

I am aware that there are many congregations working on developing a home centered ministry. I simply would like to share one congregation's efforts. From the very onset it is important to understand that this is NOT a program, instead it is a vision for doing ministry.

What I have come to appreciate is that Luther was right 500 years ago. Luther had an expectation for the church, an expectation for the homes that made up the congregation. In his introduction to the Small Catechism Luther tells of the "deplorable" state in which he found the homes of the common people and of their inability to understand and know even the most basic of Christian teachings. It is for this reason that Luther wrote the Small Catechism, for the home. Luther believed that parents were the bishops and priests to their children and therefore the church itself. In his writing on the estate of marriage in 1522 Luther wrote: *"Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal. Whoever teaches the gospel to another is truly his apostle and bishop."* So, again I ask, what happened? In the book "The Evangelizing Church" (page 22) it states: "Luther himself had no problem connecting the gift of salvation through Christ with the call to follow Christ. But the reality is that not even the very next generation of Lutherans showed any evidence that they had caught Luther's passion for sharing the gospel with those who did not know it." So what happened?

For well over 30 years I have had the privilege to teach, engage, and even evangelize teenagers and adults. I have used countless materials, enlisted the efforts of youth and parent leaders. I have worked with small groups, large groups, employed skits and dramas, used videos and PowerPoint. However, what has become clear over the years is that we were always trying to provide a program that was focused on the lowest common denominator. We wanted programs and materials that were easy to prepare, simple to teach, attractive and compelling to the youth, low cost, and entertaining. It seemed that often the goal of the materials was to try and attract youth that were not connected to worship and simply didn't want to be there. I will never forget one of my brightest Confirmands. During her final year we discussed what her life in the church might look like after confirmation. To my surprise this young Confirmand looked at me and simply said; "Oh, I'm not coming back." In response I asked, "Why"? Her reply caught me completely by surprise. "Do you see my parents here? Do you ever see my brothers here? I won't be either!" That was over seven years ago and she has not been back since! I recall the words of John H. Westerhoff in his book "Will Our Children Have Faith", page 18: "You can teach about religion, but you cannot teach people faith."

The next Spring I enrolled in a workshop offered at Augsburg College on the "Role of Family in Faith Development". The class offered me a vision of what a home centered, faith-based ministry might look like. The next fall we began by asking parents to participate in a year of confirmation with their teenage, not as a teacher or leader, but as co-student with their child. The result has developed into a home centered emphasis that has far surpassed our expectations.

What began as an effort to engage the homes of 7th, 8th, and 9th graders has now reached out to engage almost every home in the congregation. Confirmation, education, faith enrichment, and service are no longer just for youth or teenagers; instead they are for the whole people of God, for everyone in the parish and even the community.

Home Centered Ministry recognizes the home as the central location where values and faith are nurtured and passed on. Oh we realize that not every home passes on faith and values in a way that we may appreciate or agree with, but none the less they still pass them on. Our mission, as a congregation, is to engage the homes of our congregation and community in the passing on values and faith. In addition we encourage both the homes that are members as well as those who are not to participate.

We realize that faith and values are encouraged and taught through caring, trusted, and compassionate relationships and that most often those relationships are rooted in the home and nurtured through a community of faith. However, we have also found that many of our homes, though desiring things spiritual, are often 'barren' of things spiritual; prayer, scripture, worship, and service to others is neither encouraged nor practiced.

Ben Fredenburg, in his book "The Family Friendly Church", states that "Parents are the primary Christian educators in the church, and the family is the God-ordained institution for faith-building in children and youth and for the passing of the faith from one generation to the next."

For over ten years our congregation has been working to engage and encourage parent(s), guardians, and mentors to "pass on the faith". Oh, we realize this concept is not new, Luther encouraged it as did Moses in Deuteronomy 6: "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 a emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Ten years ago we began a vision to strengthen and nurture faith and values in and through the homes of the congregation. What has been exciting is that this effort has offered us not only an opportunity to support and encourage the homes of the congregation but, by supporting and encouraging the homes of the congregation, we also support and encourage the homes in the community and beyond. In other words, we have come to understand that by encouraging faith in the homes of the congregation we also encourage faith in the community as well.

This shift in focus from a facility-based, program-centered congregation to one that focuses on the home as the primary institution for passing on the faith defines what we call "Home Centered Ministry". You might ask; "What has changed because of this focus?" Everything!

We have shifted from an age-specific, group teaching to an intentional focus on the home as the basic unit of the congregation and community. You will note that we do not use the term "family", instead we have intentionally chosen to use the word "home" because not every home is made up of a mom, dad, and the children. Instead, the homes within our congregation and community differ in a host of ways. We have traditional families, extended families, single parent families, blended families, families being raised by grandparents; as well singles, widowed, and divorced. Each one of these is a 'home'.

Therefore, our vision and mission is to find ways to nurture faith in every home. We began simply by making available free resources for the home; devotional books, prayers, and even suggestions for worship in the home. Second, we began to encourage the use of the "Four Keys for Christian living" from Vibrant Faith Ministries in Bloomington that encourages each home to engage in: (1) Daily Caring Conversation; (2) Daily Devotion and Prayer; (3) Regular Worship, and (4) Service.

These four keys are woven into the fabric of how we seek to do ministry; from Sunday and Wednesday Education programs for the home, Confirmation, Worship, Youth and t our council and committees.

However, the beginning point is the home. Whenever we meet with a home (parents) before Baptism, we ask them about the values that guide and direct their lives. We then ask how these values were passed on to them and how they intend to pass those values on to their children. We then invited and encourage them to participate in home centered ministry offered by the congregation. We tell them that they will be invited, each year, to participate with other parents and homes in passing on values and faith to their children.

What we have discovered is that many of our homes have extended home members that come from diverse religious backgrounds. One Catholic Grandmother told me after one event that no one has ever asked her to teach the faith to her children, let alone her grandchildren. Nor did she ever expect a Lutheran minister to ask her, a Roman Catholic, to pass on faith. I simply responded: "Why would I ever stop you from doing so?" She then thanked me and said she was looking forward to attending future events with her grandchildren.

One of my favorite sessions is the one we have with three year olds and their homes. We begin by asking the parents and home members about the faith talks they have with their children. Usually the response is simply a blank stare that would suggest that discussions are not easy to come by. Then, through a series of exercises we ask parents to engage in 'faith talk'. By the end of the session parents are usually overwhelmed by the questions and insights their little ones have about life and death, about creation, about the world, and about God and faith. Currently we offer sessions for each year from Baptism to an event for graduating seniors. At every session the home is central and parent(s) or other home members are present, as well as members of the congregation.

In 7th and 9th grade we offer a Mentor program that strives to establish a partnership between the home and the congregation. It is required that mentors be active, worshipping Christians. Often times they are grandparents, aunts and uncles, along with members of the congregation chosen by the home and Confirmand. The mentors meet one-on-one with the students throughout the year as well as engage in small and large group service projects. In 8th grade, we offer a 15 week Bible program that is attended by both adults and youth.

However, all of these programs are "Home Centered" which means they are not age or grade specific. We have youth of various ages along with non parent adults attending the Basic Bible Course. The Mentoring program is open to all homes and can begin at any age.

One parent remarked: "I finally figured out what your up to... you're after us!" Or another parent remarked: "Thank you, this is one of the few activities in my child's life where I am asked to be more than an spectator, instead you have asked me to be a participant."

One of the most unexpected blessings has come from the homes that have experienced division. It is not uncommon in our program for divorced couples to attend the class together with their child. In one instance we had a family where the mother and father had never married, but shared custody. Every week the three of them came not only to class together, but also met for an extra hour to study and prepare. This study time was not required! In short, I have seen more lives changed, reconciled, and blessed by this emphasis than I ever witnessed in the 20 plus years of doing traditional religious education.

Again, in the book "The Evangelizing Church", on page 128, the editors quote Soren Kierkegaard: "Lutheran church culture needs to cultivate intentional speaking of faith". This is exactly what we are striving to do. We are seeking to give the homes within our congregation both the opportunity and the encouragement to speak faith out loud to their children, in their families, to their neighbors, and with their brothers and sisters in Christ, even to the whole world!

Now for a moment of twentieth century Lutheran heresy that I want to be clear about; our focus is not on youth. This is not a youth based program. It is not a way of getting youth so that we can get the parents. Instead, this is a home-centered program. The emphasis is on the home; children and adults together!

As Christians we declare the faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit or as Luther's declares in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel." I believe that

God through the work of the Holy Spirit uses parents, family members, community, and others to encourage and pass on faith and values.

I am also convinced that parents and homes who intentionally engage in passing on faith and values to their children bless not only their children, but they also bless their grandchildren and great-grandchildren! Again, on page 39 of “The Evangelizing Church”, it says: “In the end, all evangelical ministry boils down to the reality of Jesus coming to people. Jesus’ presence makes the difference in people’s lives.” One grandmother, who at first was very offended by a presentation on home centered ministry, called me a few days later and asked if she could begin now, if she could start passing on the faith now? She then told me that she had called her children and asked if there were faith practices that they could start doing at family gatherings. It was obvious that she wanted to bless her grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Now some might ask: 'How does encouraging the home help the local congregation?' Let me say this clearly, this emphasis on home centered ministry is not a church growth gimmick. Instead, the vision that began this program seven years ago was never about the growth of one congregation, instead it began simply in response to the command to "go and make disciples", beginning here and moving into the world! Now that's mission, that's evangelism, that's the church!

Mark Yaconelli, son of Mike Yaconelli an innovator in youth ministry who worked tirelessly in the evangelization of the Christ's church, writes on the website 'LookSmart': "The problem goes far deeper than the neglect of catechetical duties. It is not that we've forgotten how to pass on our faith but that we often can't find any faith to pass on.... What we fear most in our youth is not their rambunctious ness, but their lack of interest in the Bible, their boredom in worship, their dismissal of church doctrine. We fear their judgment of the church as trivial, even laughable".

We are not suggesting that what we are doing is some great answer to all the needs of the church. But over the last years I have watched as children and the adults have joined together in faith development and have seen the blessings that have come from it. It is amazing to watch a bored child perk up as a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncles answers or asks a question in class. It is amazing to watch as a home takes the time to engage in daily conversation and prayer. A grandmother told me that she had been at a large family gather during the summer and overheard her granddaughter tell the cousins about confirmation, how her dad, grandmother, and uncle and aunt had all attended class with her. The response from the cousins was that it must have been boring, even embarrassing. What caught the grandmother's attention was her granddaughter's response; she disagreed with her cousins, her peers and said: "No, it was great!" I suspect she will never forget whom she went to confirmation with, the very people who will continue to be a part of her life for years to come.

It is my hope that our experience with home centered ministry will encourage and support those who are seeking to engage such an emphasis in their community of faith. To God be all glory, now and ever more. Amen

Blessings,

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