

Passing On the Faith

Passing On the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry

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Contents

Foreword	7
Preface	9
Chapter 1: What Is Youth and Family Ministry?	13
Chapter 2: Strengthening Family Relationships	36
Chapter 3: Fostering Close Relationships with God	72
Chapter 4: Faith-Focused Christian Education	103
Chapter 5: Congregations As Family	155
Chapter 6: Creating a Christian Youth Subculture	186
Chapter 7: Healthy Communities, Healthy Children	225
Chapter 8: Transforming Today's Culture	256
Chapter 9: From Vision to Action	284
Chapter Notes	307
Resource Contact List	332
Additional Works Consulted	341
Index	347



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Foreword

Families have extraordinary power to shape the lives of their children. This is so obvious that one would think it unnecessary to say. Unfortunately, a conspiracy of social forces has diminished the influence of family. Take, for example, the importance of a child's educational achievement. Educators know that the highest level of learning occurs when family and school interact as partners, moving in the same direction during a child's educational development. Families create positive learning environments at home—modeling, encouraging, and rewarding learning, while schools respect and encourage this family engagement. The family-school partnership is reinforced by frequent parent-teacher dialogues and parent engagement in school policies and programs.

This partnership is essential. Unfortunately, it is also uncommon. National studies tell us that all too often families give away their power and depend on schools alone to promote their children's achievement. And then the finger pointing begins. Teachers blame parents for being too busy with work and personal agendas to be attentive to the family role in learning. Parents blame schools for being out of touch with family pressures. Certainly, the reasons for parents' lack of involvement are complicated. But the reality is that family influence on learning has gone underground; it has become a latent, dormant power.

Families' influence on faith development parallels this reality. We know from documented studies and from our own intuition that parents are essential actors in their children's faith journey. Theoretically, congregations should support families in activating and using this power. Just as quality learning results from a strong family-school partnership, family strength results from a solid congregation-family partnership. Again, the ideal gets sabotaged.

The trend is for families to depend solely on congregations to nurture faith just as they tend to depend solely on schools to nurture academic achievement.

Now is the time to awaken a sleeping giant—the power of parents to teach and nurture in partnership with the institutions designed to support them in their efforts rather than replace them. *Passing On the Faith* is a timely, urgently needed guide for awakening the considerable power of family life in the faith journey of children. Weaving together the wisdom of its authors, stories from the field, and recent research, this book offers a compelling case for rethinking the role of congregations and for unleashing the capacity to trigger the faith-building capacity of families. Offering clear and doable steps to guide families through the transformation, *Passing On the Faith* proves to be very practical.

I recommend this book with the highest enthusiasm. It represents an important paradigm shift. Someday, because of this wise treatise, congregational leaders will evaluate their successes as much against the standard of how well they have empowered families as against the standard of how well they have “programmed” the precious and fleeting time they have with children and adolescents. And as family empowerment grows, faith will blossom far beyond the limits of the congregations.

Peter L. Benson, PhD
President
Search Institute
March 1999

Preface

This book addresses a major concern of Christian parents and congregational leaders: How can we increase the likelihood that our children will be committed to Jesus Christ and a life of service when they graduate from high school? We, the authors, address this concern with a new paradigm—a partnership between congregation and family in which primary responsibility for faith development is assumed by parents. We are passionately committed to this paradigm, arriving at similar convictions despite our contrasting orientations.

I, Merton Strommen, founder of Search Institute, have served thirty years as a research scientist at Search Institute and at other serving institutions. Search Institute has garnered knowledge on church youth through national frontier studies involving youth, congregations, colleges, seminaries, schools, and youth-serving community organizations. Because Search Institute is an independent agency, it is free to focus its studies on matters of faith, beliefs, and values. Psychologists and sociologists ignored these subjects in 99 percent of the studies they carried out in the early 1900s.

These three foci reflect my years of working with students and youth, both as a college pastor and as national youth director for the Lutheran Free Church. My work in these ministries raised questions that I thought research could answer, and provided a theological setting for interpreting the research information.

The most influential and shaping influences of my life, however, are my two families. One family is my parental family, which is headed by a clergy father and mother of deep faith. This family helped me find my life direction. My other family is the family formed by me, my loving wife, and our five wonderful sons. This

family has deepened my faith in Jesus Christ, inspiring me and providing me with much wisdom and spiritual insight.

I, Dick Hardel, was raised by a meddling Methodist mom and a hardworking German-Lutheran dad, who loved the Lord and loved the church. I attended Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod schools for twenty years, from first grade through seminary. This classic education has helped me throughout my twenty-plus years of ministry as a parish pastor with a focus on youth and family ministry. I have also served as a pastor of smaller and yoked (connected) rural congregations in South Dakota, and larger suburban congregations in South Dakota and Florida. One of the congregations in which I served as pastor also had a parochial school.

In addition to my ministry training and experience, I have also been trained by older Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus clowns to be a clown myself. For more than twenty-five years, I have been a Christ clown. I established Christ Clown College and have taught hundreds of youth and adults the art of clown ministry, traveling throughout North America and Europe.

For about three-and-a-half years I served as an assistant to the bishop of the Nebraska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Because I was such a right-brained, creative thinker, I had no administrative responsibilities; rather I was a creative resource for the 274 congregations in the synod at that time.

My passion for ministry with children, youth, and their families connected me to the research of Dr. Strommen at Search Institute and the Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College, where I have served as the executive director for the past five years.

Doctor Strommen and I both grew up in homes where the Christian faith was expressed and practiced. We both have a passion for strengthening families to nurture faith in the home. Merton is definitely a left-brained, sequential thinker. I am a playful right-brained person who thinks in pictures. Thus, this combination of our minds has produced a book that includes both research and stories.

Major research studies form the basis of the many facets of the conceptual model in this book (see page 12). We draw on four decades worth of studies conducted by Search Institute, which are broadly enhanced by corroborative research from other sources.

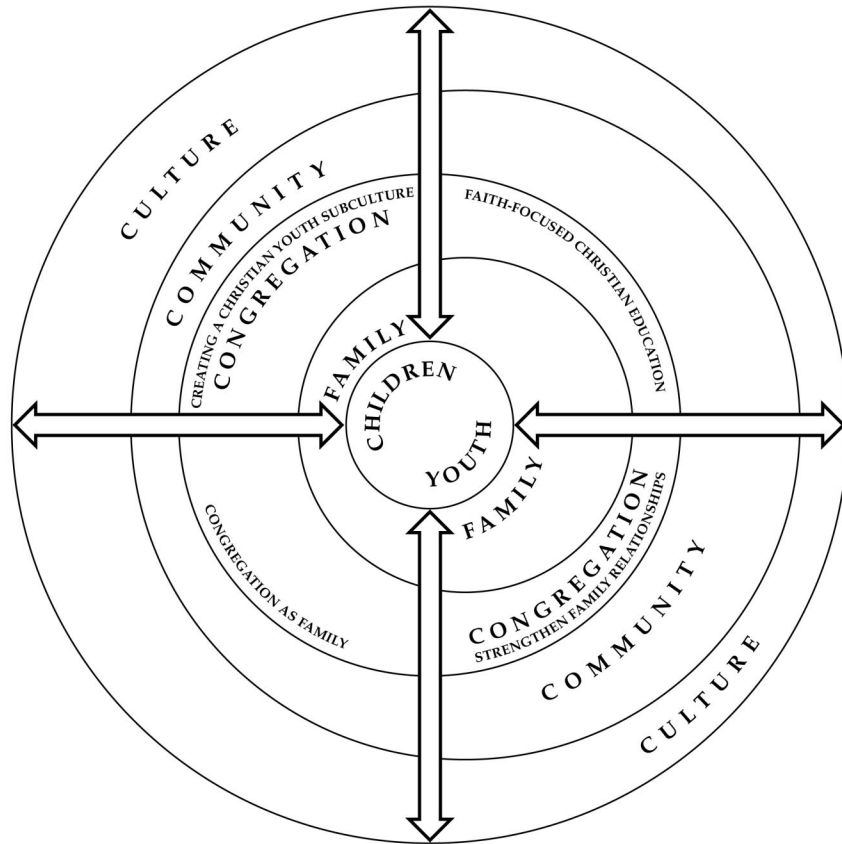
Although some of the studies are from past decades, we still use them because their information is significant. Many of the older studies used multi-variate analyses of data to identify underlying variables. This type of in-depth study is quite different from studies that involve simple polling efforts. Information from studies based on nothing more than percentages from polls has a much shorter life.

To illustrate the strength of our older studies, a fifteen-year trend analysis of data from a study called *Five Cries of Youth* showed almost no change in four of its five major facets of church youths' life. The study showed that over the years, the facets were scarcely affected by cultural determinants such as national events, increased media exposure, or national shifts in value orientations. This is the type of bedrock research information that we share in this publication.

This book is also filled with a wealth of examples of what dynamic congregations are doing to nurture faith among their people. Many of these examples come from unpublished material that resulted from a unique follow-up to Search Institute's *Effective Christian Education* study. In the follow-up study, researchers visited thirty congregations that were labeled "exemplary" and twenty-four ethnic minority congregations that were not involved in the original study to identify characteristics of congregational life contributing to their dynamic faith life.

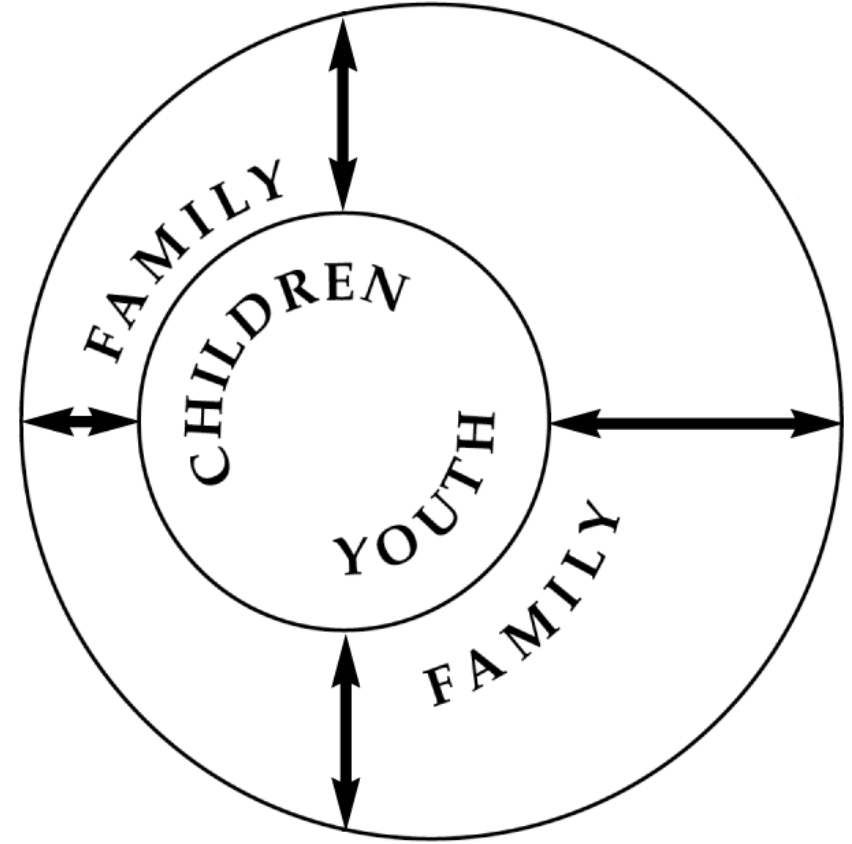
Through our research and analyses of personal experiences, we intend to show why congregations should adopt our new paradigm of youth and family ministry—a paradigm that will help congregations move from vision to action.

Conceptual Model Youth and Family Ministry



Chapter 1

What Is Youth and Family Ministry?



Thirty-five years of research in the church shows that the relationship of faith to daily life has changed in our culture. According to major studies conducted by Search Institute in all the largest church bodies in America, fewer church families are producing the kind of youth whose hearts are committed to the mission of Jesus Christ. The studies conclude that we are losing our youth from the church and the faith as they turn to at-risk behaviors.¹

Why are we losing these children? Because the tradition of passing on the faith in the home is disappearing for many members of Protestant and Catholic congregations. A study conducted in 1980 called *Young Adolescents and Their Parents* involved a national random sample of eight thousand adolescents whose parents were members of congregations in eleven different Protestant and Catholic denominations. The study showed that “God, the Bible, or religious things” are seldom discussed in church homes. Only 10 percent of church families discuss its faith with any degree of regularity; in 43 percent of the homes in these denominations, faith is never discussed.²

A similar study conducted in 1986 involved 7,551 students from 196 randomly selected Catholic schools. When asked how often their family talks about religious things, only 17 percent of the students claimed to discuss such topics at least once a week.³

In 1990 a national sample of youth and adults from six major Protestant denominations was asked the same question. Their response was no better: 35 percent of the youth, ages sixteen to eighteen, said they rarely if ever talked about faith or God with their mother, and 56 percent reported not ever having such discussions with their father. When asked how often they have devotions or worship as a family, 64 percent reported that their family rarely or never did so. Only 9 percent reported holding family devotions with any degree of regularity.⁴

As is obvious from these percentages, faith sharing is not happening today in most families of the church. It seems as though parents do not recognize their role in the faith growth of their children. As a result, children lack the undergirding that comes from being raised in a home that takes matters of faith seriously. Its effects are being noticed. A 1997 national study entitled *Kids These Days: What Americans Think About the Next Generation* reported that two-thirds of the two thousand adults surveyed came up with neg-

ative adjectives like “rude,” “wild,” and “irresponsible” when they were asked to describe teenagers. Nearly half of those surveyed described younger children as spoiled, and only 37 percent believed that today’s youngsters might eventually make this country a better place.

This study clearly demonstrates a fundamental concern about teenagers’ moral and ethical values: “Americans are convinced that today’s adolescents face a crisis—not in their economic or physical well-being but in their values and morals.”⁵ Only a minority of families today are orienting their children to a life of faith, service, and responsible living. This does not have to be our future. Strong, ethically oriented, life-shaping families are indeed as possible today as they were decades ago.

God’s Vision for Today’s Families

Two basic concepts in the Bible reveal God’s desire for families. The first has to do with *relationships*. The Scriptures focus not on the family as a collective unit, but on the relationships established between parents and children; hence, what is written applies equally well to single-parent households, blended-family households, or any configuration that makes up a family.

To children, Paul writes: “Honor your father and mother. . . . that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” To parents, Paul writes: “And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:2–4, NRSV). Paul preaches that mutual love and respect between adult and child is an important part of a family relationship. Each member of a family is to treat the other with the same love God shows us. As John says, “Love one another as I have loved you” (15:12, NRSV).

A second requirement for families involves *priorities*. Christ says: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you” (Mathew 6:33, NIV). “These things” includes family life. In case we failed to get that point, Jesus spells out his claim for being first in our lives when he says:

Anyone who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it. (Matthew 10:37–39, NIV)

According to the Scriptures, a strong, life-shaping family needs to build and maintain two key relationships—a strong family relationship and a strong relationship with God. These relationships are two sides of the same coin. One side encourages bonding between parents and children. The other side encourages bonding with Jesus, the Christ—a relationship that enables the gospel of grace and forgiveness to be lived out. When these two types of relationships characterize a family, the family indeed becomes strong and life-shaping. This is only possible, however, if parents seek to develop these essential relationships.

An important question to ask is, How can the congregation most faithfully and effectively encourage and support faith formation in the home, intentionally attending to its critical role in the family-congregation partnership?

A New Paradigm Is Needed

Church leaders increasingly realize that what is happening or not happening in the life of a child is directly related to what is happening or not happening in the home. Leaders recognize that in order to pass on the faith from generation to generation, a new paradigm of ministry is needed—one that is holistic and connects children, youth, family, congregation, community, and culture.

The current paradigm has subtly conveyed the impression that faith is nurtured only in the church buildings. This has ultimately institutionalized the faith, a phenomenon found in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

Fr. Robert Stamschror describes how this has come to characterize the Roman Catholic church:

The common understanding of the role of the family as a partner with the institution in faith formation was to give birth to the child, present it for baptism, enroll it in a Catholic school or CCD program, and make sure that the child attended Mass and received all the appropriate sacraments. It is important again to note here that the operative perspective of Faith during these times was primarily focused on the content and forms of Faith, that is, the beliefs that the church taught about God and what a Catholic practice should be in the light of those beliefs.⁶

In parallel fashion, the teaching and nurturing of faith in Protestant congregations today is associated primarily with the church building, or what is often called the “Godbox.” Over the years the message has been, “Let the professionals do the teaching. They know best.” So, parents send their children to the church for Sunday school or other religious instruction, handing the responsibility of faith education to the teachers.

Parents who believe their responsibility has ended when they have transported their children to church schools are not bad parents, however. They simply do not know how to nurture the faith because it probably was not modeled in their own homes when they were growing up. The good news is that some parents want to learn how to form and nurture faith in their children; they want to participate in the family-congregation partnership.

In this book we use the term *family* in its broadest definition. A single person has a family because she or he has at least two or three people with whom she or he converses two or three times a week if not daily. This unit, then, constitutes family. Some families may have children whereas others may not. Like families in the Scriptures, we include friends and mentors as well as relatives in our definition of *family*. Our family is those people with whom we share our faith, values, and purpose as they relate to a life of hope and love.

A Realistic Vision: Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth

The vision we authors present in this book is a partnership between family and congregation that will encourage and support the Ten

Characteristics that mark a life of commitment to Jesus Christ and a life of witness and service. We have identified the following ten characteristics:

1. Trusting in a personal Christ
2. Understanding grace and living in grace
3. Communing with God regularly
4. Demonstrating moral responsibility
5. Accepting responsibility in a congregation
6. Demonstrating unprejudiced and loving lives
7. Accepting authority and being personally responsible
8. Having a hopeful and positive attitude
9. Participating in the rituals of a Christian community
10. Engaging in mission and service

Dare we pray that God can accomplish these characteristics in the lives of youth and adults? Knowing that God has accomplished them in the lives of many former youth and adults, we must now determine how we can help increase the probability that these characteristics will become a reality for the youth and adults currently in our congregation.

The answer presented in this book considers the interactive effect of four levels of influence: family, congregation, community, and culture. Each level of influence makes a significant contribution to the characteristics we desire for our children and youth, and each level needs to be part of our ministry.

Though four levels of influence are involved, the most powerful influence comes from the family. The evidence is overwhelming that the probabilities of seeing committed youth are greatest when families are bonded to one another in a close relationship and bonded to God in a close relationship.

The term *probability* is one we use advisedly because we cannot guarantee that specific children will mature with a committed faith. Faith is a gift from God to be received and nurtured by sinful human beings, and although the Christian faith is given to children in Baptism, not all children are willing to retain this gift through daily renewal. And, not all parents who have their children baptized teach and nurture this faith in the lives of their children. The influence of family, congregation, community, and culture determines whether children and youth become people of mature faith.

A New Paradigm for Faith Formation

A faith-formation paradigm limited to religious instruction for children and a youth group for high school students no longer equips one generation to effectively pass on the faith to the next generation. A paradigm shift is needed—one that results in a more comprehensive approach and fosters faith through experiences in the family, the congregation, the community, and the culture (see fig. 1).

The need for this shift is widely felt. In September 1976 the United States Catholic Conference's Department of Education published *A Vision of Youth Ministry*. Now, over two decades later, the

Figure 1



Roman Catholic church's ministry with adolescents is confronted by new challenges. In 1997 *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* was published as a comprehensive and holistic ministry with younger and older adolescents. It includes an emphasis on the church of the home, or the family, as the first community and the most basic way in which God gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. This vision, also emphasizing extended family, the parish, the positive building blocks of the whole community, and the present culture, helps congregations move into a new paradigm of youth and family ministry.⁷

Such a paradigm shift connects silent generations (people over sixty-five years of age), perhaps the most church-ed group of people in the history of our country, to the millennial kids, who do not know the stories of God's gracious love and how these stories relate to their lives. This new vision identifies the family as God's domestic church and the congregation as God's communal church. The community and culture are viewed as providing the context within which faith-lives are shaped.

As the first and most basic community, the family acts as a model for other, larger faith-learning communities. Diana Garland, director of the Family Ministry Project located at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, defines *family*. According to her, the model of family that Jesus endorses is the adoptive family. The last act of Jesus' earthly ministry recorded in the Gospel of John enacts that adoptive model. Jesus turns to his mother and says, "Woman, behold your son." Then turning to the beloved disciple he says, "Behold your mother." The church follows Christ by ensuring that no one in the family of faith is familyless—everyone is adopted into the family.⁸

A Partnership Between Family and Congregation

In her book *Family: The Forming Center*, Marjorie Thompson raises the all-important question "What if the family were not merely an object of the church's teaching mission, but one of the most basic units of the church's mission to the world?" She continues, saying, "What I am suggesting is that the communal church and the domestic church need to recapture a vision of the Christian family as

a sacred community. This will require an awareness of the 'sacred' in the 'secular,' of God in the flesh of human life."⁹

Stamschror, editor for Saint Mary's Press Family Faith-Life Resources, identifies this awareness as an important part of family life, saying, "A personal and trusting adherence to God is the proper aspect of faith to be nourished in the family setting."¹⁰

In its latest conceptual model, *Child in Our Hands*, the Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College presents a partnership of family and congregation in which the home is viewed as the primary place for teaching and nurturing the faith. Because the beginning years for this are prebirth to age six, and most Sunday schools do not begin instruction until a child is age three, half the primary years for nurturing faith are lost for children who do not receive this guidance at home. The congregation is available simply to strengthen parents and other primary caregivers in their ability to evangelize the children whom God has placed in their hands.¹¹

A number of congregations already have begun programs based on the suggestions and concepts of Marjorie Thompson and the Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College. In 1991 Our Lady of Guadalupe, a Roman Catholic church in Helotes, Texas, adopted an alternative model to religious education called family-centered catechesis. Their approach is based on a "Family Perspective" document prepared by the United States Bishops in 1988, which includes the following four principles:

1. *A Christian Vision of Family Life*
The family has a unique identity and mission that permeates its tasks and responsibilities.
2. *The Family As a Developing System*
The family is not a collection of individuals but a living and developing system whose members are essentially interconnected.
3. *Family Diversity*
Diversity in structure, economic status, special needs, ethnic and religious heritages, and the influence of societal trends affect the roles and activities of families today.
4. *The Partnership Between Families and Social Institutions*
Partnerships need to be formed between families and the institutions that share family responsibilities.¹²

Cynthia Tejada, coordinator of Family Faith Development and Social Concerns at Our Lady of Guadalupe, remembers the benefits that came to her home from a family life program in her congregation when she was a ninth grader. Curious about how these ideas could affect the parish she now served, she introduced family-centered catechesis to several families gathered in a home. Out of this small pilot effort has emerged a family-centered approach that has established a new paradigm for religious education.

To provide resources and support for parents involved, her congregation introduced three options for families to choose from. The first is a type of family Sunday school for all ages: a parish-based, intergenerational faith-formation experience for the whole family offered one Sunday a month. In addition to a thirty-minute gathering and family activity period, there is a forty-five-minute learning time for each age-group: children on up through adults.

The second option is a program called *Seasons of Faith*. It is for all ages, and it uses a home-based approach to a family-centered catechesis. Each household is provided a home resource book (with lectionary-based lessons for each week) and an adult workbook along with an age-appropriate book for children and youth. Parents are instructed how to use these materials in settings other than the classroom.

The third option focuses on a parish-based experience that is offered three times a month for different age-groups. The classes are facilitated by an adult, high school peer minister, or mentor. Parents can choose to be involved in one, two, or all three of these options.

As might be expected, this revolutionary innovation took time to establish, and it received resistance at first. Some said: "We hired you to teach our children and youth. That is your job, not ours. You have the training and expertise." Others said: "We can't be responsible for the faith development of our children. We don't know what to say. We have had no training in Christianity since childhood." A few families actually left the church to find another parish that would be responsible for the religious education of their children.

But Our Lady of Guadalupe has not suffered. When the family-centered catechesis was introduced in 1990, there were seven hundred families in the parish. By 1998, there were 2,400 families, with

65 percent of the members under thirty-five years of age. Obviously, parents with children have been joining this parish.

Although much of the growth has to be credited to the congregation's location in a quickly growing area, the paradigm shift has not deterred people from joining. On the contrary, parents have expressed enthusiasm for this approach, saying:

- We appreciate being involved in our child's learning.
- We appreciate the availability of options and the flexibility these give our family.
- We have closer family relationships.
- We are getting acquainted with the Bible and learning how to use it.
- We are having prayer together as a family.

Tejada, who has had the full support of her pastor and church council, identifies the following assumptions underlying the paradigm they have adopted:

- The family is the domestic church.
- Family life is sacred and holy.
- Both parish and family have responsibilities in promoting family faith-growth.
- Because family life has changed significantly, approaches to religious education must reflect, respect, and embrace the contemporary family.
- Parents are the primary educators of their children in faith.
- Families and the parish need time to adjust to change; fear and resistance should be expected.
- Parents and guardians need resources and support to build confidence in their ability to form their children in faith.¹³

Another congregation has also shifted responsibility. Concordia Lutheran Church in Kirkwood, Missouri, decided to shift the responsibility for faith formation to the family. Ben Freudenburg, now Minister of Christian Home, took sabbatical visits to various congregations only to realize that the congregation of which he was Director of Christian Education was church-centered and home-supported. Excited to take on the challenge of developing a home-centered, church-supported congregation, he introduced the idea to his senior pastor and the governing board. The idea gained full support. To reflect this shift, the congregation revised its mission statement to read as follows:

Concordia-Kirkwood is a sending community called together by the Spirit of Christ—celebrative and imaginative in worship, SEEKING TO MAKE THE CHRISTIAN HOME THE PRIMARY AGENCY FOR FAITH FORMATION—shaping, nurturing and equipping the people of God for the ministry for which they have been gifted and to which they have been called.¹⁴

This mission statement, the result of a long process, is undergirded by the following basic assumptions:

- Our world has changed from a “churched” to an “unchurched” society.
- The critical unit to hand on the faith and its resulting values is the Christian home.
- The Christian congregation is a most valuable community for meeting an unchurched society through the Christian home.

This particular congregation decided to use the phrase *Christian home* rather than the word *family* because many people feel excluded by the word *family*. The word *agency* refers to home because it is to be seen as a “God-ordained place.” The phrase *primary unit* draws attention to the fact that the home is to receive the primary attention and energy of the congregation.

The mission statement also identifies the areas in which the shift of responsibility is to occur: worship, home, and training. The shift to becoming family-centered is seen in such programs and activities as Family Daily Vacation Bible School, Family Bible Hour, and family worship services. Parents shift from being cooks and taxi drivers to being equippers of faith. For Freudenburg, a program of training parents to communicate, show caring, and become involved in faith building is at the heart of a congregation’s ministry.

Convinced by his studies and observations that faith should be taught and modeled in the home, Freudenburg decided that he should begin in his own home. Over a period of time, he tried to create in his own home what he would like to see become a reality in the homes of his congregation. In a book based on his experiences, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Freudenburg lays the groundwork for a shift in thinking from a church-centered, home-supported ministry to a home-centered, church-supported ministry.¹⁵ This shift, however, requires families to be strong, receiving encouragement from many areas.

Strategies for Strengthening Family

Assist Parents in the Baptismal Journey

To help congregations shift the responsibility of religious instruction, Dr. Roland D. Martinson, professor of pastoral theology at Luther Seminary; Richard Hardel, executive director of Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College; and David W. Anderson, program director of Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College, have developed a strategy for ministry that fosters a partnership between the communal and domestic church. They call it *Child in Our Hands*.

The partnership is introduced by a home visitation team made up of a male and a female, one of them being from the most churched generation, those over age sixty-five. The teams meet with children and their families at twelve milestones (e.g., baptism, the start of school, confirmation) during the child’s journey from birth to graduation from high school. During the first visit, the team prepares the family and child for the upcoming milestone by presenting information on baptismal grace, the importance of prayer, faith communication in the home, child development, faith-informed child rearing, as well as ideas and resources for maintaining faith-life in the household. During this initial visit the families are given a *Child in Our Hands* Faith Chest and a *FaithLife in the Home Resource Guide*.¹⁶

Stored in the Faith Chest and listed in the *FaithLife in the Home Resource Guide* are the following items: musical tapes, a Bible, faith-in-daily-life storybooks, games, and videos. These items can be used for communicating faith at times when family members intersect with one another—bedtime, car time, lap time, sick time, mealtime, vacation time, and other significant family times.

The *Child in Our Hands* model presents eight strategies that connects the milestones in a family’s life with God. The milestones are to be celebrated not only in the home but also in a congregational festival worship service followed by a reception for the child and the family members. These worship celebrations and all other worship services are designed to be friendly for children and youth as well as adults.

During these contacts the congregation informs the parents of positive, Christian parenting support and resources available in a

variety of forms, varying from moms' and dads' days out, to parent support groups, to videos, to classic parenting books, to family counseling, to parenting mentors and networks.

In all contacts with the family, regular worship and participation in adult Christian education is encouraged. To give parents an opportunity to worship and pray, the congregation or other providers in the community offer quality day-care, preschool, and after-school ministries for children.

The congregation in the *Child in Our Hands* model also sponsors intergenerational training events to equip uncles, aunts, moms, dads, grandparents, godparents, and other caregivers with the skills and understanding needed to nurture faith at a specific milestone in a young person's life.

Work for Long-Lasting Marriages

In their book *A New Day for Family Ministry*, Richard Olson and Joe Leonard conclude that congregations must have an active ministry that focuses on strengthening existing marriages. A partnership between household and congregation requires stable and long-lasting marriages. It is important to counter the shattering effect of divorce by helping couples make their relationship enduring and by helping divorced people develop a new relationship, healed, healthy, and hope-filled.¹⁷

To help the church realize this objective, a "Marriage Savers" movement was developed by Mike McManus and his wife Harriet of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. They introduced the idea of citywide agreements about marriage preparation and marriage agreements to pastors and congregations. According to McManus, the divorce rate in Modesto, California, the first city to adopt such an agreement, dropped 40 percent during one decade. Obviously other factors could have contributed to this drop, but the contribution of "Marriage Savers" to the drop is evident. A 12 percent drop was noted in Fairbanks, Alaska, over seven years; a 28 percent drop in Peoria, Illinois, over six years; and a 35 percent drop in Modesto, California, over eleven years.¹⁸

When Saint Paul and Minneapolis adopted the Twin Cities Community Marriage Policy in 1997, they became the largest metropolitan community to have adopted a marriage agreement. The signers included bishops and denominational executives from a di-

verse Christian spectrum, along with representatives of the Jewish and Islamic communities. The policy calls for a minimum of four months of marriage preparation and a minimum of four premarital counseling sessions that involve use of the Bible, a premarital inventory, and intensive education. In addition, the faith leaders are expected to do the following:

- strongly encourage additional retreats, classes, and marriage enrichment opportunities designed to build and strengthen marriages
- train mature couples to serve as mentors to engaged couples, newlyweds, or couples experiencing marriage difficulties
- use or develop programs for couples with troubled marriages, allowing some mentoring to be done by couples whose own marriages were once in trouble
- use or develop support systems for couples with stepfamilies and couples of different religious backgrounds¹⁹

Greater care in preparing couples for marriage and in strengthening these marriages will enhance the partnership between family and congregation in the faith formation of children and youth. Preparation can address the growing phenomenon of couples living together before marriage. By 1990, 45 percent of unmarried adults had cohabited, and 39 percent of married couples had lived with their spouse before marriage.²⁰ But living together before marriage is no guarantee of marital success; in fact, couples who live together first divorce at higher rates (38 percent) than couples who live separately before marriage (27 percent).

A study entitled *The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce*, by researchers William Axinn and Arland Thornton of UCLA, confirms this data. They found that marriages preceded by cohabitation were 50 to 100 percent more likely to end than those marriages not preceded by cohabitation.²¹

Encourage Parents to Be Spiritual Leaders

In "The Role of Family in the Faith and Value Formation of Children," Dr. Roland D. Martinson notes the central role parents have played in passing on faith to their children.²² The parental role was established by Moses when he instructed parents to keep the theological and ethical core of God's word at the center of Israel's life:

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. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6–9, NRSV)

Walter Brueggemann, theologian and seminary professor, notes that in the biblical world, the family is the primary unit of meaning, shaping and defining reality: “One major function of intergenerational life is to transmit the stories and promises which identify the family, so that each new generation has an inheritance that gives both identity and roots, purpose and vocation.”²³

The major ritual and tradition through which families in the Old Testament celebrated God’s story and Israel’s identity was the seder meal (ceremonial dinner) held every Friday evening when the family gathered at the table. During this and other family rituals, the father and mother functioned as priest, spiritual teacher, and leader.

In the *Child in Our Hands Conference Participant’s Manual*, David W. Anderson notes that Martin Luther, in his sermon “The Estate of Marriage,” reflected his convictions about the role of father and mother in these words:

Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the Gospel. In short there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.²⁴

There are, of course, many families in which only one parent is able to serve as a spiritual leader. Though the task is more difficult for that parent, the objective of making the home a center for nurturing the faith and experiencing the presence of God should remain the same.

An important aspect to consider in fostering the family as God’s domestic church is the role of father. Organizations such as the Promise Keepers, the National Center for Fathering, and the National Fatherhood Initiative emphasize that fathering is one of the most important and challenging tasks men face. These and other

organizations have worked to revitalize congregational men’s groups and return men to a greater sense of responsibility for their role as spiritual leader in the home. Many denominational men’s organizations as well as local congregations have responded to the need to strengthen the father’s role as a nurturer of faith in the home through spiritual renewal retreats, workshops on developing spiritual disciplines, and seminars on spiritual leadership in the home.

This important role of spiritual leader is increasingly neglected as the presence of fathers in many families diminishes. Wade F. Horn, director of the National Fatherhood Initiative, says that in 1960 the total number of children living in fatherless families was fewer than eight million. By 1997 the total had risen to nearly twenty-four million. Today nearly four out of ten children in America are being raised in homes without fathers, and authorities predict that soon it will be six out of ten.²⁵

In addition to the absence of fathers, the absence of mothers is also increasing. Mothers seem to be abandoning their children, turning the responsibility over to the grandparents. Across the country more than 633,000 grandparents have become the primary caregivers for more than one million children.

Connie Booth, a counselor with Lutheran Social Service in Minneapolis, has witnessed this increase in Minneapolis. “It seems to be connected with the rise of the crack cocaine epidemic,” she says. “[Mothers] got involved with drugs or alcohol and because of that they are no longer able to parent. In some cases, the kids were just dropped off on the grandparents’ doorstep. In other cases, the grandparents had to really fight to get the kids out of the home.”

“[This problem] crosses all socioeconomic bounds. We have grandparents in the inner city and in our wealthy suburbs who are raising their grandchildren. Nobody seems to be immune to this. Many are caring for their grandchildren in an unofficial capacity. They don’t want to report their children to the county social workers, so they simply step in and do what needs to be done.”²⁶

The statistics show the increasing number of parents—mothers and fathers alike—who renounce their responsibility to be spiritual leaders in the home. This lack of responsibility comes at a high cost not only to the children being neglected but to society as a whole.

Consider the High Cost of Neglect

Jack Westman, child psychiatrist at the University of Wisconsin, used calculations based on the cost of public services in Wisconsin in 1994 to create a worst-case scenario. He chose a child born to an incompetent single parent on welfare, who grows into a habitual criminal and spends forty years of his life in prison. The cost to society is two million dollars. This stands in contrast to the one million dollars contributed by a productive child raised by a competent parent.

Westman believes that the right to parent should be earned, because parenting is a responsibility and a privilege. His argument is that incompetent parents cost society enormous amounts of money; therefore, some requirements should be placed on parents. In his controversial book, *Licensing Parents: Can We Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect?* he suggests the following three requirements:

1. Parents must be at least eighteen years of age.
2. Parents must make a written commitment to rearing a child (similar to applying for a marriage license).
3. Parents must attend parenting classes before the birth of their child.

Westman says his requirements encompass three key predictors of bad parenting:

- being too young to control one's life
- having no commitment to child rearing
- having no knowledge of child rearing

He is joined in his argument by David Lykken, a professor at the University of Minnesota, who since 1970 has worked on a world-renowned study of twins. His research on psychopathic personalities has led him to examine the link between children born out of wedlock and violent crime. Out of his research has come the book *The American Crime Factory: How It Works and How to Slow It Down*. Lykken notes that the "American Crime Factory" is turning out potential sociopaths at an ever increasing rate. Instead of building more and more prisons, we should be trying to stop the assembly line.

Hennepin County officials in Minneapolis have estimated that in terms of 1988 dollars, they have spent over two million dollars dealing with the seventy offenses committed by seven children of one family. A total of twenty-nine institutions and programs have

been used in an attempt to rehabilitate members of this family—to no avail, however.

Reviewing the records of ten other such families, a probation officer, David Seeler, said, "It's baffling to see how ineffective all these programs are, and it's disturbing to see the court throw all this money at these kids with no results. The flip side is: What else can one do?"²⁷

The difficulty of changing the lives of young people raised by incompetent parents is discussed in the book *Castaways: The Penikese Island Experiment*. The author, George Cadwalader, a Marine veteran of Vietnam, established an Outward Bound-type program for juvenile delinquents on Penikese Island off Massachusetts. He hoped that the delinquent kids would learn self-worth by living in a pure environment and would grow in self-confidence by participating in outdoor activities. After fifteen years of experimenting with this, he tried to evaluate the results of his effort. Of the first 106 boys who came to Penikese out of troubled homes, only sixteen turned themselves around. The other ninety went on to live lives of destruction.²⁸

Although these cases are extreme, they do illustrate how vital it is for children to be raised by loving, responsible parents if they are to develop the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth.

The importance of family life is being identified by many voices. Knut Andresen, then general director of the Church of Norway's National Council and author of "Youth in the Church of Norway," asked why 85 percent of youth are losing contact with the church after eight months of confirmation classes, after one year in a church youth group, or in better cases, after six years as a member of a youth organization. After examining the data of an extensive survey, he came to the following conclusion:

One explanation is the family. We never talk about faith at home. That goes for regular churchgoers. They are mostly leaving it to the professionals—that means the pastors, the lay staff, and other church officials—or to grandmothers. They might worship in the church on Sunday, but they don't have family devotions, prayer, or Bible reading. They might talk about faith with other members of the congregation, but they are very seldom talking about faith at home.²⁹

Provide Help in Parenting

People learn by experience. For this reason it is easy to assume that it is the new parents, not the older ones, who need instruction and ministry. Research shows, however, that experience does not necessarily equip parents for the responsibilities they face in this role.

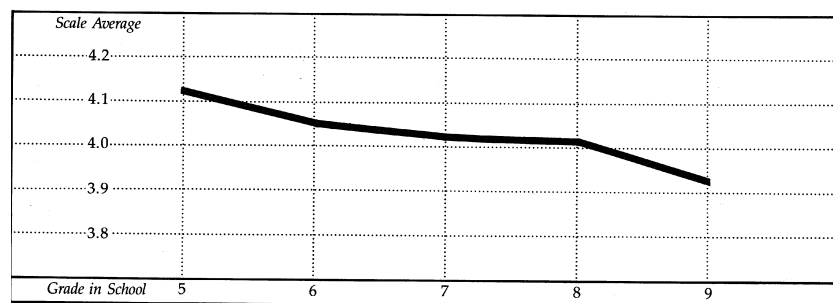
Evidence from two major studies shows that family relationships decline in closeness as parents gain experience. Family unity and closeness decline steadily from the childless stage to the adolescent-raising stage in the family cycle. Relationships are at their lowest ebb when children are adolescents.

This was discovered in a national study of eight thousand early adolescents and ten thousand parents randomly chosen from congregations in eleven major denominations. Youth and parents, independent of one another, both reported less unity and closeness as the children moved in age from fifth to ninth grade (see fig. 2). There was a discernible decline in parental harmony, communication, parental control, and expressions of love as children approached adolescence.³⁰ It is apparent that parents need more than experience to develop the kind of families that are life shaping.

Though premarriage counseling, family counseling, and youth counseling are made available, people still may seek divorce, have children out of wedlock, or remarry to form a stepfamily. In other

Figure 2

Change in Family Closeness



Item: "Members of my family get along well with each other." Based on the average of 5 items. 5 = almost always true; 4 = often true; 3 = sometimes true; 2 = true once in a while; 1 = never true

words, a ministry is sharply limited in its ability to alter the nature of family structures other than to emphasize the importance of long-lasting marriages and to model such marriage relationships.

Nor can much be done about the resources people bring into a marriage such as income or level of education. True, some things can be done to improve the level of income or to encourage further education, but as a whole, little can be done to alter these factors in family happiness. The same applies to such background variables as race, gender, and age. These are givens that do have an effect on family happiness, but little can be done to change them.

What, then, is within the scope of a ministry to parents? The one area of possibility can be labeled *family relationships*. At least five such variables are open for ministry:

1. marital relations or parental harmony
2. children's relationships with their residential fathers
3. children's relationships with their residential mothers
4. children's relationship with their nonresidential mothers
5. children's relationships with their nonresidential fathers

These variables are the most important in determining whether there are close relationships and happiness in a family. What is our basis for saying that?

In 1994 Alan Acock, sociologist at Oregon State University, and David Demo, professor of family studies at the University of Missouri, conducted a study called *Family Diversity and Well-Being*. They surveyed 13,017 households, collecting information on four thousand variables that would represent American families and households in their full breadth.³¹

From this study, Acock and Demo have been able to identify which factors are most influential in shaping the happiness, well-being, and emotional adjustment of children and parents. They studied the simultaneous effects of family structure, family resources, background variables, and family relationship variables. They found that family structure has a modest effect; family resources such as income and education have little effect; background variables have very little effect; and family relationship variables have an enormous effect on family happiness, irrespective of family structure, family resources, or background variables.

Family relationship variables are the aspects of family that can be influenced by congregational ministries. In the following list,

Dr. David Stoop summarizes what many counselors and psychologists have defined as characteristics of a healthy family:

- It is balanced; it can adapt to change.
- It handles problems on a family basis, not just an individual basis.
- It has solid cross-generational connections.
- It maintains clear boundaries between individuals.
- Its individuals deal with one another directly.
- It accepts and encourages differences.
- It accepts the thoughts and feelings of others.
- Its members know what they can give to others and what they can receive from others.
- It maintains a positive emotional climate.
- Its members value the family as “a good place to live.”
- Its members learn from one another and encourage feedback.
- Its members are allowed to experience their own emptiness.

In short, the well-adjusted family has found a balance between two seemingly contradictory dynamics—being close and being separate. When either of these two dynamics gets seriously out of balance, the result is family dysfunction.³²

God’s desire for close family relationships can be viewed as a goal for closeness without possessiveness. It is a dimension of family life that a pastor can address.

A Vision for a Christian Family

We are aware, however, that a family is a complex organism in which the attitudes, values, and actions of each member interact with one another. Changes do not come easily because of the unpredictable reaction of different members to any proposed change. Though we recognize the family as a system in which each member often lives out a designated role, we believe changes are possible where there is both intention and willingness to live by God’s promises in the Bible.

Eight factors (to be described in the subsequent two chapters) combine to shape the lives of children and youth. Each factor contributes to the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth. The more factors that are found in a family, the greater the likelihood that these Ten Characteristics will describe its youth.

We believe these eight factors can be developed over time, and that strong, life-shaping families are as possible today as they were fifty years ago. Many of today’s families can prove this to be true. The one difference for today’s families is that parents must become more intentional about what they do or don’t do as a family. Becoming more intentional means doing for our families what we do in the area of health: stop doing the things that make for ill health (e.g., eating unhealthy foods, using drugs, smoking) and begin doing those things that make for good health (e.g., exercising, praying, eating healthy foods).

The next two chapters identify those aspects of family life that make for good health and strength; chapter two identifies four factors that make for close family relationships, and chapter three identifies four factors that make for close relationships with God. If these factors are made a part of family life, they will vastly increase the probability that children will demonstrate the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth upon high school graduation.

What a radically new (yet ancient) model of faith formation: the family is restored to the center of the faith growth process, with the congregation and community as integral, active partners! The authors of *Passing On the Faith* present this new model, which is based on the extensive research of Search Institute and the Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College, including the finding that only 10 percent of church families (both Protestant and Catholic) discuss their faith on a regular basis. In *Passing On the Faith*, Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel draw on their pastoral experience to present a radically new (yet ancient) model of faith formation: the family. With its helpful chapter notes, bibliography, list of resource contacts, and index, *Passing On the Faith* is an important text for college and seminary courses in youth and family ministry, and is a useful reference book for community and school libraries. With its narrative style, ideas, anecdotes, charts and graphs, and activities, it is also an essential resource for pastors, youth ministers, family ministers, and community leaders. This book will encourage dialogue about an essential tenet of Christian teachings--that the family is central to faith formation. ...more. [Get A Copy.](#)