



Marilyn Sharpe
Ministries, LLC

YOUTH AND FAMILY MINISTRY

WHAT IS IT? WHY DO IT? HOW DO WE BEGIN?

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Youth and family ministry. Family ministry. Life-long learning. Intergenerational ministry. Seminary courses and undergraduate majors bear these titles. Position descriptions are posted for directors or coordinators or ministers in these fields. What is this all about?

All of these labels – and many others - are used to describe a shift in congregational ministry. It is a movement away from the assumption that faith formation only happens in congregations.

For the last fifty years, the congregation was placed in the center, 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, neighbors, and friends to believe that they weren't needed in this arena. But this isn't biblical. Deuteronomy paints a very different picture of what parents are called to do.

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

So, parents have to “keep these words ...in your heart.” Keeping things in hearts; that's easy for Lutherans to do. But then parents receive their marching orders: “talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” Well, thank heavens, parents only have to talk about faith when they are at home and when they are not at home, when they are lying down and not lying down. Hmmm, that doesn't leave much time during which parents are not to talk about faith.

Martin Luther had something to say on this topic, too. In *The Estate of Marriage, 1522*, Luther proclaimed, “Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the Gospel.”

But we have a problem in 2007: Father and mother may not know the Gospel, nor do they have these words in their hearts, to recite and talk about with their children. Many parents don't have a life-transforming faith to pass on.

And there is another problem: Many congregations have relegated parents and other adults who love kids to be chauffeurs, chaperones, and sloppy joe slingers. They hover around the edges of ministry with their

children, expected only to provide rides, behavior monitoring, and food service. They aren't invited to feed their children with spiritual food.

Research finds that only one family in ten of our church families ever talks about faith outside the walls of the congregation. Pay attention: these are the families who actually come to worship!

This dismal statistic is all the more alarming when we learn that the top four factors in whether our children will have faith are:

- What mom does
- What dad does
- What mom says
- What dad says

What can be done?

Scripture, Luther, and current research point to a different way of doing church. They all point to the first marker of youth and family ministry: partnering home and congregation to pass on faith. Congregations become the place where all of the generations are equipped to pass on a life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ. This is not about ministry to nuclear families, but to all of us, the whole family of God. All of us, regardless of age, are involved in leadership and worship, learning and serving.

Years ago, Pastor Frank Showers, at Church of the Savior Lutheran Church in Williamsport, PA, peeled the sign off his office door that read, "Senior Pastor," and replaced it with a new one: "The Equipment Room." Pastor Showers understands his call is to equip the saints to be the priesthood of all believers. All Christian adults are understood to be faith parents, with a responsibility to pass on faith. At every baptism, the congregation welcomes the baptized child as brother or sister in Christ, a fellow worker in the Kingdom. The congregation promises to support the family to nurture faith in the baby.

So, if we want our children, youth, and adults to know, love, and follow Jesus Christ and share the Gospel with a world sorely in need of the Good News, we need to figure out how to do this differently.

We need to begin with a different understanding of "church," articulated in the **Five Principles for Youth and Family Ministry**, identified by Dr. David Anderson of The Youth & Family Institute. Faith is always passed on relationally and incarnationally, as God demonstrated in Jesus Christ, God's ultimate gift to humankind, with the Word made flesh.

- **Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships.** Virtually all of us can point to adults who were the first voice and hands and face of Jesus in our lives. We can equip all of our adults to become this God-bearer in the lives of children and youth.
- **The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home.** The body of Christ is not limited to the building where we worship on Sunday, but is loose in the world, especially evident as we partner congregations and homes to make Christ known.
- **Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too.** Home is often the first church for children, where they learn to pray and hear the stories of faith from the people they love most in the world. For those

who are not engaged in congregational life, the front door of your congregation may very well be the front doors of the homes of your members.

- **Faith is caught more than it is taught.** Who were the saints who made faith contagious and utterly irresistible to you? How did they do that? Often, it was not by preaching a sermon or having you memorize the Small Catechism, but by loving you, by being the person you wanted to become, by gently sharing that you, too, are beloved of God.
- **If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults and parents.** So, we have come full circle. We need to equip adults to be able to have those personal, trusted relationships that the Holy Spirit will use to help children and youth to see Jesus.

How will we begin? A friend recently quipped, “Jesus blessed the children and taught the adults. We, in the church, have reversed it.” We need to make sure that we have robust Christian education for all ages and that we connect the generations, so that they will hear one another’s faith stories.

Then, we need to teach all of our adults and youth and children to do the **Four Keys for Nurturing Faith**, at home, in the congregation, on a walk, in the school cafeteria, in our workplace. These are simple faith practices that can be woven into our everyday life together. They are:

1. **Caring Conversations** We need to be available to talk and, especially, to listen to one another. This is the floor under relationships, that allow us to talk about all of the important things in life.
2. **Devotions** Turn up the faith talk under caring conversations and you have devotions. Help children find themselves in God’s story and God in their story. Let Scripture be God’s fresh and living Word for them each day.
3. **Rituals and Traditions** We all have them; now, just fine tune them to be God-bearing. Light a candle to remind family and friends that we gather around the Light of the World. Make the sign of the cross on each forehead each night, remembering their baptism and God’s love that has claimed them and will not let them go.
4. **Service** Filled with caring conversation, devotions, rituals and traditions, we are free to pour ourselves out in service, sharing the love of Christ that fills us to overflowing. Make it a part of every day, a natural way of loving God back, not a “got to,” but a “get to.”

God’s in the midst of this shift to Youth and Family Ministry, calling all of us to be about passing on faith in Jesus Christ to all the generations. A friend calls this, “the reformation of our time!”