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# A Future I Trust In: Identity and Vocation As The Parent-Leader

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A FUTURE I TRUST IN:  
IDENTITY AND VOCATION AS THE PARENT-LEADER

by

KAREN M. GIESEKE

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It was the congregation's annual Milestone Ministry event where the 3-year-old children received the newest illustrated children's Bible. The pastor handed the Bible to the father, who then reverently placed it in his daughter's hands as he had promised to do at his daughter's baptism three years ago. Following the conclusion of the ministry event, the father holding his daughter's new Bible in his hands, turned to the Children's Ministry Director and asked, "Now what do I do?"

The ability to articulate one's personal belief regarding Christian faith is in question in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Acknowledging this weakened thread in the current religious fabric has motivated numerous studies on this inarticulation, especially studies pointed at the teenager and young adult in current American society. This recent research and ensuing studies continue to unearth a culture ill-equipped to speak with confidence about their Christian faith and the presence of God in daily life. When specifically asking teens questions regarding personal faith and belief, "very little in their lives had prepared them to be able to explain, even in basic terms, what they believe and how that fits into their lives."<sup>1</sup> As Christian Smith, Director of the Center for the Sociology of Religion and Society, began a journey of exploring and questioning the faith lives of teenagers across America, a variety of responses were received which revealed that most teenagers are not opposed to Christian faith, and that actually most embrace some form of religious tradition and belief. What was surmised in the interviews might be best represented in the response by one 15-year-old boy when asked *what he believed and how it mattered in his life*. His response, "I guess I don't really know, basically I haven't been taught about it,"<sup>2</sup> gives reason to pause and examine the greater picture of how youth have traveled through formative and developmental years of life and come away with an inability to articulate the faith they

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005) 133.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, 133.

ascribe to holding. These same studies which used the voices of youth to affirm that youth are not opposed to faith also used these same voices to name the importance of a parent as the leader in the faith formation of children and youth. It becomes not just a question of whether to *invite* a parent into the role of leading one's child in the faith journey, but rather a *necessity for the child's future* that the parent claims this role as leader on the faith journey.

Awareness and recognition of parental leadership demands a vision and plan to securely locate and equip parents in the role of parent-leader. Engaging a parent to identify "self" as the leader, or primary agent, in a child's faith journey is of foremost importance for children to nurture, grow, explore, question, and develop their relationship with God and Christian belief. To develop the parent-leader role it's necessary to: appreciate the current state of family and Christian faith formation; explore and understand God's call, or Christian vocation, as leader in the family; convey the significance of God's fulfilled promise and hope through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; understand positive leadership practices and the contribution of unique, God-given talents to leadership call; and consider practices to equip a parent-leader in faith formation with the congregational family as a collaborative team member.

### **Family Systems and Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Defining the individual roles in a family is increasingly challenging as the shape of family has changed, reflecting "[in] the proliferation of new types of family groups...People are no longer following some lockstep script about when it is time to get married."<sup>3</sup> Couples who choose to live together and/or have children outside of marriage, increased divorce rates, same-gender relationships, blended families, and grandparents as parents are just some of the family systems in current culture, with *USA Today* reportedly identifying twenty-eight different forms

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<sup>3</sup> Hope Yen, (2011, August 25). [United States Divorce Rate: 2009 Census Report Reveals Startling Marriage Trends](http://www.huffingtonpost.com), *Huffington Post*, Retrieved from April 9, 2012, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>

of family.<sup>4</sup> When exploring family systems, Western culture deeply roots itself in the model of the *nuclear family* by which to compare others to. This model may not be universal across cultures nor the only model by which vital family functions can be performed, but it has been the perceived cultural lens with which to view American families through art, photography, and advertising. “[T]he family ideal of any particular culture does not necessarily describe the social realities of family life...the nuclear family remains the preferred cultural pattern in the United States despite the fact that the proportion of nuclear family households is smaller than in the past.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, if the nuclear family, defined as a married couple with children living with them, is perceived to be the prevailing system in America, it is noteworthy that this family system peaked statistically in the late nineteenth century among white households and has been declining since.<sup>6</sup> Added to these shifting family dynamics is the increased transportation options for job fluidity, continual technology and communication advancements, and increased ethnic diversity. With each of these factors comes a new challenge to recognize who will lead the *family* as the family system may change from day to day or week to week, not only in the routine tasks of providing food and shelter, but also in the responsibility of leading one’s child in faith.

As the responsibility of caring for children became divided among multiple individuals and contexts, so too the advent of the “expert” seeped into family life as a potential added voice. Experts in the areas of medicine, education, sports, entertainment, safety, and church assumed roles and decision-making tasks which parents previously held. The twentieth century brought with it social, technological, and scientific advancements which carried the promise for a better,

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Holmen, Building Faith at Home: Why Faith at Home Must Be Your Church’s #1 Priority, (Ventura, Regal Books, 2007). 42.

<sup>5</sup> "Nuclear Families." International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family. 2003. *Encyclopedia.com*. (April 9, 2012). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3406900312.html>

<sup>6</sup> Steven Ruggles, (1994, February). The Transformation of American Family Structure, *American Historical Review*, Retrieved April 9, 2012, <http://www.hist.umn.edu/~ruggles/Articles/AHR.pdf>

healthier life, but with the outside world, not the home, viewed as the provider of this promise. These advancements, along with a variety of historical events influenced family and the named roles. From World Wars I and II to industrialized society, and from television in the home to increased consumerism, “parents with children at home lost social capital and a sense of importance...we were the first generation to understand personal development in civilization without the family as a basic building block.”<sup>7</sup> Families looked to public institutions to provide experts to administer and distribute information. The better-educated or professional image was granted permission to influence decisions and life choices, both great and small. The church, likewise, adopted this role and became the expert in teaching and educating the Christian faith, and in doing so coincidentally espoused the role of leader of faith formation in the family. The ability to articulate, explore, learn, teach, and pass on the faith became associated with advanced religious learning, and disassociated with experiencing God and God’s promise in the everyday life which one was called into as a family. Identity within the family was being re-invented as societal and cultural roles shifted and communities were re-configuring themselves based on new possibilities including the church, who with the permission of many families, has continued to identify itself in the role of the faith formation leader within the family. George Barna’s *Revolution* shares research findings on the process whereby most church families rely on the church, rather than the family, to teach and equip their children to become spiritually mature.<sup>8</sup> This reliance on the church as the faith formation leader becomes increasingly precarious as family participation in the church continues to weaken. Marjorie Thompson writes, “For all their specialized training, church professionals realize that if a child is not receiving basic Christian nurture in the home, even the best teachers and curriculum will have minimal impact. Once-a-

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<sup>7</sup> David W. Anderson, *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: The Role of the Home in Renewing the Church*, The Youth & Family Institute, 2009) 59.

<sup>8</sup> George Barna, *Revolution*, (Carol Stream, Tyndale House, 2005) 35.

week exposure simply cannot compete with daily experience where personal formation is concerned.”<sup>9</sup> Add to this “once-a-week” expectation the fact that fewer and fewer people are attending church, and one can quickly see how the role of the church as the leader becomes increasingly less valuable or effective. Diana Butler Bass, Ph.D. in religious studies, reports current weekly church attendance numbers range from 14 to 24 percent.<sup>10</sup> While this reported declining statistic begs further discussion on the church itself, in this instance it points to the honest question of the church or the parent being in the most viable place of leadership in a child’s life.

Recent research conducted repeatedly names the parent as the key impact adult in a child’s faith formation from childhood through youth and even into adulthood, whether a parent realizes it or not.<sup>11</sup> A parent’s religiosity provides an important role model for youth and determines to a large extent the type of religious exposure experienced during childhood and adolescent years.<sup>12</sup> “Fluidity among religious traditions” creates another challenge in identifying the leader of faith within a family as marrying outside one’s religious tradition, change in personal religious views, household mobility, and abandoned loyalty to religious denominations creates a murky understanding of one’s beliefs, understandings, and confidence in teaching and modeling faith to a child. “Gone are the days of sticking to a church just because one’s family has always attended there.”<sup>13</sup> The intention for joining and attending a church has changed with identity in a faith community serving varied purposes. In exploring further into the perceived place of Christian faith in the life of people today, it is apparent that while many Americans still

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<sup>9</sup> Holmen, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Diana Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening, (New York, Harper Collins, 2012) 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa D. Pearce, Melinda Lundquist Denton, A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Changes in the Religiosity of America’s Adolescents, (New York, Oxford Press, 2011) 23.

<sup>13</sup> George Barna, Futurecast: What Today’s Trends Mean for Tomorrow’s World, (Austin, Barna, 2011) 182-183.

describe themselves as a Christian, “the connection is often shallow and on the surface, having more to do with cultural identification than it does with deep faith.”<sup>14</sup> This insubstantial faith relationship reflects the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism identified as a *de facto creed* where “believers get to enjoy whatever particulars of their own faith heritages that appeal to them, while also reaping the benefits of this shared, harmonizing, interfaith religion.”<sup>15</sup>

The ability to articulate and translate one’s own Christian belief and faith is challenged by multiple lenses and identities. The variety of roles which culture suggests or even demands can influence the roles of identity within a family. Understanding one’s identity as a Child of God within God’s family, and relating this identity within one’s own family becomes primary in understanding the role of leader in teaching and modeling Christian faith to one’s child. The Christian creed which says *I believe* is never more important than when proclaiming God’s promise fulfilled through Jesus Christ, and especially when called as a parent to translate it to one’s child, as the identified *leader* of the family.

### **Vocation and Identity as a Child of God**

*Then Jesus said...Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people...they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:10-11 NRSV)*

Luke tells the story of Jesus’ *call* to the disciples. It is an invitation unlike any other call written in the Bible. No questions were asked and the response to the call was immediate. It creates a model for living as a Christian that is counterintuitive of current culture, where listening for one’s call is about the *self* and discovering what is right for the individual. But as a Child of God, the agency of *self* is viewed differently. It is not about personal ambitions but about the *call* received from God. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

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<sup>14</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2011) 23.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, 166.



before you were born I set you apart” (Jeremiah 1:5 NRSV). These words make known to God’s children the immensity of God’s presence and power in the creation of the world and its people, and declare God’s call to one’s life long before one set about planning the personal journey.

Martin Luther speaks of this *call*, referring to it as *vocation*. The word recently may be associated with a profession or job skill, but Luther presented a different understanding. Kathryn Kleinhans, in *The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective*, writes of Luther’s perspective that vocation “is rooted in the dynamic doctrine of creation... [and that] God’s ongoing work as creator is a fundamental catechetical starting point.”<sup>16</sup> Kleinhans continues to view vocation through the lens of God as Creator, acknowledging that God daily provides for creation and this sustaining activity is a mediated action. “God wants to act through His creatures... With persons as his ‘hands’ or ‘coworkers,’ God gives his gifts through earthly vocations.”<sup>17</sup> Luther also understood vocation as being *plural* rather than mutually exclusive and that Christians are called to numerous responsibilities. This multiplicity is especially evident in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture where this burden can feel overwhelming. But Luther recognized this in his time, too, and responded with the belief that a Christian cannot find assurance in what’s been done or left undone. Rather, “our roles and responsibilities continue to call us to service of neighbor, however short we may fall. Yet in all these roles and responsibilities, the Christian remains united with Christ by faith, as branches are rooted in the vine.”<sup>18</sup> The multiple responsibilities are present in everyday life through creation and through meeting and serving the neighbor where they are. It is “incarnational commitment to anyplace and everyplace that

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<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Kleinhans, (2005) *The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective*, *Word & World*, Vol. 25 No. 4, 397.

<sup>17</sup> Kleinhans, 398.

<sup>18</sup> Kleinhans, 400.

Christians find themselves...vocation is contextual theology. It shapes our sense of identity and our relationship with others.”<sup>19</sup>

Vocation as an incarnational commitment and a contextual theology calls us as God’s children to enter into sharing the proclamation for the sake of the world—wherever we are and whomever we are with—with knowledge of God’s promise and hope fulfilled through Jesus Incarnate. God knows us and has set us apart for God’s work in more than one place, but with the identity as God’s child. Jesus called us to follow—not to be afraid—but to leave behind the burdens of the day. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks calls this a “*Summoned Life*...an unknowable landscape to be explored [which] emphasizes the context, and asks, ‘What are my circumstances asking me to do?’”<sup>20</sup> He reflects how in America it is the acclaimed individual who is often admired, but that for the one who assumes a *Summoned Life* it is not about the individual, but rather about seeing one’s identity through the lens of the greater purpose. For the Christian *Summoned Life*, this is about a way of life focused on God’s purpose to care for God’s people daily, and to proclaim the good news of Jesus incarnate. It “is a paradoxical ‘way’ that involves self-denial and often leads through suffering.”<sup>21</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood denial and suffering all too well, but was convinced of vocation as a Child of God. The “radical obedience to Christ’s call meant radical freedom to be fully responsible to and for others.”<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, while in a German prison, understood well the self-denial, sacrifice, and suffering that was possible as he awaited the ramifications of his radical actions of caring for all God’s children, in this case the Jews during the Holocaust. He

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<sup>19</sup> Kleinmans, 401.

<sup>20</sup> David Brooks, (August 2, 2010) *The Summoned Self*, *The Opinion Pages-The New York Times*, Retrieved February 20, 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com/20100803/opinion/03brooks.html>

<sup>21</sup> Mark R. Schwehn & Dorothy C. Bass, ed, Lee Hardy, *Leading Lives That Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006) 106.

<sup>22</sup> Schwehn & Bass, 108.

understood his vocation as a son, brother, theologian, friend, and brother in Christ. He understood and wrote that in Christian vocation “...my responsibility to the call of Jesus Christ knows no bounds...”<sup>23</sup> The purpose of this vocation was God’s purpose with God calling on a living sacrifice ready to do God’s work in God’s world.<sup>24</sup>

Understanding one’s identity and vocation as God’s Child in the midst of God’s purpose requires both consideration and response to radical questions. In *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean explores identity as a Christian and the ensuing challenges, especially in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. She points to the particular nature of Christianity and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as pivotal. The incarnation story points to *the other* and the radical reversal Jesus’ life exemplified as a model. The question of identity as a Christian is challenged by a culture where labels can jeopardize survival. Additionally, the question of the identity of *Christian* as a label of division rather community and acceptance *for all* may be asked. Dean asserts the opposite, claiming that in following Jesus one does not avoid but rather embraces *radical particularity*, which arises out of being part of God’s purpose and the life of Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> One’s identity as God’s Child becomes the place where one sees oneself responding to daily life. One’s identity as God’s Child provides the lens for serving *the other*. One’s identity as God’s Child locates self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, responsibility, promise and fulfillment at the center of life. The *radical particularity* of the vocation of the Christian life is amazed at a gift of love so vast it takes on death—and wins. God’s gift says to God’s Child, “You are loved and therefore you exist.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Schwehn & Bass, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005) 48.

<sup>25</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian-What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010) 32-33.

<sup>26</sup> Volf, 47.

## Summoned to be the Leader

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:5-9 NRSV)*

The research, studies, and reports asked a variety of questions through dialogue, interview, surveys, and assessments to teenagers and young adults in local, national, and international contexts. At the heart of each dialogue the root question remained unchanged: *Who has had the greatest impact on your religious beliefs?* The percentages in each analysis weighed heavily towards one influence: *a parent*. In the National Study on Youth and Religion, conducted in 2002-03, author Christian Smith wrote the following in the book *Soul Searching*:

One of the key themes of this book is that parents are normally very important in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of their teenage children, even though they may not realize it...For better or for worse, most parents in fact still do profoundly influence their adolescents...Simply by living and interacting with their children, most parents establish expectations, define normalcy, model life practices, set boundaries, and make demands—all of which cannot help but influence teenagers, for good or ill. Most teenagers and their parents may not realize it, but a lot of research in the sociology of religion suggests that the most important social influence in shaping young people's religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught by their parents.<sup>27</sup>

In a follow-up survey in 2007-08 of the same young adults, about two-thirds of those surveyed considered their current religious beliefs to be similar to that of their parents.<sup>28</sup> This information correlates with studies conducted by the Search Institute,<sup>29</sup> the Exemplary Youth

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<sup>27</sup> Smith, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009) 128.

<sup>29</sup> Search Institute, (2008) *With Their Own Voice*, Retrieved November 2009, <http://www.search-institute.org/csd/major-projects/with-their-own-voices>

Ministry Study,<sup>30</sup> and the Barna Group.<sup>31</sup> Repeatedly the overwhelmingly response places the parent at the center of a child's faith formation and resulting religious beliefs. This includes youth who identify with a deeply rooted faith—and those who don't. "[T]he best general rule of thumb that parents might use to reckon their children's most likely religious outcome is this: 'We'll get what we are.'"<sup>32</sup> *So what are we?*

In Deuteronomy 6, God states what parents *are*. A parent is the one to plant God's word in the heart of the child. A parent is the one to talk with the child whether at home or away, whether it is morning or bedtime, about God's love for God's children, and God's children loving God in return. Parents are the ones meant to be *radically particular* as they tie God's words to their hands and foreheads and inscribe them on the doorposts of the home. The parent is to be the leader of the faith journey of the child, knowing with confidence that 21<sup>st</sup> century research supports this modeling and practice, but most importantly, that God names it as a parent's call—a *parent's vocation*—*a summoned life with a purpose that is greater*.

The joy which arises when one becomes a parent flows from seeing the possibility of something greater—a purpose—that shows up in this new life which a parent has now been invited to be a part of. Experiencing the purpose of parenthood through the identity as a Child of God provides a model of a love which exceeds what the world has to offer. It is in knowing the promise which God gave and fulfilled through the obedient life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that the phrase *new life* transcends new meaning, hope, and a future. Jürgen Moltmann reflects on this transcendence positioning the *future* as an essential element in Christian faith—in *Easter* faith. As Christians, the greater purpose rests in God's future as one waits and hastens,

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<sup>30</sup> Roland Martinson, Wes Black, & John Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, (St. Paul, EYM Publishing, 2010)

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.barna.org/>

<sup>32</sup> Smith, 57.

hopes and endures, prays and watches, and is patient and curious.<sup>33</sup> The experiences Moltmann expresses are extremely poignant, vivid, and palpable when one walks the relational journey of parent and child. One's purpose and call to the summoned life as a parent leading one's child to faith and belief in the promise fulfilled, embraces a future which is rooted in learning about God's story, and God's call for us to serve the other. Through life's day-to-day encounters in this relationship, the unfolding of God's presence in the midst of the walk can be given voice and substance by the parent as the child explores God as Creator. It is not about right or wrong answers, but rather about encounters and wonder and mystery. The cultural expectation of relying on the expert with answers and information runs counter to this experience. History tells the church that a process where information is conveyed *about* God is not effective in growing disciples who live deeply in the reality *of* God.<sup>34</sup>

The role as leader in a child's Christian faith is not an insignificant call. The vision for the future of this child becomes a purpose far more precious than any other purpose or role a parent will assume in a child's life. The reality names that the parent *is* the leader, whether he or she intentionally acknowledges this vocation—or not. There is no longer reason for a parent to wonder about his or her capacity in the child's life. Rather, the parent has the agency of leadership, radical particularity, and identity as God's Child to support this summoned life.

### **Identity as a Christian Parent-Leader**

In *Futurecast*, Barna unpacks the trends that are changing and transforming the society of today, including a close look at the family. The response distilled in this Barna study, despite the shifting trends in culture, once again supports the important role of the parent in the family.

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<sup>33</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End-The Beginning-The Life of Hope* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2004) 88.

<sup>34</sup> Kinnaman, 114-115.

Barna writes, “[T]he greatest legacy you will leave behind is in the lives of your children...”<sup>35</sup>

So what will the legacy of the Christian parent-leader look like? Will God’s promise and hope fulfilled through Jesus be shared? Will God’s word be written on the doorpost of the home? Will the suffering in daily life be soothed by moments in prayer and with Christian community? Will the parent-leader come to the feet of Jesus asking for guidance through the waters of Holy Baptism, in the cleansing of the Lord’s Supper, and in service to the other? What means will the parent-leader embrace and sustain in this call in daily life?

Exploring aspects of current leadership awareness provides characteristics and practices which most positively and fruitfully affect the outcomes and the legacy of the leader. But before the intended outcomes can be envisioned and praxis put into place, knowledge of oneself as the leader is necessary. Knowing one’s own unique God-designed strengths and talents, the parent-leader can better understand how he or she is equipped as a leader and how this pairs with current leadership insights.

The word *lead* is both a verb and noun, with verb indicating the act of guiding while the noun indicates a principal role. When exploring and giving definition to the term *leader* within the context of a system, both concepts are contributors. Contemporary leadership research now often includes a broader perspective which incorporates the follower, context, partners, and culture. Understanding oneself as a leader becomes fundamental as the unveiling of multiple factors in sustainable leadership is discovered.<sup>36</sup> *Self-awareness, identity, and authenticity* are key elements acknowledged by current leadership research, and the awareness, understanding, and attention to incorporating these characteristics into ones tasks and responsibilities will empower and equip the parent-leader into an effectual leadership style.

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<sup>35</sup> Barna, 50.

<sup>36</sup> Avolio, Bruce J. & Gardner, William L. (2005) Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 16 No. 3, 334.

*Self-awareness* is a process which helps identify talents, strengths, purpose, beliefs, and desires. It recognizes “values, cognitions regarding identity, emotions, and motives/goals”.<sup>37</sup> A leader who is able to identify, name, and live what is valued creates trusted relationships with followers. “These relationships are characterized by: a) transparency, openness, and trust, b) guidance toward worthy objectives, and c) and emphasis on follower development”<sup>38</sup> with the follower, in this case, being the parent-leader’s child.

*Authenticity* grows from self-awareness and the willingness to share one’s values and beliefs transparently with one’s followers. When a leader is motivated by goals that align with their values, “authentic leaders often become so engrossed in their own work that they are motivated solely by a sense of curiosity, a thirst for learning, and the satisfaction that comes from accomplishing a valued task.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, followers trust leaders when the leader’s actions reflect and model the values they have communicated.

*Identity* is defined as the “essential self” in life. To understand identity within the context of leadership has significant outcomes for the Christian life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “From Christ’s perspective this life is now my vocation; from my own perspective it is my responsibility...vocation is the place at which one responds to the call of Christ and lives responsibly...”<sup>40</sup> To understand life as a Christian, one begins with the knowledge of God as the Creator of self, having been known by God while still in the womb, before any other knew *self*. Identity as God’s Child increases when God’s promise is fulfilled through the obedient life of Jesus Christ, and life identified as a follower of Christ becomes one’s call or vocation.

Bonhoeffer articulated this life and the Christian identity where “...all of life, even the everyday

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<sup>37</sup> Avolio & Gardner, 324.

<sup>38</sup> Gardner, WL, Avolio, BJ, Luthans, F, May DR & Walumbwa, FO (2005) Can You See the Real Me? A Self-Based Model of Authentic Leader and Follower Development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 345.

<sup>39</sup> Gardener & Avolio, 355.

<sup>40</sup> Schwehn, & Bass, 109.



work, ought to be lived to the glory of God...work is the social place where people can exercise the gifts that God has given them in the service to others.”<sup>41</sup>

Research also named “leading by example” as a behavior located within authentic leadership. Leaders who “demonstrate transparent decision making, confidence, optimism, hope and resilience, and consistency between their words and deeds, [and] authentic leaders [who] seek to develop associates by modeling and supporting self-determination”<sup>42</sup> were able to develop a culture rooted in example in both words and deeds. Communication is an integral part of culture and the words communicated inform—and transform—self and others. Language is a change element recognized in transformative leadership research, providing common ground in a community and supporting the understood identity. “All leaders are leading language communities... [Leaders] have a choice whether to be thoughtful and intentional about this aspect of leadership...to make much of the opportunity... [and] to be responsible.”<sup>43</sup> The language of the Christian community engages history and messianic hope as God’s children and promises a future of new life in Christ. As Christian leaders, this language changes everything. As parent-leaders, this language changes the lives of our children. It gives *new life and a future*.

### **Equipping and Empowering Christian Parent-Leaders**

Numerous stories in Scripture give examples of God’s people working together in community, each bringing gifts and talents to the tasks and responsibilities as God’s children within God’s family. In Romans, Paul illustrates the image of the Body of Christ, recognizing the gifts of each individual member as part of the whole body. Paul’s words and imagery were meant as counsel to church leaders in the first century A.D. as they journeyed together in community—

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<sup>41</sup> Schwehn, & Bass, 94.

<sup>42</sup> Gardener & Avolio, 326.

<sup>43</sup> Kegan, Robert and Lasko Lahey, Lisa. ,How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2001) 8.

with families. Likewise church leaders in congregations today should engage in this image and practice, but with language and praxis which support God's call to parent-leaders with the lens of 21<sup>st</sup> century awareness and responsiveness. As identified and recognized leaders in the faith formation of the child, parents are an integral and needed part of the Body of Christ, and Church leadership can support and encourage this role by providing experiences to equip and empower parents to be the leaders they are called to be in the family.

Intentional *naming* of the identity and role of the parent-leader in the faith formation of the child is required. Clarity of this role, through use of language and by example, becomes a task and collaborative partnership of the church. Collaboration or team leadership is a desired model as God's children work together as the Body of Christ, with unique gifts and talents:

The leader of the future isn't a person. It is a TEAM. It is a group of people gifted and called by God to lead. It is a community drawn together by a sense of the possible within a congregation and committed to making God's kingdom just a bit more real in their time and place. This fact alone changes the notions of leadership that pastors and congregations have operated under for years. It breaks down barriers between professional and lay leaders. It refocuses our attention on gifts and call as being the basis for ministry.<sup>44</sup>

Responding to this paradigm and the recognized leadership characteristics, the church begins the responsibility of modeling a partnership or team ministry with families, while identifying the significant, unique call of the parent-leader. "The collaborative team recognizes the unique gifts of its members and makes those members shine...the collaborative team is able to reinforce the cultural value that each person is a child of God created in love for a purpose."<sup>45</sup>

The purpose of a parent is to guard and protect a child. As a Christian parent, vocation is infused with the responsibility of protecting the child against a life with no hope or future, but also to bring to light a new life and new future as promised by Creator God through Christ's

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<sup>44</sup> Martinson, Black, Roberto, 215.

<sup>45</sup> Cladis, George. Leading the Team-Based Church, (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1999) 14.

redeeming work. As a parent-leader tasked with this responsibility, developing a self-awareness of one's gifts and talents is essential. Experiences to discover these gifts and talents are where the church becomes a collaborative partner. Various gift assessment tools are available, but the StrengthsFinder<sup>46</sup> tool can be a particularly helpful practice for a congregation and parent-leader. Through an assessment which focuses on an individual's talents, the assessment's language communicates one's strengths and encourages the individual to create strategies where they are most able to use their talents, as opposed to expending energy on improving a weakness which is not a God-given talent. Equipped with words and identity that support individual talents, it empowers the parent to create experiences and conversations with the child which best utilize their gifts. Likewise, the StrengthsFinder tool has assessments for elementary children and youth, so at an early age children can begin identifying with gifts and talents and the parent can respond accordingly, creating opportunities to explore and engage God's world through these talents.

The church can partner in this opportunity by creating a culture around strengths and talents and model its engagement and transformational effect, as the tool and its language become normative to the community. Parent-leaders are equipped through church-led, facilitated StrengthsFinder learning experiences. Additional learning opportunities are offered for families, and the individual members, to engage in learning the value, language, and application of this tool which engages and honors what God designs in each person, resulting in a culture, identity, and language focused on God-given gifts and talents. The church models this culture for the parent-leader and the parent becomes better equipped to lead in the same manner with their child.

Equipping the parent-leader also includes offering tools for the vocation of parenting. As an adult, much of life's activities include a plan which focuses on a goal or outcome. Recent research shows that in the parenting role, parents are not particularly intentional in their planning

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<sup>46</sup> Rath, Tom, StrengthsFinder 2.0, (New York, Gallup Press, 2007).

and typically respond to immediate needs rather than long-range outcomes.<sup>47</sup> Supporting Christian parent-leaders in creating a plan for the Christian faith formation journey provides a means to view beyond the immediate and look towards the future, embedding Christian values, conversation, and service to others in the journey as followers of Christ. Often the first indication of a parent's desire for their child to engage on Christian faith journey begins with the sacrament of baptism. This is often an underutilized opening for a congregation to begin the collaborative partnership and plan with a parent-leader. While a variety of experiences ranging from baptismal candles, Bibles, and monthly parenting newsletters may be offered, the question of the effectiveness and sustainability of this practice arises when the congregation itself doesn't model a relational, collaborative faith journey as God's family. Rather, the baptism should be viewed as an invitation into God's family through not only words but through actions. The congregational family collaborates with the parent leader through a mentor who has already experienced the joys and challenges of parenting, and commits to walking alongside the parent for years to come. The idea of *apprenticeship* in Christian parenting is a gift the church can offer to help "connect spiritual wisdom with real-world knowledge"<sup>48</sup> and to intentionally develop a plan for being a Christian parent-leader. The effort must be made to connect vocation and faith, and the apprentice relationship offers that opportunity. Hearing and learning from a trusted "church family member" who can reflect on the daily walk as a Christian parent-leader can help formulate a plan for the family faith formation journey. Providing this tool equips and empowers the parent leader to be intentional and utilize the gifts, talents, and strengths God created within them.

When equipping and empowering the parent-leader through experiences leading to a

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<sup>47</sup>The State of the Church and Family (2010) *Annual Report*, Orange, a division of the reThink Group, 24.

<sup>48</sup> Kinnamann, 127.

family faith formation plan, congregations must be aware of the varied religious narratives which are present today, and which have led to the inability to articulate the language of Christian beliefs. This fact is troubling due to the basic connection between language and identity and its fundamental nature to religion. “[T]o be able to say what God has done in Jesus Christ, for the world and for us—is critical for Christian formation.”<sup>49</sup> In Matthew 28:19-20, the Great Commission calls us and sends us into the world, as followers of Jesus, for the sake of the world. This call does not require expertise on one’s part, but it does require one to know Jesus’ story in its fullness and resurrection hope, and to be able to show this in and through one’s life. The Moralistic Therapeutic Deism spoken today does not speak an understanding of God’s story. So the question must be asked, “Do we adults *love* Jesus enough to want to translate the Christian conversation for our children,”<sup>50</sup> and possibly the parents? Language choice needs to be embedded in thoughtful, responsible ways because it provides identity and a common ground for a community. Parent-leaders need to know the example they model in their language and translation of the gospel matters. Translating the gospel happens best through people, not programs, and experiences which offer practice and reflection. It means translating God’s story in language that can be heard and comprehended by both the mature faith and the newcomer “...as they gradually acquire a faith vocabulary.”<sup>51</sup> For the congregation as a collaborative partner, this means understanding that the parent-leader may also be a newcomer and need support and equipping with their own Christian language.

Practice, reflection, and ritual are opportunities to equip the parent-leader and the child with the language and an understanding of God’s story, and Christian communities are rooted in ritual. “Rituals are repetitive, symbolic actions in both words and deeds that manifest and express

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<sup>49</sup> Dean, 143.

<sup>50</sup> Dean, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Dean, 124.

a community's sacred story."<sup>52</sup> Engaging rituals provides a place for the common language and practice to tell the Christian story, but it also provides space for the unique context of the community and the culture. A core Christian ritual practice is prayer, but yet this key element of faith is often a challenge. Fear of not praying *the right way* or using *the right words* may burden a parent-leader to pray with a child beyond childhood bedtime prayers. The collaborative team of the congregation can offer experiences and resources which make the language of prayer a gift—not an encumbrance. Experiences beginning at the baptismal ceremony can model for the parent leader the language and practice of prayer. At baptism, the child has the sign of the cross placed on his or her forehead. Inviting the parent-leader to replicate this sign at the baptism itself can be the beginning of years of this practice becoming a ritual for the parent when praying with the child. This practice is encouraged in the FAITH 5 model, along with daily check-in conversation tools, as an example for beginning a family faith plan.<sup>53</sup> Modeling the practice of prayer and inviting the culture to engage language which reflects the common experience allows prayer to be a natural encounter in the relationship between the parent-leader, child, and God.

Reading the Bible involves practice and ritual. Handing a parent-leader a Bible and saying “good luck” does not equip the parent to dive into God’s stories with their child. Yet it is well known that children love to be read to, and often like the same stories repeatedly (a.k.a. ritual!). The Bible is filled with stories that, thanks to a variety of translations, can engage varying levels of development and study. Translation of the Bible and the gospel story are necessary for one to witness the fulfillment of God’s creative, redemptive work in the world. It is not about memorization for the sake of information but about translation for the sake of transformation. It becomes the task of the congregation to create time and space and to model for

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<sup>52</sup> Westerhoff III, John H. (2012, 1) *The Church’s Contemporary Challenge: Assisting Adults to Mature Spirituality with Their Children*. Retrieved April 2, 2012, from <http://childrenyouthnkc.files.wordpress.com>.

<sup>53</sup> FAITH 5, Faith Inkubators, Retrieved April 15, 2012, <http://www.faithink.com>.

the parent and child reading together and asking questions together. Utilizing time in worship, a Milestone Ministry experience, or any time Biblical text is shared provides a place for modeling and, more importantly, time spent in God's story. The fundamental purpose is to equip and support the parent-leader with faithful steps on the journey towards God's promised future.

### **Conclusion**

Identifying and equipping the parent as the parent-leader in the child's Christian faith formation is the primary objective. Acknowledging and understanding this role as Christian vocation, and understanding God's call places the parent-leader in the center of daily tasks and responsibilities of life, and as a Christian parent this is not limited to human needs but rather it *demand*s the guidance and protection which leads to the promise and hope of new life, fulfilled through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Guidance on the journey to know God's fulfilled promise surpasses all other responsibilities a parent possesses. Naming the parent-leader of the child is the first step on this journey.

Experiences which nurture the growth of a mature Christian faith in both the parent-leader and their child are crucial to the future of Christian families. Congregations can act as a partner in creating a culture which respects, honors, and seeks to equip, support, and empower the parent-leader in the child's faith formation. While the church community holds a central element in many families faith journey, it does not hold the same influence as a parent. Research overwhelmingly names the parent's influence on the child's faith and beliefs. Simply stated, "No one has more long-term interest in students than their parents."<sup>54</sup> The impact and investment of parents in the faith life of their child is incontrovertible.

Equipping the parent-leader with effective leadership methods empowers the parent to

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<sup>54</sup> Ed. Creasy Dean, Kenda, Clark, Chap, & Rahn, Dave, Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2001) 146.

give attention to their own *self-awareness, authenticity, and identity* in this role. Calling out unique God-given strengths, talents, and gifts creates an environment constructed to support the parent-leader in creating experiences in which they engage what they do best. The Strengths-Finder assessment provides awareness and language to accomplish the discovery of talents for the parent-leader, and the child as he or she matures. Recognizing unique talents of individuals invites the congregation to be a part of a *collaborative* faith journey so the parent-leader is not sent out alone on the journey. Rather this provides a partnership which includes a relational, apprenticeship model to support the parent-leader with a practiced parent who has already traveled ahead on the Christian parent-leader path and may help to create a family faith plan.

Moreover the engagement of experiences and rituals which model the language and life of God's children is offered. These pragmatic opportunities deepen the parent-leader's ability to articulate and translate the Christian life for one's child, and include a conversation on intentional planning on how to lead as a Christian parent-leader. Opportunities beginning at the basic rituals and practices of prayer and reading the Bible lead the journey, with enhanced experiences to develop and grow an understanding of the Christian life as a follower of Jesus.

The Christian parent-leader has one very important responsibility: "To impress on their children the love and character of God."<sup>55</sup> This translates into shining God's guiding light into the life of self and one's child wherever one is, whatever one is doing, day or night, in conversation at home or away with one's child. It's about being the parent-leader God called one to be, bringing the news of Easter hope and promise, claiming "I will remember and mold my life after the future I trust in."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Joiner, 48

<sup>56</sup> Root, Andrew, The Promise of Despair-The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2010) 142.



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