

2009

Equipping Parents : a Study of Baptism Education in the Twin City Area

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EQUIPPING PARENTS: A STUDY OF BAPTISM EDUCATION IN THE
TWIN CITY AREA

by

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A Ministry Project Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

April 28, 2009

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This is an exploratory study seeking to document current practices of pre-baptismal education, in the context of specific local churches, to gain insight into what they are doing in this arena. It is the author's intent to engage in an investigation of the general pre-baptismal experience within the Minneapolis and St. Paul synods of the ELCA and to examine a few specific expressions of this teaching moment. I believe, and the church teaches, that becoming a parent means entering into a calling from God to participate in God's creative and redemptive activity through the raising of one's children. However, many parents feel ill equipped to raise their children to respond to God. The literature in religious education suggest that pre-baptismal education is an important tool in the church's ministry to reach out to and support parents, not only in their own faith journey, but also in assisting them in becoming the primary faith nurturers of their children.

LUTHERAN THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

For Martin Luther, central to one's whole life as a Christian was living daily in one's baptism. Historically and currently there are three elements for Lutherans to consider in the contemplation of what it means to daily live in one's baptism: what is baptism; how are we to regard baptism; and why do we baptize.

First, what is baptism? "Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's Word."¹ Plain water can be a powerful thing. By itself, plain water has the power to bring physical life or death to living things. Physical existence is dependent on the availability of an adequate clean,

¹ Luther, Martin, *Small Catechism*, Translated by Timothy Wengert. (Augsburg Fortress, 1994) 41.

fresh water supply. In space exploration, one element sought as evidence to support the possible existence of life now or at one time is signs of the presence of water. A few years ago, my family and I went on vacation to New Orleans. We had a wonderful week exploring the French Quarter, walking along the river and meeting the people of this fascinating community. The day we returned home, we were met with disturbing news: Hurricane Katrina had unleashed her fury. The town we were just in was under water, death and destruction was everywhere; such is the negative power of uncontrolled water.

Yet this water cannot compare to the strength of water when infused with the power of God's word. It is the power of the Word, spoken at creation and again at baptism, which is the creative force producing new life where there was nothing or simply death and darkness. In baptism, water serves as the physical symbol of death to sin and the believer's new life in God. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:14 NRSV)

How then is baptism to be regarded? Does baptism have a special significance in the life of a Christian? Most definitely. Just as God gave the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer to humankind, so God has given us the Means of Grace in Baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism is commanded by God, "Go therefore and make disciples of nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19 NRSV)

Just as John acted as the agent of God in the baptism of Jesus, today the human hands that baptize are simply acting as agents of God "To be baptized in God's name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself." (Book of Concord 457.10) It is not the pastor administering the baptismal service and applying the water or the parents

and sponsors making vows, which produces this transforming sacrament. It is God acting through these elements and the faith of the congregational community including all of the participants.

Why baptize? It is in baptism that God redeems and saves us. “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved.” (Mark 16:16 NRSV) For Lutherans, this assurance is critical to our understanding of salvation as justification by grace through faith. “But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body” (Book of Concord 462.44)

So, the question remains, “What does it mean to daily live out one’s baptism?” The goal of Luther’s entire ministry was that all Christians might live each day trusting in the assurance that they are baptized.² What does a life lived in this assurance look like? It is a life that stumbles and falls but gets back up and begins anew each and every minute. This life understands that it is through baptism we:

- 1) Are saved through faith alone
- 2) Celebrate our new birth
- 3) Acknowledge the benefits we receive in baptism
- 4) Receive the Holy Spirit
- 5) Receive membership in the church
- 6) Participate daily in Christ’s’ life, death and resurrection

Daily living out one’s baptism reflects thankfulness that we are saved through faith alone. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2: 8-9 NRSV) God’s graciousness toward humankind is especially evident when an infant is

² Buschkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, (Augsburg Fortress, 2008) 6.

baptized. Faith cannot be explained in logical terms. You cannot design a paradigm that will end in faith. Faith is a leap of trust – trust in God to act as God has promised. In baptism, God promises to forgive sin, deliver us from death and the devil, and grant eternal salvation. Faith in these promises is not an intellectual acceptance of a doctrine or right living but the childlike trusting in a heavenly parent, God. What better example of this trust of God’s gracious act toward humanity than when parents bring an infant to be baptized. The infant is unable to declare or make confession. Instead, they are confidently placed before God. The act of salvation is entirely God’s action. Faith and repentance are lifelong consequences of, and not preconditions, for baptism.³

Daily living out one’s baptism reflects thankfulness and the celebration of new birth in Christ. “Jesus answered, Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (John 3:5-6 NRSV) We rejoice in a new birth freely given through the grace of God. “He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:5-6 NRSV)

Daily living out one’s baptism reflects thankfulness for the benefits received in baptism. In *The Small Catechism*, Martin Luther lists the gifts or benefits granted in baptism, “Baptism brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the Word and promise of God

³ Buschkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, 7.

declare.” “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.” (Acts 2:38 NRSV)

Daily living out one’s baptism expresses thankfulness for receiving the Holy Spirit. In scripture, God promises the coming of the Spirit. “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26 NRSV) At our baptism this promise is personally fulfilled with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. “Sustain (name the one being baptized) with the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.” (ELW 231)

Daily living out one’s baptism reflects thankfulness for being received into membership in the church. Living out this baptismal life and promise is as important to the life of a congregation as it is to the individual. Baptism is not an isolated event. Believers are baptized into a community of faith all over the world, past, present and future. The ritual of baptism taking place during corporate worship gives each member an opportunity to reflect on and renew one’s own adoption into to the family of God. Through baptism we are made members of a family, not only of the individual congregation but more importantly, we are made a child of God, “(Named), child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” (ELW 231) This adoption is sealed with the sign of the cross made on the forehead of the one being baptized.

Daily living out one’s baptism reflects one’s thankfulness in the participation in Christ’s’ life, death and resurrection. “Do you not know that all of us who have been

baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For as we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:3-5 NRSV) In the same manner, true participation in the life of Christ is through baptism. In this God issues a call to vocation, to reach out and minister to the world.

VOCATION OF PARENTING

In our baptism, God calls all Christians to minister to the world in whatever station they find themselves. The Protestant idea of vocation has fallen out of use over the years. “Vocation encourages Christians to live out their calling in and through the special relations in which they have been placed by God’s design.”⁴ Is there a more special relationship than that of a parent and child? The church needs to reclaim its heritage and rediscover what it means to consider parenting as a vocation. Many people today believe the family is an endangered species. Even a superficial look at society exposes the risks to family life. Society has become increasingly less friendly to parents who put children first. The workaholic who ignores one’s children is rewarded on the job with raises and promotions. The rise of daycares and having other people “raise” children is more and more common. Whether one works “outside” the home or not, one must not abdicate the vocation of parenting. When I became a parent almost thirty years ago, I didn’t understand then that I was entering into this vocation. I was just a mother. However,

⁴Schuurman, Douglas, *Vocation: Discovering Our Calling in Life*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) 96.

becoming a parent means entering into a calling from God to enthusiastically participate with God in God's creative and redeeming activity through the raising of one's children.

According to Martin Luther, one carries out one's vocation to serve God through serving one's neighbor. In the vocation of parenting, the neighbor is one's child. There are three aspects of vocation to consider when examining parenting in light of Christian vocation. First, in even the most mundane task, God's love is demonstrated to the child. Second, when the needs of the child are met, the needs of Christ are met, and third, believers are representatives of God by faithfully living out our vocation.

It is easy to forget that while performing even the most mundane tasks, God's love is shown. Changing diapers, although definitely not an exciting task, meets one of the most basic needs of a child. Satisfaction should be found in fulfilling the most basic physical needs such as food, shelter and clothing. While this is a natural instinct for loving parents, it takes on greater meaning when done vocationally. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish will give a snake?" (Matthew 7:9-10 NRSV)

When I was first married, my husband and I lived in a college town in Ohio. His colleagues' wives were professors, lawyers and doctors. When we first became parents, my husband and I made the decision that I would stay home with our children and not work "outside the home". I had a degree in education and had been a teacher. On more than one social occasion when asked, "What do you do?" people would turn their backs and walk away after I answered that for now I had chosen not to work outside the home. I often heard them say, "Oh, she's just a wife and mother". These educated people were clearly uninformed as to the role of homemaker and parent.

In *The Book of Concord*, Luther writes, “God has given this walk of life, fatherhood and motherhood, a special position of honor, higher than that of any other walk of life under it.” (Book of Concord 400.105) The vocation of being a father is also extremely complicated. Often in our society, women are seen as the natural caregivers and fathers are expected to go out into the world and earn a living. It is through their “jobs” that the needs of their family are met. The vocation of fatherhood however, is not solely relegated to his job. Occasionally I would be gone from the home. My husband would care for our children. Inevitably someone would ask, “Is your husband babysitting?” My response would be, “No, he is being a father.”

The second aspect of vocational parenting is that, in meeting the needs of one’s child, one meets the needs of Christ. Through the daily tasks of laundry or cooking, Christ is served. In our society today, caring for the needs of children is often seen as a low level job. This is not much different than in the times of Jesus.

Throughout the course of history, the status of children has been that they were considered fundamentally incomplete. They were not yet deemed fully human. In the Roman world, children did not have any rights, not even a right to life. A father could cast out an infant in the street, abandoning it to die if it did not meet his expectations (by being born female or deformed). The custom of exposition was practiced at every sociocultural level in the Roman world.⁵ While the Jewish attitude toward children was not quite this negative, it is apparent that children were not held in high regard. “People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples

⁵Gundry-Volf, Judith M., “The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament.” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001) 33.

spoke sternly to them.” (Mark 10:13 NRSV) From Abraham on, within the Jewish tradition children were valued as gifts from God. This difference in attitude gives children in Jewish culture greater value than afforded them in the Greco-Roman world. However, their value was still limited by their dependence upon the adult world for everything. Children occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder, and thus caring for children was a low status activity left to the women and servants. It was beneath the status of males to be involved in the day-to-day care of and interaction with the children of the community.

Into this society, Jesus came proclaiming, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3-4 NRSV) “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.” (Luke 9:48 NRSV) Welcoming someone into one’s home involved providing service for the guest, but not necessarily assuming the role of the servant. Once again, Jesus proclaims the need for the reversal of status. “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:11-12 NRSV) Members of the kingdom are called to serve, not to be served. Those to be served are to include people of all status. Jesus redefines care for children as a mark of greatness.⁶ Luther recognized the importance of children. He wrote, “Nor is it recognized how very necessary it is to devote serious attention to the young.” (Book of Concord 410.171) Douglas Schuurman states it well when he writes,

⁶Gundry-Volf, Judith, M. *The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament*, 43.

“God’s will is that in all our callings we serve the least of these, for in serving them we serve Christ.”⁷ “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40 NRSV)

The third aspect is that as an agent of God, one is working with God in the creative process. “God creates the babes in the mother’s body – man being only an instrument in God’s hand – and then he sustains them with his gifts, brought to the children through the labors of father and mother in their parental office.”⁸ To children, parents represent God. They introduce God’s love to their children. They are called to be channels of God’s love to those around them. In *The Large Catechism*, Luther points out that all creatures are conduits for showing God’s love to others. This is particularly true of parents, in regard to their children.

Vocations are lived out through office. Each office, in this case being a parent, comes with specific duties and responsibilities. Luther spent a great deal of his time writing in an effort to assist parents in faithfully discharging these duties. He writes, “For if we want capable and qualified people for both the civil and the spiritual realms, we really must spare no effort, time and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world.” (Book of Concord 410.172) Too often today parents concentrate on the civil realm and raise their children to serve the world, not God. “Many parents never bother to study the meaning of Christian faith themselves, leaving that to ‘experts’, and so are not competent to discuss it with their children. Individuals and parents exhaust massive amounts of time and energy in their paid work, and in preparing

⁷Schuurman, Douglas, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 110.

⁸Wingren, Gustaf, *Luther on Vocation*, (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957) 9.

their children for paid work, but often pay almost no attention to the roots of Christian vocation.”⁹

Unfortunately, on earth there is a constant battle between God and the devil. All too often parents misuse their office. “Everyone acts as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement.” (Book of Concord 409.170) There are some common temptations in the call to parent. Often parents expect their children to reflect them in the world. By this thinking, they violate their vocation by putting the focus back on themselves and not on God. They want their children to excel in sports or academics, as if to say, “Look what a good parent I am” or, they tell them, “What would people think of us if you misbehave?” They desire to relive past highlights in their own lives through their children, pushing them into activities the children may not enjoy just because the parent did. Or else they try to undo past “would have”, “should have” regrets in life. They can be quick to judge or fail to listen to their children. The attitude of “I am the parent and I am always right” does not reflect the loving nature of God. In Scripture we read, “And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bringing them up the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4 NRSV) By applying a rigid, unbending set of rules, they fail to fully love their child and meet his/her needs. Parents need to be adaptive and loving to express God’s love to their children. Children are not meant to be the parent’s reflection in society. Children should reflect God, for they too have a vocation.

Another trap is a failure to “parent”. A popular trend in the seventies was to “be their friend”. This is a disservice to children. By attempting to be their friend, parents fail

⁹Schuurman, Douglas, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 69.

to adequately discipline their children. Hebrews 12 speaks to the responsibility of parents to discipline their children. “Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them.” (Hebrews 12:9 NRSV) Luther wrote, ““Everyone acts . . . as if it were of no concern of ours what they learn or how they live.” (Book of Concord 409.170-410.171) By failing to discipline children, they are being told in essence that what they do or how they live out their lives is not important. There is a difference between discipline and punishment. When exercised with justice and mercy, discipline is an important tool in carrying out one’s vocation as a parent.

The same office has different duties, not only as children grow but also in response to the reality that different children have different needs. A frequent mistake parents make is playing the “fairness game.” I have three children and they each have unique needs. Although some of their needs are obviously the same (food, clothing, a place to live), my children are very different in temperament, style of learning, talents and emotions. Therefore, even in similar circumstances, my response to each child must be individualized. By using the same answer in response to each child’s need, no child’s need is met. True fairness is not a rigidly applied uniformity in responding to all children. Fairness is accomplished by seeing to it that each child receives what is needed (not necessarily what they want).

Luther uses the term “stundelein” when speaking about meeting the needs of the child now, rather than looking forward and trying to anticipate future needs. The office of parenting changes as children grow. It is necessary to pay attention to the changing needs of children as they grow without losing site of their immediate needs. The needs of a teenager differ from the needs of a toddler. Parents have to be prepared to loosen their

hold on children and to allow them to grow. As children become adults, their needs change yet again. However, one thing does not change, and that is the office of parent. The duties of that office are what changes.

Parents need to avail themselves of the assets available to help them in their vocation. Among these assets are the church, with participation in the sacraments and prayer; doctors, teachers, or other professionals they can turn to for advice; the fellowship of believers; and other parents. The church should be a valuable asset. It is here they can participate in the strengthening activity of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Through this communion with Christ, they are built up for service. The church can be a source of fellowship and can provide the tools they need, while teaching them how to use these tools to instill in their children the habits and practices and knowledge necessary to serve God. Fellowship with other parents is another valuable asset in helping them live out their vocation. “By reflecting on especially exemplary mothers, friends, fathers our sense of vocation can be sparked and deepened.”¹⁰ When my children were small, I participated in weekly play dates. During these weekly gatherings, as our children would play, we would share with each other the events the week. We were able to offer each other guidance to help us in our common vocations. The strength and assurance as we discovered the similarities of our highs and lows was an important benefit gained during those meetings.

¹⁰ Schuurman, Douglas, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, 71.

PARENTS AS FAITH NURTURERS

“He has given us children and entrusted them to us precisely so that we may raise and govern them according his will.” (Book of Concord 410.173) Parents should be the primary faith nurturers for their children. In her book, *Family, the Forming Center*, Marjorie Thompson states, “Because we are born or adopted into families of one sort or another and because these families of origin are the principal context of daily life and relationship during our most formative years, it seems reasonable to conclude that the family of origin is the first place of spiritual formation.”¹¹

Dr. David Anderson, of The Youth & Family Institute, puts forth five principles of faith nurture. They are as follows: faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal trusted relationships, often in our own home; the church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home; where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too; faith is caught more than taught; and if we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults and parents.¹² The role of the Christian community will be addressed later in this work.

In an article written for the Minneapolis Star Tribune Newspaper, a report released by the Search Institute at a recent Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth conference was cited. The study asked, “Who helps you spiritually?” 44 percent of young people, ages 12-25, listed family as their chief spiritual influence. However, in the same report, 35 percent of the young people, say they never talk to their parents about

¹¹ Thompson, Marjorie, *Family The Forming Center*, (Upper Room Books, 1996) 19.

¹² Sharpe, Marilyn, *Partnering Home and Congregation in Christian Education*, (The Youth & Family Institute, <http://www.tyfi.org>) accessed October 30, 2008.

religious faith, and 42 percent do so only infrequently.¹³ Well-meaning parents say they don't want to inflict their own beliefs or values of a religious nature on their child.

However, these same parents would not hesitate to teach their children to obey the civil law. Their attitude of "I'll let them decide for themselves" is a mistake. This intentional abdication of parental guidance sends the wrong message. The implied message is "I don't care what you do in this area of your life". This inability to parent sends an erroneous impression. "To avoid making decisions regarding a child's faith, character, attitudes and habits is to teach a child that these key elements of personhood are of little value to the parent and likewise to the child."¹⁴

The Youth & Family Institute has developed four spiritual disciplines for daily life to firmly establishing the presence of Christ in the home. The Four Keys for Nurturing Faith are:

1. Caring Conversation: It is through these conversations that parents can honestly share who they are and what they believe. It is vital to find time to fully turn one's attention to the child. Turn off the TV, radio, or computer. Spend intentional face-to-face time with your children. This intentional time can occur as you drive them to school, sit down to dinner or put them to bed at night. Parents should be prepared to use any moment and any circumstance as a teaching opportunity.

2. Devotions: Set aside time each day to read Scripture and pray. You can go into any store today and find a wide variety of age appropriate Bibles and Bible storybooks. Teach your children to pray. There are six common categories of prayer:

¹³ Strickler, Jeff, "Here's the steeple; open the door, and where are the young people," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, November 10, 2008.

¹⁴ Evenshaug, Oddjorn, Dag Hallen and Roland Martinson, *Parenting With Purpose* (The Youth & Family Institute, 2001) 23.

praise, confession and forgiveness, supplication, intercession, lament and thanksgiving. Children understand the concept of “I want”. Even young children understand the need to say, “I’m sorry” and hear “You’re forgiven”. The concept of lament is not foreign to children. They know sadness and mourning just as adults do. It is important that they realize that, as well as an earthly parent; they also have a heavenly parent they can turn to in prayer in times of sadness or joy. Devotion time can be an important opportunity to teach them to look beyond themselves to God and to the needs of others. As parents teach their children to pray, they also need to teach them to listen. Prayer is a conversation with God. “Children need times of intentional quietness and stillness to remain in touch with their spirit and the divine force that animates them.”¹⁵ Modeling the practice of prayer and devotion time is an essential behavior to pass down to children.

3. Rituals and Traditions: Most families have a built in set of traditions that they are already practicing, especially around birthdays and holidays. In my family, we celebrate birthdays with a special dinner. The birthday person gets to pick whatever they want for dinner. This is carried over on the baptismal birthday of each person. What do you do everyday? Do you have a morning or bedtime ritual with your child? Find time to build God into these everyday moments.

4. Service: As Christians we are called to serve those around us. Remember children too have a vocation. They also are to “proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.” (ELW 228). It is never too early to show by example and to help them live out their vocation. Include children in service together with adults. Find opportunities to model generosity and

¹⁵ Yust, Karen Marie, *Real Kids Real Faith*, (Jossey-Bass, 2004) 96.

charitable living. For example, let children help deliver Meals on Wheels or shop for items to donate to Toys for Tots at Christmas.

Faith is caught not taught. Faith does not suddenly appear one day even though at baptism it is miraculously endowed. We do not go to bed one night and awaken the next morning with faith. In his book, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, John Westerhoff put forth his theory of faith development in four steps: experienced faith; affiliated faith; searching faith; and owned faith. In the first step of development, we “experience faith” through our interactions with others. It is through these contacts children first encounter God by observing how the parents express their faith and the importance it holds for them. What the child experiences is the faith of others.

The second step, “affiliated faith” is based on a continuing and developing relationship or affiliation. They adopt the beliefs of those around them. “For children to develop a relationship with the images and characters of their faith tradition, they must see these images and characters frequently.”¹⁶ Active participation in worship and with a community of believers is important during this time. Practicing the behaviors of faith produces an attitude of faith.

During the stage of “searching faith”, it is necessary to question ideologies put forth. This can be a challenge to most parents, as they often see these questions as an attack on what they hold dear. Parents need to be open to these challenges and questions. This stage can be an opportunity for growth and renewal for the parents as well. The promises made during baptism enable children to move through these steps on their journey. Parents are instructed in Scripture to faithfully teach their children the tools

¹⁶ Yust, Karen Marie, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 24.

necessary to live godly lives. “Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”

(Deuteronomy 11:19 NRSV) What are the tools needed? The Lutheran Church has provided guidelines for facilitating parents with the vows taken at the time of baptism. “As you bring your child to receive the gift of baptism, you are entrusted with responsibilities:

To live with them among God’s faithful people,
Bring them to the word of God and the holy supper,
Teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,
Place in their hands the Holy Scriptures,
And nurture them in faith and prayer,

With the knowledge gained from learning the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the commandments, and from reading Scripture, and relationships built in a community of faith, children will have a base from which to launch their search and a community to fall back on for help and support during this time.

It is only by experiencing, affiliating and searching that anyone can reach the final step, “owned faith”. “Owned faith, personal identity, is God’s intention for every person.”¹⁷ Owned faith is the outcome of active searching, so that one can confidently confess that which they believe as truly their own. Faith is a gift from God, but owned faith is when the individual claims and acknowledges that gift. Owned faith is first person faith, “I believe/credo”.

If we want Christian children, we need Christian adults and parents. “Both children and adults need exposure to the grammar of the religious life so that they can

¹⁷ Westerhoff, John, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, (Morehouse Publishing, 2000) 96.

understand and participate in religious conversation.”¹⁸ Parents cannot teach what they do not know. How will they know if they have not been taught? By affiliating with a congregation, the parents will have a base to fulfill their vocation and a source of information and support. As parents practice faith with their child, both become better acquainted with God.¹⁹ Therefore, it is vital for parents to nurture their own faith by participating in education class, worship and partaking in Holy Communion, through reading Scripture, prayer and receiving daily forgiveness and new life in Christ. Parents need to remember that the gift of faith and grace their child received in baptism is the same gift they received in their own baptism.

THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATION

Just as parents are called to a special vocation, so too are congregations. God has created a world in which we are invited to work with him. As God baptizes through human hands, God has given us the church as agents to help teach others. In his address to the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany in 1524, Martin Luther said, “Indeed, for what purpose do we older folks exist, other than to care for, instruct and bring up the young?”²⁰ While the church has distinct offices for carrying out its vocation, as baptized members into the priesthood of all believers, each person of the congregation has been called into “the ministry” of Jesus Christ. Members of the congregation make a promise to the parents as they bring forward their child for baptism. “People of God do you

¹⁸ Yust, Karen Marie, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 70.

¹⁹ Evenshaug, Oddbjorn, Dag Hallen and Roland Martinson, *Parenting With a Purpose*, 51.

²⁰ Strohl, Jane E. “The Child in Luther’s Theology: For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for the Young?” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (William B. Eerdmans Publishing 2001) 159.

promise to support (name) and pray for them in their new life in Christ?” (ELW 228)

“The two most defining relationships in a baptized person’s life are with the God of the gospel and with the church. To use baptism aright is to immerse oneself in the various means of grace – worship, prayer, proclamation, and sacraments – so that one is constantly exposed to the working of the Spirit. Apart from the church, this is impossible.”²¹

In his book, *To Know as We Are Known*, Parker Palmer talks about “null” curriculum. We teach by what we do not say or do. “The informal hidden curriculum in our churches is often more influential than the formal curriculum.”²² Last summer, while I was visiting friends out of state, they invited me to attend church with them. The service was to be a celebration of its ministry. Mid-way through the service, the youth pastor stood and gave a brief talk about how valued the children in the congregation were. After speaking, he then announced, “Alright, children it is now time for you to leave.” As the children continued to sit there he said rather sternly, “I’m serious, it’s now time for you to go.” Slowly, the children got up and processed out of the sanctuary. What was the message the children heard? Was it “you are valued” (as his talk said) or was it, “we don’t want you in the sanctuary?” Do we welcome children with a smile? Or, do they only see frowns when they are restless? It is through the congregation’s actions that children encounter God in a corporate setting. They will never have faith unless there is a community of faith for them to live in and be influenced by.²³

²¹ Strohl, Jane E, *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge, 143.

²² Westerhoff, John, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 15.

²³ *Ibid*, 47.

Worship can be a time of educating parents on the faith. Unfortunately, in some churches we worry too much about entertaining people. A common comment from some people today is “church is boring”. They seem to believe that worship is for their benefit alone. This doesn’t mean worship has to be unchanging. In her book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, Marva Dawn writes, “Many churches that want desperately to attract people to Christ miss the mark by offering worship so shallow that not enough of Christ is proclaimed to engender lasting belief.”²⁴ One congregation I attended would routinely shorten the baptismal service, completely eliminating the section that explains the significance of water. This approach causes a lost teaching moment for the sake of expediting worship. A worship service should not only inspire but also be a time to nurture a deeper understanding of the faith.

In many parts of the church today, there is renewed awareness of the centrality of baptism. Baptism is considered “the foundational event in the life of any community.”²⁵ In *The Use of the Means of Grace*, congregations are encouraged to choose a sponsor from among their members for each baptismal family. Their role would be to guide the family to “join in the life and work of the community of believers for the sake of the world.”²⁶ By acting as a mentor, the congregational sponsor can assist in the incorporation of the parents and child into the community of faith.

The entire church has the responsibility to help all members grow in their faith. “That responsibility certainly includes supporting and encouraging families with young

²⁴ Dawn, Marva, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993) 60.

²⁵ Buschkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, 15.

²⁶ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997). 26.

children.”²⁷ When my first son was born, we would bring him to worship service with us. When he was around three, he was a typical toddler. If he became disruptive, we would take him out, but would return with him as soon as possible. One Sunday morning, a woman in the congregation asked us, “Why do you bring your son to church services? Don’t you know we have a nursery for children? They shouldn’t be in worship until they are five.” As we worshipped there, I started to observe the people around us and began to notice the frowns and looks in our direction on Sunday morning. Needless to say, we did not stay at that church much longer. The next church we attended was similar in size and congregational make-up. One morning, after a particularly difficult Sunday with our now two children, a member of the congregation came up to me and said, “You know the problem with your children? You need to sit up front so they can see what’s going on and when they start to act up turn them around so the rest of us can entertain them for awhile!” “While faith itself is a gift of God, the understanding of faith is learned within the faith community of the congregation.”²⁸

“We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.” (ELW 231) At baptism, the child becomes a full member of the community. He has gifts that contribute to the family. Alex, age 4, and his mother attended a class I taught on confession of sin and absolution. The concept of doing wrong, needing to confess and receiving forgiveness is not foreign to children. At the end of the class, the students assisted in the worship service with a very simple confession of sin. As they

²⁷ Morgenthaler Shirley K. *Right From the Start*, (Concordia Publishing House, 2001) 194.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

gathered around the baptismal font, they simply said, “Jesus, I’m sorry. Please forgive me.” The Pastor responded with, “You are forgiven.” The students then dipped their hand in the water of the font and made the sign of the cross on their forehead. Over the years we have watched Alex enter the sanctuary for worship. Each time he and his mother enter, they stop at the baptismal font and Alex dips his hand in the water and makes the sign of the cross on his forehead and then on his mother’s forehead. Alex reminds those that watch him of the baptismal gift of forgiveness. We need to be aware that our children can teach us. Their actions can serve as a reminder of the content in ritual that may have become rote and second nature to us. “We need to acknowledge not only the worth of others, but our need of their life and witness for our growth in faith.”²⁹

“As important as it is for a church to strengthen families in order to become a domestic church, it is equally important for a congregation to become like a family.”³⁰ The domestic church is the family as church and is central to successful faith nurture. In this mobile society today, the extended family is fragmented. Many parents do not have the luxury of grandparents or other biological family members nearby for support. In the same manner, older members of the congregation are missing their children and grandchildren who are not nearby. By becoming surrogate grandparents and mentors, the needs of both families are met. “God sets the lonely in families.” (Psalm 68:6 NIV) The congregation is in the unique position to become a family to its members by encouraging members to behave as families to each other and providing opportunities and resources

²⁹ Westerhoff, John H. III, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 87.

³⁰ Strommen, Merton P. and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, (Saint Mary’s Press, 2000) 156.

for growing more intimate relationships. “Whether or not they have biological children, all adults must exercise the vocation of parenting in one way or another.”³¹

“All members must realize that they are responsible for education because they form a people.”³² Because learning takes place outside the classroom, education is not just the responsibility of the pastor, director of education or Sunday school teacher. Learning what it means to be a member of the body of Christ takes place in the conversations held over coffee and in the fellowship between members before service and in the parking lot after church. Our behaviors while we socialize outside the sanctuary reflect and teach what we believe to be important aspects of our Christian faith.

Congregations need to include and accept people where they are on their faith journey. Learning events should be offered in non-threatening environments so parents can become confident learners and teachers. “Hands on” learning is one of the most valuable methods for integrating practical advice on spiritual formation. One of the most effective ways congregations can do this is through intergenerational events. One congregation I served offered an Advent Workshop on the first Sunday in Advent every year. As the generations gather around a table to make a decoration or decorate cookies, stories on Advent and Christmas celebrations were shared. Rituals and traditions celebrating Advent and discussion of the true meaning of Christmas were passed from one generation to another and from family to family. “If our imaginations for teaching

³¹ Strommen, Merton P. and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 158.

³² Harris, Maria, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*, (Westminster John Knox Press 1989) 47.

and learning are locked into the classroom, our imaginations for education become extremely limited as well.”³³

“If one of the most fundamental gifts a parent can give a child is words to articulate inner experience, one of the greatest gifts a church can offer its families is faith language.”³⁴ In a recent Lutheran Association of Christian Educators newsletter, Debbie Streicher compares the need of adults to learn faith language to immigrants struggling to learn English. For many adults today, the language of faith is not their first language. Terms and concepts such as “grace and justification” are foreign to them. It is unintentionally exclusive and excluding to use “church speech,” without offering translations for the uninitiated. It is the task of the church to recognize this need and to assist parents in learning the language of faith. As parents become more familiar and comfortable with the language of faith, they will become more comfortable using it at home. Parents need a loving environment in which to learn. Just as children have different learning styles and need teaching methods matching their ways of learning, so do adults. The church needs to provide a variety of learning experiences.

If the church desires family formation to be explicitly Christian, they bear responsibility for helping families learn intentional Christian practices in the home.³⁵ The goal of any church program should be to increase parental confidence in their own ability to share their faith and give them the tools necessary to raise their children in faith. “Parents need a community of faithful people to study, work, pray and worship alongside. They need to realize that they need not shoulder the responsibility in isolation from the

³³ Wigger, J. Bradley, *The Power of God at Home*, (Jossey-Bass 2003) 2.

³⁴ Thompson, Marjorie, *Family the Forming Center*, 142.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

resources others can provide.”³⁶ “All God’s people belong in worship and all need to be lifelong learners”³⁷

However, there are pitfalls to be aware of. In his book, *The Power of God at Home*, J. Bradley Wigger warns that congregational programs can disable the role of parents if they are not careful. The church needs to be exercise caution. Its role is to empower and equip parents, not make them feel inadequate and powerless to fulfill their vocational role as faith nurturer. There is no question, the foundational base of formation for a child is the family unit. “If the church wishes the content of this formation as explicitly Christian, it will need to take the role and support of the family seriously.”³⁸ To help support parents, the church should make available resources on child rearing, home devotions, prayer, ritual and season celebrations, and service opportunities.

“I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth.” (Ephesians 3:16-18 NRSV)

LUTHERAN VOICES ON FAITH EDUCATION

“Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.” (Psalm 25:5 NRSV)

³⁶ Yust, Karen Marie, *Real Kids Real Faith*, 164.

³⁷ Everist, Norma Cook, *The Church As Learning Community*, (Abingdon Press 2002) 107.

³⁸ Thompson, Marjorie J., *Family the Forming Center*, 22.

In 1529, Martin Luther felt the church was in an educational crisis. Not only did he believe the people were sorely lacking in basic theological and biblical knowledge, he felt that the priests were also lacking. In response to this crisis, he began to produce a series of pamphlets explaining the basic tenets of the faith. These were eventually compiled into *The Small Catechism*. This catechism was primarily for use in the home to assist parents in teaching their children the basics of the Christian faith, as well as a source of personal renewal. He began each section with the words, “in a simple way in which the head of a house is to present them to the household.”³⁹ Luther regarded *The Small Catechism* as “proper knowledge for every Christian, stripped down to its bare fundamentals and elucidated clearly and concisely.”⁴⁰

In the early church, the catechism contained the three items considered essential for all Christians to know, the Ten Commandments, the Apostle’s Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Luther made two major changes to his Small Catechism. First, he added two areas he considered essential: explanations on Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, the two sacraments through which God personally comes to the believer. Second, he focused on God’s gifts to the people by using the format of asking the question “What does this mean?” This differed from earlier catechisms, which primarily focused on rules and regulations. They were considered lists of behaviors to help the people avoid God’s wrath and anger. The new format, by asking what it all meant, focused on God’s love toward humankind.

³⁹ Luther, Martin, *The Small Catechism*, 9.

⁴⁰ Steinmetz, David C. “Luther and Formation in Faith,” in *Educating People of Faith*, ed. John Van Engen (William B. Eerdmans Publishing 2004) 265.

Luther's ordering of *The Small Catechism* intentionally followed this new outlook. By beginning with the Commandments, Luther showed the people how their inability to live without sin separated them from God. He then declares what God has done for them in the Apostle's Creed. The Lord's Prayer follows as a resource that teaches where humankind can go to for help. Next, the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are discussed to teach what was needed most from God, the means through which sins are forgiven. Finally, Luther included a section containing morning and evening prayers, prayers before and after meals, and Scripture references to describe how Christians were to behave. This final section provided tools needed by parents to model faith in the home, "especially to the praise and honor of God." (Book of Concord 409.168)

Unlike other pastors of his day, Luther carefully wrote his explanation in a simple, basic form. He felt it was important to define these complicated theological concepts in the simplest words to assist the people in learning them. He exhorted priests to "help us bring the catechism to the people, especially to the young." (Book of Concord 348.6) It was his belief that once the people grasped these concepts in their basic terms, deeper teaching and understanding would come later.

Luther understood that learning was a lifelong process, and that education in the faith was not just for children. Priests were implored to preach and teach on the catechism. "Once the people have learned the text well, then teach them to understand it." (Book of Concord 349.14) To this end he wrote a series of sermons that later were compiled into *The Large Catechism*. Priests were encouraged to make use of this document to help the people attain a deeper understanding of their faith. "Then take up a

longer catechism and impart to them a richer and fuller understanding. (Book of Concord 349.17)

Today, this still remains the task of adult education. It should equip adult members to respond faithfully to God in living out their vocation and participation in God's creative and redemptive activity. Just as children grow and develop through different stages, so do adults. Unfortunately, too often the assumption has been adults are static individuals in their development. But adults respond to the same experience differently, depending on their previous life experiences, temperament or place in their life cycle. The "transformative moments in any life come with a new set of responses."⁴¹ A young adult will act differently to the same situation when compared to an adult facing an "empty nest" or retirement. Faith is not static and neither are God's people. God speaks to us at whatever stage we are in.

Christian education has often been relegated to children in the form of Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. During education time adult classes are generally sparsely attended in most churches. However, "all of the baptized require life-long learning, the daily re-appropriation of the wonderful gifts given in Baptism."⁴² It is important for adults in the congregation to demonstrate the importance of education by their example to the youth by participating in education. If parents show little interest in reading and studying Scripture neither will their children.

Mature faith does not grow overnight. Faith needs to be fostered and cared for over the lifetime of an individual. It is just as necessary to cultivate the faith of adults, as it is the faith of children. This is important, not only for the adults themselves, but it will

⁴¹ *Nurturing Faith Through the Stages of Life*, (Augsburg Fortress 1998) 23.

⁴² *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 25.

assist them in nurturing the faith of their children. Parents, who are spiritually drained and cannot care for themselves, will be unable to care for their children.

In their book, *Passing on the Faith*, Merton Strommen and Richard Hardel give three compelling reasons to give Christian education a renewed priority: “the current state of biblical knowledge; the challenges of a pluralistic society; and the faith-enhancing potential of Christian education.”⁴³ For Luther, the term “Sola Scriptura,” by Scripture Alone, was the basis for all wisdom and what one’s life was to be based on. Too often our education programs have vague theological and biblical foundations. The unfortunate result is that today many people are sorely lacking in the most basic of biblical knowledge. In a Gallup poll conducted recently among American teenagers only 35 percent could name all four Gospels and 29 percent did not know what religious event is celebrated at Easter.⁴⁴ Without the basic biblical background of stories such as David, Moses and the Exodus and Jesus’ own baptism, it is difficult to come to terms with deeper theological concepts.

The challenges posed by society today are strong. Children and adults are bombarded by the world through TV, video games and the internet. Churches need to ground their members firmly in the faith so they can discern the information they are exposed to through these various sources. Parents will be unable to make faithful choices, and thus guide their children through these muddy waters, unless they are grounded themselves and have been equipped with and know how to use the tools

⁴³ Strommen, Merton and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 110.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

available to them. “Intentional education and enculturation by the whole congregation is required for Christians in today’s society.”⁴⁵

Perhaps the most valuable outcome of Christian education is its faith enhancing potential. In their study, “Effective Christian Education”, the Search Institute found formal Christian education second only to faith nurturing families in importance in the spiritual growth of youth. Faith nurturing families need Christian education to become equipped to be that foundation for their children. Adults are often afraid to attend educational opportunities for fear that others in the congregation will find out how much they don’t know. The church needs to be sensitive to this fear and provide non-threatening learning experiences for parents. In my former parish, I would teach “Together In Faith” classes for parents and their child. This series, available through The Youth & Family Institute, is designed to introduce the Small Catechism to students starting at age three and continuing through fifth grade. During the class, I often would hear comments from the parents such as “I didn’t know that”, or “I’ve wondered why we did that”. I would spend more time during and after class answering questions from parents than children.

“Christian education includes what Christian parents teach in their home; what the pastor presents from the pulpit; and what is experienced in worship within the congregation.”⁴⁶ In *The Use of the Means of Grace* the ELCA has declared the Proclamation of the Word central to its mission. One means of accomplishing this charge is through teaching. “The congregation’s entire educational ministry participates in the

⁴⁵ Stommen Merton and Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 113.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

proclamation of the Word.”⁴⁷ Worship is an important element in a congregation’s ongoing education of its members. In his introduction to the new translation of Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*, Timothy Wengert quotes Luther on the connection between worship and the catechism: “The various parts of *The Small Catechism* help us listen to the lessons and sermon, since almost all of them will relate to one section of the catechism or another. The better we know the *Small Catechism* the easier it will be to understand and hear God’s Word in the reading and preaching. As you listen, ask yourself, ‘What part of the catechism is this?’”⁴⁸

As the world and values change around us, the church should also be mindful of the theology of new curriculums and ideas being put forth. It is important that all new and changing ideas be examined against the theological norm and practice within the Lutheran tradition. St. Paul in II Timothy 3:16-17 points to inspired Scripture as useful in teaching and training “so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” Believers are instructed to “test everything, hold fast to what is good.” (I Thessalonians 5:21 NRSV) Again the faithful are warned to “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” (I John 4:1 NRSV) New ideas and applications of theology, as well as alternative understandings of Scripture, need to be measured for their consistency with the theology and understanding of Scripture in Lutheran heritage.

Education should empower the believer to live as a disciple for Jesus, draw the believer to participate in the mission of the church and foster personal and spiritual growth. The goal of any Christian education program should be to present a personal

⁴⁷ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 12.

⁴⁸ Luther, Martin, *Small Catechism*, Translated by Timothy Wengert, 10.

Christ, teach parents to pray with their children and equip them to pass on the faith, to teach Christian rituals, and to encourage the development of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John1:12 NRSV)

ROLE OF PRE-BAPTISM EDUCATION

In the second century, catechismus was the term used to denote basic Christian instruction. It was mandatory for all new Christians to be instructed in this catechism prior to baptism. In the early days of the church the season of Lent was a time for the education of new converts, teaching them the basic tenets of Christianity, culminating with their baptism on Easter Sunday. Today the church baptizes individuals year round, but baptism into the church “includes instruction and nurture in the faith for a life of discipleship.”⁴⁹

The word curriculum derives from the Latin “currere”; literally it means a course to be run.⁵⁰ Life is a curriculum that begins at birth. A Christian life is a curriculum begun at baptism. In a marathon, the runners have periodic hydration stops. For parents, an important opportunity to be rehydrated in the waters of their baptism can occur when they bring a child forward for baptism. The educational opportunity provided by the church can help parents reconnect with their own baptism and remind them that they too are children of God.

The church has often made the assumption that parents bringing their child for baptism understood the meaning and significance of what they are doing. Unfortunately,

⁴⁹ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 25.

⁵⁰ Harris, Maria, *Fashion Me a People*, 48.

that is an assumption that has produced a generation of children and parents who are trapped in the “experienced” stage of faith. They bring their child for baptism because, in their experience, that is what you do. The societal norm to help their child socialize and prepare for kindergarten is to enroll them in a pre-school. The religious norm is to bring them for baptism. “Each congregation needs to understand the strategic importance of training for entry into the faith. Congregations will have to assume very little previous knowledge or experience of religion or Christianity.”⁵¹

The medical community today is advocating “pre-conception” counseling to prepare couples for parenthood. Society focuses on early childhood development. There is no stigma involved in seeking professional advice and admitting one’s inadequacies concerning the physical, emotional, and social needs of the child. Most parents bring their child for baptism with good intentions, but reality quickly sets in and they realize that they are ill equipped spiritually. In his book, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, John Westerhoff talks about beginning pre-baptism education before the child is even born. If parents already have a beginning handle on what to do, they may not feel as overwhelmed by the added responsibility. Pre-baptism education allows the church to provide support and encouragement for parents as they deal with the spiritual development of their children.

The manner in which baptism is administered is the most powerful teacher of what the church believes and how the church values this sacrament.⁵² The significance NOT put into baptism preparation by the church says as much to parents as does in-depth

⁵¹ Buschkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, 83.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

teaching. “The education ministry of a church should sustain and transmit Christian faith traditions to its members; nurture and expand the faith and spiritual lives of persons and equip and motivate its members to fulfill their Christian vocation in the world.”⁵³

Baptism education can be an important opportunity for the church to connect with parents and begin their renewed journey of faith.

Congregations will need to have a strong entry process into the church to help those parents with little or no knowledge of the tenets of Christianity or religious experience. One way for the community of faith to connect with those preparing for baptism is through the order of “Welcome to Baptism” found in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal. (ELW 232) This service is to be used with parents of infants or with adults or older children who are beginning a public relationship with a congregation. It announces their intention to begin the education process culminating in baptism. The use of this service is a good method to remind the congregation of its responsibilities to themselves and each other to nurture faith and commemorate the importance of baptism in the life of a congregation.

Today, North American culture is less overtly Christian than it once was. Congregations need to recognize the importance of baptism education and preparation in helping form the faith identity of parents. Using the baptism liturgy may be the best way of explaining the significance of baptism and the responsibilities of parents and sponsors.⁵⁴ By using ELW liturgy combined with *The Small Catechism* and such books as Daniel Erlanders, *Let the Children Come*, churches can teach the basics of the

⁵³ Westerhoff, John, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, 106.

⁵⁴ Buschkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, 51.

Christian faith much in the way Luther intended when he first wrote the catechism. Simplified explanations can be followed by deeper educational experiences and opportunities.

“When infants and young children are baptized the parents and sponsors receive instruction.”⁵⁵ In the Lutheran Church, parents are encouraged to choose sponsors for their child. Any pre-baptismal education for the parents should also include the sponsors. The role of sponsors is to assist the parents in guiding the child in their faith journey. The role of a sponsor is often overlooked. Parents should not lightly decide upon this position. In one baptism orientation class I taught, the parents asked, “Does it matter who the sponsors are?” My response was “YES!” Being chosen as a sponsor is an honor. However, sponsorship is not an honorary position. Sponsors are making the same promises parents make during the baptism. “Sponsors, do you promise to nurture this child in the Christian faith as you are empowered by God’s Spirit, and to help him/her live in the covenant of baptism and in communion with the church?” (ELW 228) Sponsors should actively participate in the life of a congregation; they should be able to talk about faith and model behaviors such as praying and reading the Bible. They should understand that they are making a life-long commitment to the child. Perhaps the older term “Godparent” was more revealing than “Sponsor” is of this faith-nurturing role.

It is critical for parents to remember that children need consistent support and nurture. A parent would not consider denying their child nutrition for their body to grow strong. This is not only true physically, but also spiritually. It is imperative to provide spiritual nutrition for their soul. As children grow in faith, parents can expect to mature

⁵⁵ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 25.

and grow in their own faith as well. No one starts out knowing how to read or write. No one starts out knowing how to model Christian behaviors. Everyone is taught by someone. The church must not abandon its opportunity to teach all generations.

SURVEY RESULTS

This section examines specific current baptismal education practices in Twin City Lutheran churches. An invitation to participate in an anonymous online survey exploring their baptism education practices was extended to 220 churches in the Minneapolis and St. Paul synods. (See appendix 1) A total of 76 congregations responded to the survey for a response rate of 35 percent. (See appendix 2) The survey was followed up with interviews of respondents who demonstrated willingness to being contacted. Anonymity of the participants was observed to allow them the freedom to respond openly.

Based on the Lutheran position as stated in *The Use of the Means of Grace* and *The Christian Life*, a companion to the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal, one would expect to find churches actively engaged in the education of its members, especially in regards to the sacraments. “The parish education of the congregation is part of its baptismal ministry.”⁵⁶ Confirmation and marriage are not sacraments, yet a church would never consider confirming someone without prior education or even perform a marriage ceremony without some kind of pre-marital counseling. It was surprising then, to find that 14.5% of congregations responding had no requirement for any instruction prior to baptism. (See figure 1)

⁵⁶ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 25.

Figure 1

Percentage of Congregations Requiring Baptism Education

YES	No
85.5%	14.5%

Breakdown by congregation size

Size of Congregation	Yes	No
0 – 300	9	2
301 – 500	7	2
501 – 700	7	3
701 – 900	4	0
901 – 1,100	6	1
1,101 – 2,000	14	1
2,001 +	18	1
TOTAL	65	11

When asked, “Do you require attendance at a baptism education class prior to baptism?” one pastor responded “No, but I offer to meet with parents. I am more assertive if they seem new to the Christian community.” One congregation reported instruction was not required for teenagers and adults. Instead, they meet for a private conversation with the individuals. Four congregations replied their class consisted of a basic “run through” of the liturgy in the ELW so parents would know where to sit, stand, come forward and when to respond to questions asked of them. When asked why they didn’t require attendance at a more in depth class, they commented that they encouraged parents to ask questions if they didn’t understand something. One pastor responded, “I never thought about the intentionality of a baptism orientation class.”

A number of churches reported conducting baptisms for non-members of their congregation. “I’ve performed more infant baptisms for “proxy members” (children of people regularly attending worship services). Parents seem eager to talk and learn about baptism.” In another congregation, with a membership of 3,000, the pastor commented that 40% of all baptisms (which accounted for 28 baptisms last year) are for children of non-members, yet there is no requirement for attendance at baptism education class prior to receiving the sacrament.

“More often than not, we meet with the parents and sponsors of infants and children. We stress the nature of baptism as God’s action (sacrament vs. ordinance”) as in “evangelical” circles and expectations of godparents to oversee their godchild’s growth as a Christian boy or girl.” A caution here: the church needs to be mindful of the language used when parents bring their child for baptism. If a parent is not familiar with the “church speech” spoken here, they may become confused and convinced that they are not capable of the task ahead of them.” In regards to educating sponsors, only two congregations reported encouraging sponsors to attend pre-baptism classes.

An overwhelming majority of congregations responded that they do not use a formal published curriculum but instead have chosen to write their own. (See figure 2) The congregations that use published curriculum state they use either Augsburg Fortress’ *Splash* or the service printed in the ELW, companioned with either Luther’s Small Catechism or Daniel Erlander’s book, *Let the Children Come*. One pastor reported that, “I have a well rehearsed baptism instruction in my head.” A concern here is the risk that the instruction may come off as rote. Often in this circumstance, when one knows the material well, it is easy to assume knowledge on behalf of the other participants and

unintentionally shut down questions and concerns. One congregation handed out Daniel Erlander’s book, *Let the Children Come* and said, “Call if you have any questions about what you read.”

Figure 2

Percentage of Congregations Using Published Curriculum

YES	No
17.1%	82.9%

Breakdown by congregation size

Size of Congregation	Yes	No
0 – 300	5	7
301 – 500	2	7
501 – 700	1	9
701 – 900	2	2
901 – 1,100	3	4
1,101 – 2,000	0	15
2,001 +	0	19
TOTAL	13	63

An education class prior to baptism is critical, but it should not stop there. Follow up is an essential element of the education process. One pastor I interviewed said, “I’m glad you are looking into this practice of pre and post baptism education. Empowering families to keep these promises is so important. They really want to be faithful but are usually stumped about how to go about it.” It was alarming then, to find that over 50 percent of the congregations responding had no formal follow up program after a baptism. (See figure 3) One pastor answered, “When children are baptized, I believe it is important to talk to parents about their responsibility to raise the child in the faith and

teach them the Lord’s Prayer, etc. and the Bible.” However, this congregation of 1,800 had no formal follow up program in place to equip parents in this task.

Figure 3

Percentage of Congregations Doing Formal Follow Up After Baptism

YES	No
46.1%	53.9%

Breakdown by congregation size

Size of Congregation	Yes	No
0 – 300	3	9
301 – 500	2	7
501 – 700	2	8
701 – 900	2	2
901 – 1,100	3	4
1,101 – 2,000	5	10
2,001 +	12	7
TOTAL	29	47

In those congregations who reported doing follow up there is a wide spectrum of activities and programs. They are as basic as recognizing baptisms from the previous year during worship on the Baptism of Jesus Sunday to more intentional milestone/education opportunities. Nine congregations follow up a baptism with periodic mailings to parents using material such as Augsburg Fortress’ *Splash* or other congregation written materials. These mailings are generally sent to the families every three to six months until the child starts Sunday school at age three.

A few congregations follow up baptism with in home visits or phone calls. Two congregations stated they provide a “sponsor” for the family. The role of the sponsor is to help guide the new families into the life of the congregation. Much as sponsors do for the

child baptized, so too congregational sponsors serve to witness the faith and act as models for living one's life in their baptismal grace to the family they are sponsoring.

Two congregations reported that they begin their program when the baptized child reaches early elementary school age. One congregation has an event when the child is in first grade. This "milestone event (with parents) is to help them understand what their baptism is all about." The other congregation offers a similar program in early elementary school called "Keeping the Promise." While this is good, they have missed several opportunities to reach out to and equip the parents to instill faith practices while their child was in their early stages of development.

Several congregations have developed strong follow up programs designed to equip parents in their role of faith nurturer. The programs provided include meeting times set up quarterly for parents to gather and have conversations around faith development. This allows them to help and support each other and share information and ideas that they use with their children. Congregational recognition of milestone events in the life of the child and family are also important. Starting Sunday school, blessing of backpacks in the fall when children head off for school and receiving their first Bible are but a few of the events celebrated. Other congregations offer workshops on parenting and faith development.

The good news is that a number of congregations are beginning to realize the importance of follow up education and the need to partner with the parents in equipping them in their role as faith nurturer. Many reported they are beginning to look at their programs. "I'd like to see our congregation get more involved with The Youth & Family Institute's materials and programs" "We are kicking off a program about baptism

entitled 'Remembering Our Baptism' and are looking at using this as a focus for the coming year as both an inreach and outreach tool." "We're working on a follow-up. I think it's important." "More is happening since we have been programming with intention."

In the words of Luther, "What does this mean?" "As a baptized people we see our daily life as a place to carry out our vocation, our calling. All aspects of life, home and school, community and nation, daily work and leisure, citizenship and friendship, belong to God. All are places where God calls us to serve. God's Word and the church help us to discover ways to carry out our calling."⁵⁷ The church should approach all areas of ministry as an opportunity to educate and strengthen its members in their vocation. In order to help its members succeed in their vocation by participating in God's creative and redemptive activity, congregations need to define their education ministry just as they define their evangelical ministry.

Baptism education is a key opportunity to reach out to parents who may feel unsure where to begin in the role of primary faith nurturer for their child. Too often parents call the church to set up a baptism and "luck out" by being able to quickly attend an orientation class and get their infant baptized when it "fits their schedule". When this happens, the window of opportunity to educate and equip shrinks. Therefore, it is important that the content of this class truly stress the importance of what is happening. In baptism God indeed does the work of salvation, but God does not act alone in God's redemptive work on earth; God partners with us. It is the obligation of the church to properly prepare and instruct the people brought forward for baptism. It does not matter

⁵⁷ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, 57.

whether it is their first child or their fifth child, participation in a class can be of benefit. The wisdom and knowledge of the veteran parent can help the new parent. Participation in the class also allows the experienced parent to continually reconnect with their own baptism.

In the early church a baptism was not performed until a person had undergone instruction. Baptism is not a one-time event, but a lifelong journey. This journey is taken in fellowship with other believers. Use of “Welcome to Baptism” allows the participants to publicly acknowledge their intention to “continue a time of discernment and formation related to the Christian faith and life.”⁵⁸ It allows the congregation a time to pledge its support, to pray for, and to walk along side those making this journey. This process makes it clear that baptism is more than an event by pointing to the intentional living to which baptized Christians are called. Intentional living must be supported by intentional training.

A baptism in the congregation is a true celebration. It is through this sacrament that the church welcomes new family members into God’s creative and redemptive work on earth. It is the responsibility of each member of the congregation to support and assist each other in fulfilling their vocation. Lutheran theology involves a strong baptismal practice. An integral part of this theology is an earnest call to prepare the candidate, parents, sponsors and congregation for their participation in this ongoing process. It is through the learning opportunities presented that we are strengthened and grow in our baptism for our mission to show the world God’s love.

⁵⁸ Buschkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, 90.

APPENDIX 1
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Initial Survey

1. How many members are in your congregation?
2. What is your average Sunday worship attendance?
3. How many baptisms are performed in your congregation a year?
4. Do you require attendance at a baptism education class prior to baptism?
5. Do you use a published curriculum?
6. Do you have any formal follow-up after baptism? If yes, what do you do?
7. Would you be available for a follow-up interview?

APPENDIX 2

SURVEY RESULTS

1. How many members are in your congregation?

Size of congregation	Number of responses
0 – 300	12
301 – 500	9
501 – 700	10
701 – 900	4
901 – 1,100	7
1,101 – 2,000	15
2,001+	19

2. What is your average Sunday worship attendance?

Size of congregation	Attendance
0 – 300	88
301 – 500	142
501 – 700	204
701 – 900	261
901 – 1,100	231
1,101 – 2,000	427
2,001+	1,269

3. What is the average number of baptisms performed a year?

Size of congregation	Baptisms
0 – 300	7
301 – 500	8
501 – 700	8
701 – 900	14
901 – 1,100	19
1,101 – 2,000	27
2,001+	80

4. Do you require attendance at a baptism education class prior to baptism?

Yes 65 No 11

5. Do you use a published curriculum?

Yes	13	No	63
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6. Do you have formal follow-up?

Yes	35	No	41
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