



WHO?

When church professionals consider “faith formers,” often we count pastors, paid staff, and volunteers - Sunday school teachers, guides, mentors, and adult Bible study leaders. The list includes those who are seminary trained or supervised by those who are. Frequently, we focus on those who will lead or collaborate on faith forming programs that take place in our congregations. They are important faith formers, and it is vitally important to equip them early and often.

HOW?

How will we do that? Seminaries train our pastors and our rostered leaders, and offer continuing education and enrichment for ordained and lay leaders as well. Church judicatories provide ongoing training for those involved in faith formation for all ages. Other faith-based organizations offer conferences and coaching, training and resources to support ordained and lay leaders; congregations are wise to invest in training volunteers, affirming their value and stewarding their gifts and passions.

Congregations themselves also offer training programs for their volunteers. Having done this for thirteen years in my own congregation, I learned a few very important strategies:

- It begins with **recruitment**. This ought not to be a call for warm bodies, but a targeted invitation to those we have observed who have a deep and growing faith, a love for those they would serve, the necessary gifts, and a desire to grow in faith themselves. Identify. Invite. Take your lead from Jesus in Luke 10:1 ... send them in pairs. Having a partner in teaching is a gift, offering varied skills, support, and encouragement, and built in backup, when one is gone. Promise to equip and support them.

- The next step is **training**, done before their work begins. Don't let it simply be a recitation of record keeping, paperwork, or schedules. Don't read aloud to them what they can read for themselves. Go over the curriculum, helping them understand the material and how to use it. Harvest wisdom gleaned from previous experience doing this ministry. Listen and make space for the anxiety and apprehension some are feeling. Reassure, but don't minimize. Assure them that this is the beginning of training, which will be delivered in digestible increments.
- **Be available** for ongoing support, brainstorming, problem solving, and collaboration. Visit classrooms. Offer to partner on a session. Listen, listen, listen.
- Then, **repeatedly deliver focused training**. Ask them what they need. Get outside experts, if necessary. Select times that work for those you are supporting with the ongoing training. Feed them something delicious; it says, "You are special and I appreciate what you do."
- **Affirm and thank** them for what they are doing. Observe them, so that you can be very specific in your praise and encouragement.
- More than anything, let them know that **what they are doing is faith formation**, helping to stir up a life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ. Too often, we think that we are simply keeping them busy and teaching cognitive chunks. No, we are on a faith-filled journey together, as we all strive to follow the one who loves us without boundaries. This is high holy privilege.

WHO ELSE?

Now, let's step outside of congregational programs to think about who else we need to equip. Jesus' final words to followers, then and now, were "Go... make disciples." (Matthew 28:19) That is Jesus' command to all of us - parents, grandparents, godparents, other relatives, neighbors, pew buddies, and friends. All Christian adults are called to be faith parents to all of God's children. Psalm 78: 4-7 takes it very seriously:

We will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done...
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach their children;
that the generations 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.

WHEN AND WHERE?

Keep these commandments that I am giving 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

When? Oh, thank heavens, we only need to share the Good News, the story of God's love and faithfulness, when we are at home and when we are away from home, when we are lying down or when we are not lying down. Wait ... that means it isn't enough to simply bring our children and youth to church, no matter how dedicated, no matter how excellently well we do Christian education and faith formation. It is supposed to suffuse all of life together.

Where? Deuteronomy identifies that faith is to be nurtured everywhere - at home and away from home - in homes and congregations, at work, in the coffee shop, at school, in the parks, on the bus or train or in the car, in play groups, at fast food restaurants, on a hospital visit, in nursing homes.

DON'T FORGET THE PARENTS

Research tells us that the most powerful shapers of a child's faith are the child's parents. Problem: today, many parents do not have a faith mature enough to pass on to their children. What can the congregation do? If we want to do effective children and youth ministry, we need to equip parents:

- teach parents the stories of God's faithfulness

- help them to see what that means for us today
- support them in parenting and faith parenting
- help them keep the promises they made at the baptismal font - to teach the basics of the faith, to place in their child's hands (and in their own) the Holy Scriptures, to worship and connect with a faith community, and to live a life of following Jesus.

And what about the children and youth who don't have parents who are willing to be on this journey? Then, the congregation has the opportunity to train faith parents to be faith formers for these children and youth. These might be formalized relationships, like mentors or teachers, or informal friendships that occur spontaneously.

WHAT?

What do these faith parents all need? What are the building blocks for faith nurture that congregations need to provide, early and often?

- **Pre-baptism class** - Offer this for parents, godparents, grandparents, and all of the adults who will surround the child. This should not simply be a dress rehearsal for the baptism service itself: you stand here, then hand the baby to ..., I will ask ..., you will say. That is important, but not the legacy you want to provide for the child to be baptized and the loving adults, who will live the baptismal promises. This is the opportunity to help adults understand what God promises, what they promise to do on behalf of the child, and how they will live together, following Jesus. Use this opportunity to highlight ongoing opportunities in the congregation to learn and to serve.
- **Parenting classes and parent support groups** - None of us is born knowing how to parent this child of God. Many of us no longer live near extended family or in neighborhoods with people we know well, who share our values, and will help us know how to raise our child. Classes and groups help parents develop parenting skills, give and receive support, and learn to nurture faith in their children.

- **Family gatherings**, focused on faith practices that they can take home, equipped to have faithful conversations, do devotions, develop God-bearing rituals and traditions, and do service in Jesus' name.
- **Godparent training**, helping build lifelong faithful relationships.
- **Grandparenting classes** help grandparents to learn how to maximize those precious relationships and pass on a legacy of faith.
- **Cross+generational opportunities** to worship, learn, and serve together. Building these relationships builds faith family, sharing the gifts of all of the generations, and providing support and connection for nuclear families and those children and youth who come to us without strong, faith-filled families.
- **Family camps and retreats** that model faith formation, strengthen family ties, and build networks of families, as well as restorative time away.
- **Connect parents and faith parents** to all of the ministries you do with children and youth.

YOUR TURN

How are you already equipping your faith formers, early and often? Celebrate that. Keep doing it. Share your ideas with others. And what one idea would you like to implement? How will you begin? Who can help? Remember, Jesus is counting on your partnership.

RESOURCES TO HELP CONGREGATIONS EQUIP FAITH FORMERS:

www.MarilynSharpeMinistries.com

For Heaven's Sake! Parenting Preschoolers Faithfully by Marilyn Sharpe, and companion book study.

Detailed lesson plans and multiple ways to use the book in your congregation. Train and equip parents to fill all of life together with best practices of parenting and faith formation. Start early with the most powerful faith shapers in the lives of children.

www.everyday-everywhere.org

Training and manuals for

- Peer Ministry Leadership - Train adult facilitators to train teens to minister to other teens, younger children, families, in your congregation, homes, and community.
- Full Circle: Triple-A Training - Now, you can train adults to journey with every child, supporting faith formation in all their relationships.

www.vibrantfaith.org

Resources for congregations and households for faith formation, including:

- Taking Faith Home - Subscription to weekly bulletin inserts based on Revised Common Lectionary, and four keyed. Households can extend Sunday's scripture in caring conversations; daily devotions, including table grace, prayers, and blessings; ritual and traditions; and service opportunities for the entire household.
- FaithTalk Cards: Four Keyed - Great conversation starters, anchored in the four key faith practices of caring conversations, devotions, rituals and traditions, and service.
- FaithTalk with Children - A wonderful resource for cross+generational gatherings in home and congregation, engaging all the generations in talking about faith.
- *Milestones Ministry Manual, For Everything a Season: 75 Blessings for Daily Life*, and Milestone Blessing Bowl and Mat - Help both congregations and households celebrate faith milestones, important moments in which we mark God's presence. Milestones include those that are shared - like baptism birthdays, receiving a Bible, learning to pray, beginning Sunday school, first communion, confirmation, receiving a driver's license, and graduation - and those that are intensely personal - like moving into a first home, adolescent body changes, the death of a beloved, pregnancy, job transitions, receiving a new pet, and countless others.