise.” That leaves no time at all that we as parents are not to be involved in faith talk with our children. It is to perfuse our life together. It is woven into the very fabric of family life.

And then there is Luther, who seemed to feel that parents had a major role. “Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the Gospel.” (The Estate of Marriage, 1522) The Small Catechism was not published as a book to be used by pastors and lay teachers in confirmation. It was published as posters to be displayed in the family kitchen, to discuss when we are preparing, eating and cleaning up after meals. Hmmm....

How about those baptismal promises? Parents promise to teach their children the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments; place in their hands the Holy Scriptures; and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith. We promised!

AND IF WE DON'T?

If that isn't enough, research is weighing in on the topic with a careful look at factors that contribute to faith maturity in our children. Although the most powerful predictor of adult faith in our children is what mom and dad say and do, only 10% of kids in church families report any faith talk at home. Lutherans, who do such a fine job of retaining kids for Christian education through confirmation, lose 80% of our youth after they are confirmed. What happens? Why isn't what we've always done enough?

And then there is the plea of the 16 year old who wrote a letter to the editor of Newsweek magazine, January 25, 1999. She wrote:

At home, parents should have rituals and practices of some sort – which is something I never had ... The void in my life where religion should be is much larger than my parents perceive it to be. People should not be denied faith while in their critical childhood years.

SO, WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

My colleague, Dr. David Anderson has distilled his understanding of faith nurture into five principles for youth and family ministry:

1. Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships, often in our own homes.
2. The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home.
3. Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too.
4. Faith is caught more than it is taught.
5. If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults and parents.

How, then, are we to develop those "personal, trusted relationships" through which faith is developed? How shall we partner home and congregation? How can we make Christ present in the home? How can we make faith "contagious"? How do we grow Christian adults and parents?

AND HOW ARE WE TO DO IT?

It's as simple as Anderson's Four Keys for Nurturing Faith. They are:

1. **CARING CONVERSATIONS** – Adults are present, really present with the child, listening deeply and respectfully, getting to know the child. Adults share who they are and what they care about and believe. This is the floor under the relationship.

2. DEVOTIONS – Infusing caring conversations with God-talk elevates our caring conversations into devotions. We find God in our everyday experiences. We learn God’s stories and find ourselves in them. We share a lively awareness of the sacred in the daily.
3. RITUALS AND TRADITIONS – Here we braid God into our everyday interactions with one another. We bless one another, pray for one another, depart from one another with a litany of faithful caring. We light candles at the dinner table, remembering the Light of the World. We say grace and have bedtime rituals that include God’s presence. Holidays and family celebrations involve God-talk.
4. SERVICE – Filled up with caring conversations, devotions, rituals and traditions, we pour ourselves out in service to God’s world. It isn’t an obligation, but a loving and grateful response to God’s love for us. We include all of the generations. We live this faith.

Congregations need to teach these Four Keys to parents and grandparents and godparents and all of the adults in home and congregation who nurture faith in children and youth. We plan our congregational Christian education around the Four Keys. We preach using the Four Keys. We plan service and celebrations, bringing together all of the generations around the Four Keys.

SO, WHAT EXACTLY WILL WE DO IN THE CONGREGATION TO BUILD THIS PARTNERSHIP WITH THE HOME?

For all of our adults, we will teach

- Bible study and theology
- Faith practices and spiritual direction
- Parenting
- How to nurture faith in children and youth
- The Four Keys for Nurturing Faith
- Parent support

Link home and congregation by providing

- Opportunities to learn together in family Sunday school and confirmation
- Letters, flyers and shared assignments from child and youth programs for parents, keeping them in the loop of what their children are learning
- Faith filled, fun intergenerational events that model the Four Keys
- Celebrations of faith milestones
- Opportunities to do service together
- Worship that includes and welcomes all of the generations

The time has come to let go of the old model of Christian education as offering chunks of knowledge about scripture, doctrine, church history and faith practices. Let us join home and congregation in giving all of the generations both knowledge and faith building experiences that prepare the soil for the Holy Spirit to sow seeds of life transforming faith. Aren’t we called to “Go, make disciples”?