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BETHLEHEM: A SHINING STAR IN YOUTH AND FAMILY MINISTRY

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A casual conversation with Pastor Allan Schoonover of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, SD, ignites passion in the listener. His enthusiasm for the transformative power of youth and family ministry is contagious. Excellent youth and family ministry in a congregation passes on faith in powerful ways, transforming children and youth, families, the family of God (the congregation), and the surrounding community. Pastor Al describes it this way: in exemplary youth and family ministry, children and families are central to mission, and faith formation is what the congregation exists to do. God, Schoonover believes, has opened the door a crack now, because the hearts of children and families are aching for something dependable and substantial – the Gospel. He has an amazing story to tell.

Eight years ago, when Pastor Al arrived at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, he found a typical Northern European Lutheran congregation that did worship well, was adult focused, was not as warm and welcoming to children, and believed that the congregation was the place where faith was nurtured and passed on to all of the generations. There had been a time in their history when they were focused on children, when they were known as a leader in the community for bringing kids together.

What accounts for a congregation that has added 1100 members in the last 7 years, a 28% growth, while located in a community that is not growing? Pastor Al credits two driving forces. First, he believes it is their radical and generous hospitality, that takes seriously the Christian Gospel, as its sign proclaims: “All are welcome because Christ welcomes all.” Second, is what they have done with youth and family ministry. The two are indissolubly braided together in the life of the congregation. Pastor Al remarks, “People tell us that Bethlehem Lutheran Church is known as a congregation that deeply cares about children and families.” How did it earn that reputation?

Parents and children are engaged together in learning, talking about, and living out their faith. Parents, who come once to educational opportunities with their children, are eager to come back and learn with their kids. In eighth and ninth grade confirmation, parents are there 60-70% of the time. Pastor Al is living out his 37 year commitment to do confirmation with parents and kids together. He has morphed John

Westerhoff's question, "Will our children have faith?" to "Will our families have faith?" He takes seriously Luther's injunction that, "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, LW 45:46*) Schoonover is committed to raising up, equipping, and empowering these apostles, bishops and priests.

Knowing that "faith is caught more than it is taught" and that "if we want faithful children, we must have faithful parents and adults", Schoonover takes every opportunity to make sure that all see God's story as their story and find God in their own story. Faith is taught experientially and relationally. Baptism is a way of life in his congregation. God is alive and active in lives in the congregation, home, and community. Individuals have the blessed opportunity to name where that is happening, where they see God in their lives. God lives in and among relationships, even in the broken places. God's presence is bigger and more imaginative than the experience of any one person. Pastor Al knows that faith happens through personal, trusted relationships, not primarily through programs or new buildings. Community, Schoonover asserts, is the place we can add depth, purpose, and meaning to this life of faith.

At Bethlehem, parents, grandparents, and elders all know the important role they play in passing on faith to children. They share an understanding that all the children of the world are theirs and that God works through them. Their greatest gift is recognizing how vitally important it is that Jesus Christ is the unchangeable center of their lives. These committed and faithful people know it in their minds and hearts and live it out in their lives.

Schoonover believes that this is now in their "DNA." "This is not our church; this is God's and we just get to pay for it and use it for mission." What vision and mission undergird this congregation?

God's Vision for Bethlehem: A family of God journeying together in faith, touching lives by: Welcoming, Worshiping, Teaching, and Serving.

God's Mission of Bethlehem: Our mission is to nurture and strengthen our Christian faith to empower us to proclaim the gospel to each other and the world through our words and actions.

How do they live this vision and mission together?

- Pastor Al says, “I see, in the face of every human being, the image of God, and we constantly remind one another of this. When we share the peace, we also say, ‘I see the image of God in you.’”
- All children feel welcome on campus, in worship, in the narthex, and outside the church building.
- It is expected that children are actively engaged in the congregation – in worship, in education, in service.
- In worship, children read lessons (sometimes from a children’s Bible), write and read prayers, teach the congregation the actions to their songs, sometimes do the children’s message, play in handbell choirs and the praise band, and partner with parents to be ushers and communion assistants.
- Grandmas and grandpas are huge advocates for children in worship.
- Some senior citizens worship with and enjoy the company of the children of single parents, so that the mom or dad can focus on the service.

Milestone Ministry, another vital element of their youth and family ministry, celebrates one milestone every year of life, from birth through high school graduation. It is a vehicle for inviting parents into the faith formation process. For each milestone, Bethlehem

- Offers an educational opportunity for parents to learn about and practice how this milestone can be a tool for passing on faith and deepening a faith-based relationship with the child.
- A milestone gift is given to each child in worship.
- The congregation blesses families to keep the promises they made at the baptismal font.
- Families are sent home to practice faith together.

So what are the milestones? Examples include baptism, baptism anniversaries, prayer pillows at age 3, prayer cards at age 5, blessing of a driver’s license at age 16, and seniors, wrapped in a gift quilt at graduation, are reminded that the love of the congregation goes with them, wherever in the world they go.

Here “family” is understood as including all God’s children of all ages. Bethlehem talks about church as a baptismal “water family.” This sense of family and commitment to all God’s children extends beyond the church walls.

Across the street, Bethlehem gifted land to LSS for a residential center for kids placed there because no one wants them at home. The children are given birthday parties, Bibles, and personalized Christmas gifts. All are invited to a Wednesday night meal and worship. Members volunteer to tutor kids and bake cookies. Some have joined the confirmation class. Some learn life skills with the custodian and in the kitchen. The youth staff offers retreats. During the summer, art classes are held.

In the congregation, kids bring their friends, who are welcomed and folded in to the life of the congregation. Milestones are marked for all the children. For kids without an involved parent, Bethlehem invites grandparents, relatives, friends or provides a “water family.”

Pastor Al believes that what makes youth and family ministry effective at Bethlehem and in the lives of children is the large number of adults with a deep passion for passing on faith and loving children. What a powerful example of the gifts of the generations and how they bless one another as they are the Body of Christ.