



Affirmation of Baptism in the Midst of Life-Long Learning

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A wonderful thing happened last year that has given me new insights into intergenerational learning: Alexander, our first grandchild, was born. This is the beginning of the next generation, bringing new experiences, thoughts, desires, and dreams. I have many dreams for Alexander, some of which relate to his life-long journey of faith.

What are some of my dreams? I see Alexander's parents, John and Amy, having opportunities to enhance and strengthen their marriage with classes pertaining to their relationship to each other and to the newest member of their family. I see pre-baptism classes that will broaden their understanding of the sacrament.

I see, during Alexander's pre-school and elementary years, opportunities for John and Amy to gain more knowledge in relating to each other, to acquire additional parenting skills, and to continue on their journey of faith. During this time I also see the three of them engaged together in short bursts of "hands on" and interaction learning experiences.

I see Alexander affirming the faith into which he was baptized and continuing to live in this relationship with Jesus Christ. I see him as an adult, continuing to grow, aware that God's Spirit is always with him. I see him continuing to be eager to learn, to know, to experience, to risk, and to challenge himself daily to be all that God has intended him to be.

At Nativity Lutheran Church we have been putting together programs that will enhance this type of faith formation, viewing confirmation not in isolation but as part of the whole continuum of Christian education, an aspect of intergenerational learning. Our efforts began in 1984 when we read Lila C. Clawsin's article on "Longer and Later" confirmation ministry in the May 6, 1983 issue of *The Lutheran*

Standard. Many of the concepts in that article were very helpful when we began to discuss catechetical ministry. We were challenged by the writings of John Westerhoff: "No longer can we assume that the educational understandings that have informed us, or the theological foundations that undergirded our efforts, are adequate for the future."¹

We decided we needed to look at the biblical and theological bases for Christian education, and also at our congregation's mission statement. We remembered that the heart of the Old Testament is the story of God's mighty acts to free his chosen people and set them on a new way. It was this story that was told and retold down through the centuries:

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life;

make them known to your children and your children's children. (Deut 4:9)

We remembered the New Testament story of God's coming into human history through Jesus Christ. At the heart of our Christian faith is a story, God's story, and this story must be at the heart of our Christian education.

Our ritual life, the experiences we have in community, and the acts we perform in the world, must be informed by this story. Unless the story is known, understood, owned and lived, we and our children will not have Christian faith. The struggle to know, understand, interpret, live and do God's word must be at the center of our educational mission.²

One part of Nativity's mission statement expresses what we believe in regard to education:

Nativity Evangelical Lutheran Church Is...
People Who Learn The Promises Of God.
The Bible is taught. Good News is told.
People are equipped. Empowered to be bold.

From this mission statement we developed the following statement and governing values for Christian education:

The purpose of Educational Ministry is to assist persons to respond, to participate and to understand God's continuing activity and revelation through Jesus Christ.

Nativity seeks to...

- place a high priority on education.
- nurture baptismal faith into full discipleship.
- encourage and support people on their journey of faith.
- help people become biblically and theologically literate.
- provide Christian faith journey learning opportunities.
- encourage mutual growth between parent and child in their faith journey; children learn from parents and parents learn from children.
- intentionally equip people for leadership as Christians in the home, the church and the world.
- be hospitable in all aspects of educational ministry.
- provide quality education to meet the variety of learning styles.

¹John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 2.

²Ibid., 34.

While continuing to think about our catechetical program we began asking: What are the unique needs of youth that the church can address? Will our youth have faith? How do we avoid "graduation" attitudes associated with confirmation? How are we helping our youth nurture their individual relationship with Jesus Christ? What role models of Christian faithfulness do young people see in our congregation?

Our catechetical program had been a full one. We were offering the usual year-long (September-May) courses in Old Testament, New Testament, church history, and catechism studies. In addition we required electives and service projects. We sometimes felt the program was a crash course in faith development. We were not accomplishing our goals, and we began to question why we were doing all this. The results of the program were frustrated, exhausted, and angry students, parents, teachers, and catechetical committee members.

We decided that we wanted to move away from the intense three-year junior high program and have children introduced at a much earlier age to some of the basic concepts of our faith. We connected with Dr. Merton Strommen's work as he was developing the Youth & Family Ministry program at Augsburg College. This model was very helpful and affirmed our efforts. Dr. Roland Martinson of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary was our consultant as we developed a youth and family ministry program.

The following have become our main directives:

- God's story is the heart of all Christian education; the story must be known, understood, owned, and lived
- the family is the primary system in which people gain awareness of God
- the best way to teach children is to teach parents; parents need help in knowing how to teach children
- short bursts of education effectively involve parents with their children

1. God's Story Is the Heart of All Christian Education; the Story Must Be Known, Understood, Owned, and Lived.

God's story is what the Christian Church is all about. This story needs to be "known, understood, owned, and lived,"³ but the knowing and living of this story will not be the same for adults, youth, and children.

Children can become actively involved with the Bible. They can be encouraged and assisted to act upon it, to interact upon it, and to think, feel, and muse about it. They can ask questions of and about it. Given the encouragement and freedom to engage the Bible at their own pace and as they are able, children can learn to be "at home" with the Bible, can share in the stories of the church, claim the Bible as their own, and participate in an exciting adventure of interpreting. And in so doing, not only will they engage in the task of interpretation but the Bible will inform their lives as persons in the world and the community of faith.⁴

Youth likewise need the encouragement to think, interact, and question. Moral thinking about life is important for youth. In times of doubt and despair

³Ibid.

⁴A. Roger Gobbel and Gertrude G. Gobbel, *The Bible: A Child's Playground* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 16.

those who are searching need the affirmation of others who are engaged in God's story.

Adults too need support and encouragement as they seek to develop their knowledge of

God's story. They need to allow themselves to continue to be open to understanding, owning, and living it.

As you therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Col 2:6-7)

2. The Family Is the Primary System in Which People Gain Awareness of God.

Merton Strommen articulates this very concisely:

For purposes of definition, a family is two or more people, of any age, who share a primary relationship. A primary relationship being one which is intended to provide for personal needs as it models values and skills for living. It is a unit in which rituals are established, a common history is developed and life is sustained. How, and at what level a family accomplishes its task of defining and meeting needs, disseminating values and maintaining and developing the relationships will differ greatly from one to another.

The concept of youth and family ministry is one which intentionally takes into account the relationships of family, which so powerfully and dynamically affect our daily living. It is an experience of relational involvement that encourages a reconnection between youth and family through the guidance and support of the church.

An emphasis on youth and family is one which cuts across generations to recognize and utilize the gifts and talents which all age groups have for the purpose of being in ministry to one another. It places the family as the unit through which people learn to become the disciples of Christ and ministers of the church.

As children, the family is our learning ground for developing values, faith, and establishing relationships and skills for living. It is the family's responsibility to provide this and much more. The church then, must be about the business of helping families accomplish their task, not by taking the responsibility away but by identifying and mobilizing the resources that are available in every family and by creating new opportunities for learning and growth through the larger family of God.⁵

Paula Matt Becker adds:

People need and want caring and mutually supportive relationships. We need people with whom we experience love, acceptance, joy and a sense of personal worth. The family, no matter what form it takes, is the place where we learn or fail to learn how to live, communicate and maintain relationships. In terms of faith, the family...is the place where the message of the Gospel can daily be nurtured and experienced, as people continue their relationships through the struggle of forgiveness and the joy of reconciliation.⁶

⁵Merton Strommen, "Youth and Family Ministry, A Definition in Process" (unpublished handout, 1988).

⁶Paula Matt Becker, "The 'And' in Youth and Family Ministry" (unpublished handout, 1988).

3. The Best Way to Teach Children Is to Teach Parents; Parents Need Help in Knowing How to Teach Children.

We recognize that we can, and must, learn from children. In baptism we affirm that children have been given the gift of faith. With faith come other gifts. As we live in the family and in the family of God, we approach each other with a sense of giftedness. I am not—as an adult, parent, teacher, or friend—a person who knows all the answers. I can learn from others and those others can be children and youth. When I am open I can be graced by another with an undeserved gift, a surprise of understanding, an “aha!”

As a parent this means that my child may be God’s angel unaware. This child may be present in my life to speak God’s word to me. In one of our classes for parents and second graders the question was asked of the children, “What do you think would be good about being an adult?” One little girl replied, “The parents get to stay upstairs and worship God; we have to go downstairs to Sunday church school.”

We came to realize that the very best way to teach children is to teach parents, and this teaching should begin before the birth of their first child. We found that this is a time when couples are eager to learn. Our “Parenthood & Your Marriage” classes (a pilot project of Lutheran Social Service, Rochester, Minnesota) began in 1990. This program is designed for first-time parents who want to learn how to continue nurturing their marriage as they nurture their new baby. In a relaxed small group setting, couples explore ideas about their role as parents, and discover ways of nurturing their own relationship as well as learning parenting skills. Classes are offered ideally during the third trimester of the pregnancy. Babies born during this time come to the classes with their parents.

Participants in pre-baptism classes broaden their knowledge of baptism. They learn how the sacrament relates to their daily life and to the formation of faith in their child. “Active Parenting” classes offer parenting education for parents with children in kindergarten through sixth grade. We have learned that we need to be very intentional to build into these classes an emphasis on faith nurturing, since parents of children this age haven’t had the advantage of education in faith formation for the earlier stages of their children’s lives.

4. Short Bursts of Education Effectively Involve Parents with Their Children.

Nativity’s programs for grades 2-12 are: “Discover” (grades 2-6); “Challenge” (grades 7-9); and “Affirm” (grades 10-12). These classes are in addition to Sunday church school, which focuses on Bible study.

The Discover classes (1-1 1/2 hours) are on Sunday or Monday evenings for three to five weeks. The series consists of: “Prayer” (grade 2, Nov.); “Using the Bible” (grade 3, Sept.-Oct.); “Worship: Communicating With God” (grade 4, Jan.); “Preparation for Holy Communion” (grade 5, Lent); “Baptism: Source of Self Esteem” (grade 6, April-May).

When we first started the Discover classes, the parents and children met separately for the first 50 minutes; we now realize that it is more effective to have parents and children together the entire time. Mutual growth takes place between parents and children; children learn from parents and parents learn from children.

planning takes a great deal of time, but the enthusiasm and excitement of the children and parents makes it worth the effort. We are finding increased support for this entire program from the participating families and also from families with younger children who have heard about the classes.

Challenge, the three-year junior high program, is divided into four four-week sessions each year. The Old and New Testaments and parts of the catechism and church history are studied. The emphasis is on relationships. Each grade has a yearly weekend retreat. The parents of the seventh and ninth graders join their youth at the retreat on Saturday. It is a day when student and parent(s) talk together about key issues relating to their own family. This day is becoming a very significant part of the Challenge program. We are also encouraging parents and students to become involved together in a service project of the family's choosing.

Each ninth grade student chooses an adult friend as a mentor, someone who will help the student grow personally and spiritually. During that year, and continuing until the student's Affirmation of Baptism, there is a commitment for at least ten contacts between the student and mentor.

The senior high program is called Affirm. The service of Affirmation of Baptism (more commonly called confirmation) is held the last Sunday in October of the tenth grade year. The student, parent(s), and pastor meet together to discuss the student's readiness to affirm, the continuation of the student's faith journey, and how the parent(s) will support the student on that journey. As a basis for that discussion, the parent(s) and student each write a paper on "My Relationship with Jesus Christ." After this discussion the student and parent(s) decide whether the student is ready to affirm his/her baptismal faith.

There are many other aspects of youth and family ministry relating to junior and senior high youth. These include Bible studies, peer counseling, youth forums, Lutheran Youth Encounter, synod conventions, an annual summer mission/venture trip, a Christmas musical, recharge weekends, camping, canoe trips, ski trips, fund-raiser activities, and monthly fun events.

Many projects relate to service in the congregation: acolyting, lay reading, singing in the youth choir, and assisting in Sunday church school and vacation church school. The youth have recently begun a monthly outreach program in which they have sung at a prison and participated in a Habitat for Humanity workday.

5. Challenges.

We are considering additional possibilities that will enhance our intergenerational life-long learning:

- grandparents with youth and children
- adults learning from children
- youth (tenth to twelfth grade) as classroom mentors, working with the teacher
- youth and children (grade 4 and above) participating with parents and other adults in an overview of the Scriptures ("Walk Through the Bible")
- intergenerational house groups for fellowship, Bible study, prayer, and sharing
- interaction classes with parents and children as young as age two

These are some of the things that can happen when lay people are given the opportunity and are empowered to grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Although Alexander is only a few months old, this grandparent's dream is being realized. John and Amy did participate in the pre-birth parenting classes and in the pre-baptism classes. The couples in the pre-birth class are already asking for opportunities to acquire additional parenting skills and to grow relationally and spiritually.

We have moved from an intense junior high program to an earlier introduction to the basic concepts of our faith, with parents and children learning together. Although the program hasn't been in place long enough for long-range evaluation, the short-term results have been impressive. These experiences are helping participants as they continue their life-long journey of faith. I know they will also help Alexander.