Children’s Ministry in a Changing World

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When children are baptized in the Reformed Church in America (RCA), parents or guardians promise “to instruct these children in the truth of God’s word, in the way of salvation through Jesus Christ; to pray for them, to teach them to pray; and to train them in Christ’s way by your example, through worship, and in the nurture of the church.” Likewise, the congregation promises “to love, encourage, and support these brothers and sisters by teaching the gospel of God’s love, by being an example of Christian faith and character, and by giving the strong support of God’s family in fellowship, prayer, and service.”

Thus begins a partnership among the family, congregation, and denomination. This article will direct our attention to the role of each of the three partners — parents, church, and denomination — in order to discover how the full partnership can be made more effective. Because parents are the primary faith nurturers, the home may be regarded as their child’s first seminary. The congregation also holds a responsibility to encourage and educate children and their parents in the Christian faith. The denomination’s role is to provide the best resources available, and to equip and support the church’s ministry with children.

Family

Marjorie Thompson, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the author of Family, the Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation, says that “the family, more than any other context of life, is the foundational arena of spiritual formation for children.” Thompson notes that this happens in families through natural opportunities of life together, and through intentional practices.

In Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children, Elizabeth Caldwell, professor of educational ministry at McCormick Theological Seminary, offers many helpful suggestions for families to use in nurturing their children. Three practices she believes to be essential are faith rituals and traditions, family worship that reflects the liturgical year, and the ability to connect daily life with what happens on Sunday.

Christian rituals and traditions are very effective ways to nurture children’s faith. Prayer before meals; bedtime prayers and remembering the day’s happenings; celebrations of births, baptisms, and other important family experiences; and preparing for Christmas during Advent and for Easter during Lent help children integrate their faith with their everyday life.
Worship may be integrated into everyday experiences by pausing to praise God for a beautiful rainbow, by thanking God for a new baby brother or sister, or by singing a song at day's end to celebrate God's care. It is important for families to begin and end the day with a worship experience. If daily family devotions (Bible reading, some discussion or singing, and prayer) are not possible, planning for such experiences at least two mornings or evenings a week might work. There is much truth in the adage, "The family that prays together, stays together."

Connecting faith to daily life involves all aspects of our humanity, including our sexual lives. Children first learn about human sexuality in the home. Parents, the primary teachers, educate by example. A well-rounded children's ministry involves thought for the whole child. The RCA offers human sexuality curriculum for children that can be used by parents and children at home or with parent orientation and classes for children in the church. This material trains parents and church leaders to help children understand their sexuality from a Christian perspective.

Another important connection between faith and daily life is found in service to others. Because service opportunities abound, the following list is only suggestive: intergenerational mission trips, visits to nursing homes (playing games, singing, talking, telling stories, appropriate hugging), service projects in the community (one church puts together packages such as homemade bread on a breadboard, homemade cookies on a serving tray, notepaper and stickers, and gives them as thank you gifts to such community persons as nurses, firefighters, teachers), or service at the church, such as collecting bulletins left in the pews after the worship service, picking up litter around the church building, planting flowers on church property, or bringing the elements to the Communion table during worship.

Choosing a life of faith in our postmodern world is no easy task for parents, who often make their children's faith nurture merely one more choice, rather than a primary focus. Faith nurture must compete with such worthwhile activities as soccer practice, music lessons, gymnastics, dance, visiting family, enjoying time with neighbors, doctor and dentist appointments, school activities, childcare, jobs, volunteering, and after-school activities. When one considers the cultural influence exerted by new technology, glitzy presentations, and fast-paced programming, fitting the church and its activities into the family schedule becomes a serious challenge.

John Westerhoff III reports that some parents are banding together to object to Sunday morning sports activities. There is strength in unity, he contends, and group objections are now likely to be listened to by those in leadership positions. Kirsty DePree, an M.Div. candidate at Western Theological Seminary, reports that a group of parents in Massachusetts have made a pact that no Sunday morning soccer match will begin until after worship. In their community, it is now a given that team members and their families always worship before the game. Perhaps if churches and consistories began to take
stronger positions on faith-nurturing Sunday practices, their stands could serve as a foundation for parents to object to the scheduling of sports and other activities at times that interfere with Lord’s Day observance.

**Congregation**

Neither parents nor the church can independently raise and educate children in the Christian faith. To nurture faith in children, the church and parents must work together. The church must not only plan for Sunday, midweek, or other educational experiences within its walls. It must also provide programs to educate parents in how to nurture their children’s faith at home in positive, joyful, and meaningful ways. This process begins when parents present their children for baptism.

Elizabeth Caldwell suggests that churches need to prepare families for more than baptism Sunday. She outlines a four-session class for prospective parents that includes the following focuses: baptism and its meanings; parenting for faith expression or living faithfully with a child; caring for and nurturing a child at church; and planning for baptism Sunday. She also suggests two booklets be given to parents: “The Church’s Welcome – The Sacrament of Baptism,” which explains the meaning and tradition of infant baptism as celebrated in the congregation, and, “Come unto Me – Children in the Life of This Congregation,” which details the opportunities for children to be involved in their congregation’s life, work, worship, and mission.\(^6\)

Research in the late 1970s demonstrated that the first three years of a child’s life are critical for the development of basic competencies in such areas as intelligence, self-esteem, and social relationships. In response, one congregation attempted to help parents develop effective child-rearing skills with a program it called, “Fresh Start: An Innovative Educational Program for Parents and Their Infant Children.”\(^7\) Perhaps it is time for all churches to help their members develop parenting skills.

By virtue of birth and baptism, children of Christian homes belong to the covenant community. As members, they are involved in the total life of the church—worship, education, witness, and service. Churches need to be intentional and proactive in providing opportunities for children to have some part in the decision-making process, to be an integral part of worship and education, and to be involved in service projects in both church and community. Some churches include children as members of the team that plans the worship services. Others involve children in the creation of special worship celebrations during the church year. One congregation sends its members (including children) pledge cards with a space for a monetary pledge and a checklist for service opportunities.

Every church should ask itself if it celebrates rituals that promote the home/church connection. The RCA’s office for education annually produces packets for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, as well as for Lent, Easter, and
Pentecost. Included are litanies (e.g., Advent wreath readings), song and hymn suggestions, family activities, intergenerational workshop ideas, and children’s dramas. These resources assist both churches and families to focus on the spiritual meaning of the seasons of the church year. In this way the connection between the practices of family ritual and church tradition is encouraged.

Every church should also ask itself how it is making a place for children in its worship practices. Children learn to be an active part of the worshipping community by participating in worship with adults; therefore, a look at what is happening in some RCA churches is in order.

The Young Children and Worship program used by many churches was developed for three- to seven-year-olds as an effective way to help them experience God through worship that is matched to their developmental level. The basic book that prepares children to participate in congregational worship with older children, youth, and adults is Young Children and Worship by Sonja M. Stewart and Jerome W. Berryman. In response to requests for additional stories, Janet Schreuder wrote, I Wonder: More Bible Stories for Children and Worship. A third book, Following Jesus: More About Young Children and Worship by Sonja M. Stewart, is a sequel to her earlier work.

Some churches, however, use the Children and Worship program for both worship and education for preschool through the sixth grade. Where that is their only worship experience, children miss fellowship with the rest of the worshipping community, have no experience of the sacraments, and reduce their opportunity for a fully nurtured faith. Congregations need to note carefully the ages of the children involved in Children and Worship and ask, “Is this program a help or a hindrance to children’s faith development once they are older than eight years?” A congregation in the Classis of Orange with a strong Children and Worship program has all children participate in congregational worship one Sunday each month. Thus, these children are active participants in worship that includes the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Children need to be included in the communal worship experience in meaningful ways. These may include such activities as ushering, reading Scripture, offering prayer, leading hymn singing, receiving the offering, serving as greeters, participating in dramatic presentations of Scripture, sharing their faith stories, and singing in the children’s choirs.

To stimulate congregations to include children in worship, a video with study guide is being produced with funds remaining from the RCA’s partnership in the Presbyterian Reformed Education Ministries. The video illustrates practical suggestions, and the guide is a rich resource for worship.

An integral part of worship is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and, by virtue of their baptism, children are welcome at the Lord’s Table. The RCA’s General Synod of 1988 adopted the following two recommendations: “To encourage boards of elders of RCA congregations to include baptized children at the Lord’s Table,” and “To instruct the Division of Christian Discipleship of the General Program Council to prepare and distribute appropriate educational
materials for the effective inclusion of baptized children at the Lord’s Table." As a result of that decision, a free packet of resources is available from the office of children’s ministry. Current plans are to publish by the end of 2002 a “Children at the Lord’s Table” preparation program that will include separate study resources for elders and parents, as well as materials for a three-session children’s class.

Children’s ministry and adult education are strongly connected. A church cannot have a strong, healthy, and vibrant children’s ministry program without also having a strong, healthy, and vibrant adult education program. Equally essential is a parenting support program of high quality.

For some adults, “graduation” from Christian education classes coincided with making their professions of faith. However, the fact is that learning should lifelong. A balanced adult education program will include offering classes in basic, intermediate, and advanced Bible study; in what Christians believe (creeds and confessions); in what it means to serve God and others; in how to nurture children's faith at home and at church; and in how to integrate everyday faith and life.

**Denomination**

The denomination’s role in children’s ministry is to equip and support congregations by providing them with the necessary resources for Christian education and mission.

**Current programs for nurturing children’s faith**

The RCA nurtures children’s faith by supporting three basic aspects of church life: worshiping with the congregation and experiencing Children and Worship, participation in church school classes (traditionally on Sunday mornings), and involvement in midweek programming. Because in our day attendance is sporadic, children are bored by some of the educational material, and staffing has become increasingly difficult, these three basic ways of nurturing faith are not as effective as they once were. Following are examples of two new approaches.

In cooperation with the office of mission services, the RCA’s office of children’s ministry is developing a study program called Living in Mission Everywhere (LIME). It is designed to help children understand that they too are missionaries to people in their neighborhoods and in their world. A learning-centers approach will teach them about the RCA’s mission work in the following areas: Africa, Central and South America, Eastern Europe and Russia, Evangelism and Church Development, Japan, Mexico, Middle East and India, Native American Indian Ministries, Reformed Church World Service, Southeast Asia, United States, Urban Ministries, and Volunteer Services.

The Formula of Agreement partnership between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Church of
Christ, and the RCA has resulted in a cooperative effort to produce Vacation Bible Experience (VBE) materials. With a new theme and focus each year, this curriculum not only nurtures covenant children, but it also welcomes children who have little or no church background into the faith experience. *Brave Believers*, focusing on Old Testament characters, is the theme for 2002.

**Church school curricula**

Because the traditional schooling model is no longer effective, curriculum as we know it may be a thing of the past. In that case, RCA churches may choose other options. Some may develop online resources for downloading; others may produce their own curricula; still others may purchase curricula that do not reflect the tenets of the Reformed tradition. The RCA’s office for education remains strongly committed to make available curricular resources that are both biblical and Reformed.

The basic Bible curriculum, Bible Way, has served to instruct children in the Christian faith for more than twenty years. Because it will be replaced by a new curriculum, tentatively titled ALIVE!, it will not be available after 2004.

In 1994 the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), in cooperation with the RCA, introduced Living in Faith Everyday (LiFE). Characterized by a strong biblical, Reformed, theological, and catechetical base, LiFE represents an intentional move away from the traditional schooling model to an emphasis on nurturing and modeling faith. The terms “lesson,” “teacher,” “student,” and “class” have been replaced by “session,” “leader,” “children,” and “group.” Drawing on the success of the Children and Worship Program, “wondering” as a response to biblical stories presented is an important part of each session.

**ALIVE!**

The RCA was once known as the Dutch Reformed Church. For 136 years, its Netherlands founders and members used only their native Dutch language in worship. Naturally, non-Dutch speakers were effectively excluded. In 2001, the picture of the RCA is radically different and diverse. Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans are vibrant parts of the denomination. To foster inclusivity and a healthy multicultural awareness and to address the issues of racism, the RCA’s office for children’s ministry has committed itself to multicultural representation in designing and writing curricula for children.

The first major project to reflect that diversity is our work on the new ALIVE! curriculum to be published cooperatively by Faith Alive Resources (formerly CRC Publications). The RCA participants insisted that the people brought together to react to the design of ALIVE! be multicultural. Further, a team of writers and mentors from a variety of ethnic backgrounds is working with Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner (an RCA member who both authored some of the LiFE curriculum and coordinated the team of authors of *Hand in Hand:*
Helping Children Celebrate Diversity) to produce two summer units for the new curriculum by the fall of 2004. Children need to experience diversity as they engage in the educational offerings of their church.

To congregations that desired a lectionary-based curriculum, the RCA offered Whole People of God (1988). It includes a handbook to assist teachers in addressing some of the denomination’s unique beliefs about baptism, The Lord’s Supper, worship, and mission.

Children now live in a rapidly changing world. Technological advances, faster-paced life, multiple choices, an emphasis on “fun,” and shorter attention spans have caused Christian educators and denominational publishing houses to offer resources for congregations looking for a lively, experiential curriculum. A recent successful example has been the development of the Workshop Rotation model12 that many congregations now use in their Sunday morning children’s education program. The RCA’s offering to churches that prefer an active, experiential curriculum with a learning-center approach is Power Express (Abingdon Press).

Teacher/leader training

In partnership with the CRC and the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the RCA trains Children and Worship leaders in the United States and Canada. This work is carried out by a network of twenty-three trainers in twenty-one training centers. Each regional synod has supervised consultants equipped to lead teacher-training workshops. Inevitably, the time and effort invested in this training increases the teachers’ commitment to their task. That, in turn, guarantees a meaningful and nurturing teaching/learning experience for both teacher and students. The denomination and its regional synods partner with congregations to make this happen.

Child abuse prevention programs

Since 1996, requests from congregations have led the RCA’s office of children’s ministry to develop resources related to the issue of child abuse. Congregations that want the church to be a safe place for children have policies that are aimed at child abuse prevention.

Conclusion

According to the New Testament, Jesus invited children into the faith community he created. He did not say, “Oh, please, don’t let those noisy children interrupt my teaching,” or, “Send those children back to their parents where they belong,” or, “I’m too busy to deal with those children now. Find something else for them to do.” Instead, Jesus “took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”13
Thus, among the first questions congregations need to ask themselves are:

How do we welcome children to our worship and other activities? Is our room for them limited to places where we will not be bothered by their questions, their restlessness, and their curiosity? Or do we make room for children in every place that they can see and imitate adults and experience their love and respect? If we want faithful children, we need to be faithful in their nurturing, in modeling for them the daily life of faith, and in helping them become servants of Jesus Christ. Such faithfulness also requires that we seek answers to these hard questions:

- Are children’s programs built more on education and instruction (knowledge) than on nurture and experience?
- How are children being included as active participants in congregational worship?
- What kinds of opportunities are provided for children to serve their church, their community, and their world?
- How are children being nurtured for leadership roles?
- Is there a variety of educational opportunities available to prepare parents and adults to nurture children’s faith?

ENDNOTES

2 Ibid.
4 (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 2000), 79.
7 The Rev. Dr. Andrew Atwood developed this program for the Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
12 In 1990, Neil MacQueen and a team of educators at the Presbyterian Church in Barrington, Illinois, began to explore a new approach to Sunday school. They called the program Workshop Rotation Model. Classrooms are transformed into learning-based workshops and the church school focuses for several weeks on a single biblical story. More information about the program can be found in, Workshop Rotation: A New Model for Sunday School, by Melissa Armstrong-Hansche and Neil MacQueen (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000).