

## **THE FAMILY AS LEARNING COMMUNITY: How the Church Can Help**

A reflection for the Reformed Institute Education Round Table

At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA

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### ***The Problem***

I think we have to begin this discussion by acknowledging again that bringing up children and youth as distinctively Christian people is a tough nut to crack in this day and age. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. There are any number of forces militating against Christian spiritual formation today, especially in this culture and at this particular time in history. If my two daughters' experiences are any indication, many of their school friends are lukewarm at best to the idea of Christian religious practice (their friends never having been involved in an intentional or ongoing way in a church community), and some actively scorn it. Weekend and weekday time that used to be set aside as sacrosanct for religious services and religious education is encroached upon by athletic games and practices and other school or club related activities. In addition to that, the pace of life has increased since I was a youth, advancing technology offers ever more attractive opportunities for distraction, and busy young people are just plain tired on the weekends. If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times, "Sunday is my child's only day to sleep in." To top it off, the mainline church has, over the past two generations, done a pretty effective job of inoculating our youth with what Christian Smith has called, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," which he defines as the view that God is basically distant from the events of life and wants us to be happy, comfortable, nice people. This stance, of course, is not really anything near what serious Reformed Christian theology would hold. But it is what kids and their parents have internalized from their involvement in congregations. So we may be able to get them out for a mission trip, but it's harder to have them commit to regular corporate worship or ongoing bible study. They don't see the need.

This is not an exhaustive recitation of the problems we face in the task of spiritual formation, but it gives you a picture. The question is, how do we as the church and as individuals and families within it respond to these realities?

### ***Creating Outliers***

This summer I finally read Malcolm Gladwell's little book *Outliers: The Story of Success*. Most of you know his thesis in that piece: it is basically that no one becomes a "success" solely on the strength of his or her own hard work and natural genius. External conditions always contribute to the success—such as the time of year or the decade in history in which one is born, the opportunity and encouragement to devote enough time to a task that one masters it (and Gladwell famously says that it takes 10,000 hours), and the cultural inheritance

that shapes one's attitudes. This, by the way, would be a marvelous jumping off point for a sermon on grace, but I will resist that temptation.

Reading Gladwell's book started me thinking about how, any more, young people who remain engaged in congregations and understand their lives in terms of the call and claims of Jesus Christ could increasingly be labeled outliers.

One particular portion of the book *Outliers* made me stand up and take special notice. Using the research of Dr. Annette Lareau, Gladwell addresses the importance of parental involvement in fostering and assessing a child's talents, opinions and skills. Lareau calls it ***concerned cultivation***. Gladwell draws a contrast between two students, one whose middle class parents encourage him to ask questions and advocate for himself, the other whose interests her mother fails to nurture. The first is encouraged by parents, sent to camps, provided with additional resources, and given confidence to speak and act for himself. The second student has to take all the initiative upon herself if she wants to get additional training in her area of interest. You can guess who is more likely to succeed academically, musically, or in the world of athletics.

Most parents I've met in Northern Virginia understand the importance of this when it comes to achievement in those areas. If you want to be a top notch oboist, if you want to get into TJ or UVA or Princeton, if you want to make the varsity soccer or basketball team, it helps to have parents who cultivate your interests, send you to camps and get you private instruction, encourage you to do your homework, and push you when you'd rather not do the work. I know many parents who believe in concerned cultivation when it comes to sports, music, and schoolwork. I know far fewer parents who believe in concerned cultivation when it comes to their children's Christian spiritual formation. Here's the rub, though. Concerned cultivation—hopefully by parent and families, but especially by communities of faith—is ***the only way committed disciples of Jesus are formed***. (By contrast, it takes much less concerned cultivation to create a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist. But Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is pretty thin broth when it comes to sustaining a life of deep meaning, particularly in the midst of hardship and difficulty.)

### ***Stories of Concerned Cultivation in Families and the Church***

How do we go about the work of fostering concerned cultivation in the church? Let me begin addressing that by telling a few stories. The longer I am in ordained ministry, the more I have seen evidence that stories really do have the power to shape lives. They inspire, they inform, they educate. So for the next few minutes, I want to give you a window into concerned cultivation in families of children and youth I've known. After telling these stories of family as a learning community, I'll suggest what I believe the church can learn from them.

Later today, at Concord Presbyterian Church in Statesville, NC, where my wife and I used to serve as co-pastors, Liz Baker and Thomas Setser are getting married. Liz's father and Thomas' grandfather were co-chairs of the Pastor Nominating Committee that brought Judith and me to Statesville. As sixth graders, Liz and Thomas were members of the first confirmation class Judith and I taught there. They started being brought to church as infants, went through the toddler class taught by Mrs. Jones, were involved in pageants and plays as elementary school kids, learned as third graders to sit through a worship service, established friendships with their peers, participated in youth Sundays and in youth choirs, felt the support of adults who were related to them only as fellow church members, and saw the church community rally around them and their families in times of celebration and loss. Liz and Thomas attended separate high schools and graduated from different colleges, but the bonds they began to develop through church grew into something more. Neither one of them could imagine being married anywhere else but at Concord Presbyterian Church.

These two people are committed to each other, but more importantly, they are committed to the God they have come to know through Jesus Christ (and to being active participants in a community of faith). They are committed because their parents and their congregation engaged in **concerned cultivation**. Going to Sunday morning worship and education wasn't negotiable for them as children and youth. That was just what you did if you were a Baker or a Setser. So they had a chance to develop a taste for it on their own. Their parents and grandparents went to worship and studied scripture in Sunday School. They modeled for Liz and Thomas what it means to be disciple. And look at Thomas and Liz now—married, in the church, singing in the choir and part of a Sunday School class.

Okay, you say, that can happen in a small town in North Carolina, but not here. Not in sophisticated Northern Virginia, where people are more transient, more busy, more aware of the diversity in the world. So let me tell you about another couple, members of this congregation. They have two adult daughters together. Again, going to Sunday morning worship was not optional in this family. Neither was getting involved in service to others through the church. It was just what was expected. It was just what you did if you were part of that family. I had a conversation recently with the mother of those daughters in which she told me that every Sunday after church, they had a family discussion about the sermon and how its message could be integrated into daily life. In addition to that, the girls were involved enough in this congregation's worship and work that they came to know and felt the support of adult members and friends, some of whom helped provide them with internships and connections. Now both of these young adult women are meaningfully involved in congregations where they live—one in New York City, the other outside of Philadelphia. Their lives of faith are the product of concerned cultivation.

My wife Judith and I have two teen-aged daughters. As PK's, or double PK's, going to worship on Sunday morning was never really an open question for them. They grew up going to Sunday School and worship, they grew up listening to their mom and dad talk about sermons at Sunday lunch, they grew up being asked how they reacted to what they heard on Sunday.

We faced the travel team realities with my older daughter, Rebecca, when she was involved on a club volleyball team, and I confess that we caved in—she missed worship some Sundays. But up until her senior year in high school, it was never difficult to get her to come to church or to youth events when travel sports didn't conflict. She had friends in the group, she felt nurtured and supported by the adults in the congregation, she enjoyed the fellowship and learning she found in Sunday School, and as a senior she gladly preached a sermon here for Youth Sunday. It delights me to know that she, as a college freshman, is trying out local churches in Harrisonburg, working on international justice issues on campus, and that she is *having fun* taking her world religions course.

My younger daughter, a high school junior, goes to Judith's church for worship and education. She is deeply serious about her spirituality, loves helping set up for the service, and she will engage you in a theological conversation. She regularly raises money for World Vision, tried to give her spending money away to a homeless person when we were on vacation in Chicago, and considered her best Christmas gift a few years ago to be a goat I purchased in her name for a village in Africa. She also challenges Judith and me to be true to the words we say. One time I was leading the blessing at our family meal, and in the course of the prayer grumbled to God about some congregation member who was getting on my last nerve. Martha chastised me, "Dad, that's not how we pray." And that was the start of a dialogue about honest prayer and the importance of reconciliation. She has also engaged her mom more than once around the issue of her mother's shopping and how it matches up with her sermons on materialism. How did Martha get to be that way? Some of her character is the result of how she came out of the womb, but a big part of it is the concerned cultivation of a community, inviting her into growth and leadership.

One last story, and then some suggestions. Last week, I was talking to a mother in my congregation who has three young children. Thanks to my colleague Dan Thomas and a capable Children's Ministry Committee, the children at Immanuel were asked, in honor of our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, to collect and give 50 coins of caring—which would be brought to church and used to help others in need. What this mother told me is that she and her husband asked their children to "earn" these coins by answering questions or telling Bible stories. She shared with me that her youngest related the story of Noah and the Arctic, adding a little known geographical detail to the story! One of the questions she posed to the kids was, "Tell me the names of twenty people at church who love you, besides your mom and dad." They came up with the names of some of their peers at church, and then they mentioned Dan and me, and then a few of the most visible

Sunday School teachers. After that, the kids seemed stumped for a minute. But with a little encouragement, they generated a list of other adults who had been Sunday School teachers, VBS helpers, and people who showed an interest in them on Sunday mornings—speaking to them, praising them for singing in the choir, etc. As I heard that story, I thought to myself, “These children are getting the kind of concerned cultivation it takes to grow into committed disciples.”

### ***How Can the Church Help? Eight Suggestions***

So what lessons might we draw from these stories and others about how the church can help nurture the family as learning community? Here are eight suggestions for how we tackle that task.

1. Regularly remind people that just as it takes concerned cultivation to make a top-notch athlete, musician, or scholar, it takes concerned cultivation to shape a young life (or any life for that matter) in committed discipleship and in a thoughtful theological approach to viewing the world. Do this, not as a means of loading guilt onto those who aren't engaging in concerned cultivation, but as an earnest appeal to them to take faith development seriously. Christian spiritual formation takes intentionality. There is no way around that.
2. Strongly encourage parents to connect the dots with their children, to talk theologically with them. That might involve a regular discussion of the sermon at Sunday lunch, or a question about what they learned in Sunday school. It could also be some life situation that provides a teachable moment. Help the children understand how our words about God shape, or can shape, how we behave. How do Jesus' life, death, and resurrection impact the parents' decision-making with regard to how they spend their time and money, how they view the death of a loved one, how they treat someone who has hurt them or someone who is impoverished? What do they believe about who God is and what God expects of us? What is the Holy Spirit and where do they see it at work in their lives? I remember well having a conversation with my daughter Martha in a funyak on a pond at an all-church retreat. She was maybe seven or eight. I marveled at the beauty that surrounded us that spring afternoon, and how I saw all of that as a gift from God, a God who is incredibly creative. And I told her that to be made in God's image—to be a child of God—means that we are called to be creative, too. I believe that one to one conversation planted a seed in her life.
3. Consistently call on other adults in the congregation to think and talk theologically with children and youth as well. One of the best aspects of our confirmation program here at Immanuel is that the young people are paired with adult faith mentors. There are specific questions that the kids are supposed to ask these mentors (and the mentors are supposed

to answer), including these, “When has it been hardest for you to have faith? What do you believe and what do you struggle to believe? What are your growing edges? When have you clearly seen God at work in your life and the world?” And, “What is your hope for me as a young Christian?” Lillian Daniel, a U.C.C. pastor in the Chicago area, has written books on the practice of testimony in worship. What if we encouraged a minute for testimony once a month in worship services, early in the service, so children and youth could hear an adult who is not the pastor talk about how that person understands God to be at work in their lives and in the world?

4. Parents, invite children and youth to ask questions and to be in dialogue with you and other adults theologically. Take their questions, and even their rebukes, seriously. (“Dad, that’s not how we pray,” or “Mom, how does your shopping square with what you tell people about materialism?”). These openings can be the beginning of a rich conversation. Take their challenges seriously enough to give them a thoughtful response. Get beyond the pat answer, to the reasons for your answer. Be confident enough about what you believe to be able to provide a response, and humble enough about your answer to realize that it is not beyond challenge.
5. That being said, let the children and youth know that there are some practices (worship, Christian education, service) which are non-negotiable for you. This is just part of what it means to be part of your particular family. This is just what the Fulp-Eickstaedts, or the Bakers, or the Setsers, do. They go to worship. They study Scripture. They serve those in need. Let them see how worship, education, and service is important to you, let them become aware of how integral the God we know in Jesus is in your own life, and they will be less likely to reject these things. I have a cousin who was dropped off at the Catholic church for CCD on Saturdays, but his parents never darkened the door of the church. It’s not surprising he never developed much respect for communities of faith.
6. Churches should, and often do, provide families with suggested rituals and practices that facilitate at home conversations. These are great resources for nurturing faith in a family. It may be a series of Advent and Lenten devotions, a set of table graces, or a series of faith questions that might guide discussion for that day. I think it is worth challenging families to actually read the Bible together at mealtime, to reflect on a Bible story and what it teaches us before or after they eat, or to have each member of the family answer this simple question around the table, “Where did you see God at work in your life today? And what causes you to say that?”
7. We should also realize that try as we might, we are not going to win the battle of getting every family here in worship and Christian education on Sunday mornings. We have to stop pretending we are in the 1950’s and early 1960’s and do what we can in light of

changing rhythms of life to provide opportunities for worship and education that happen at other times than Sunday morning. There is nothing Biblical—beyond the fact that Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday morning—about regular communal worship and Christian education happening solely at that time. So at least consider having an alternative worship service—or small group meetings—at a time that will catch people when they are more likely to come out. As a result of our Strategic Planning Process here at Immanuel, we are going to institute an alternative service, informal, geared to families and perhaps combined with a meal, early on Sunday evenings. We are finding that it might just be time to try something new.

8. Finally, we should keep Acts 2:42-47 in mind as a model for how we nurture the spiritual formation of our congregations and their children and youth. This account, from the formative days of Christian history, gives a picture of the early church at perhaps its most robust. Hear in Luke's words a description of the fledgling church in Jerusalem as a learning community: one which studied, ate, prayed, and worked wonders together, in gratitude and generosity. Note how the church grew.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Thank you, and may God bless us all as we seek to nurture learning communities.

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