

THE FAMILY AS LEARNING COMMUNITY: How the Church Can Help

A response for the Reformed Institute Education Round Table

At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA

October 15th, 2011

1.

I wish I had the answer. In fact, I think that if you asked any parent any question about raising children --no matter whether their children are 3 or 30--they would say the same thing. There is no answer key in the back of the parent's handbook. We all know that.

What we do is share our experiences, in the hope that that might help us figure out what we need to do.

2.

Just for background, my husband and I have been married 38 years. We have two daughters--age 36 and 35. My husband is a lifelong Presbyterian. I was born, raised, and educated as a Roman Catholic, but we decided before the girls were born that we wanted to belong to a single church. Both our daughters graduated from a public high school here in Fairfax County, and from the same Virginia college. Public institutions.

3.

Our oldest daughter is the mother of two daughters, 3 and 2 months. She is a post-doctoral fellow at Brown, and has consistently been involved in various churches, in leadership capacities, through high school, college, her first job, grad school, and as a young married person and mother. The younger is a lawyer in private practice here in Virginia, and, to my knowledge, has not been inside a church (with the exception of weddings) since she left home for college. They have always been as different as night and day, and my general inclination is to blame nature rather than nurture for their wildly differing personalities. That has always been the easy answer, though maybe not the correct one.

4.

My husband and I did what we thought were all the right things. Even before our children were born, we were sponsors for youth groups, made stewardship calls, stuffed envelopes, served on committees, were active and involved. When we chose a church home, we were selective, and looked for people and preachers whom we liked and respected, for places where attention was paid to children and youth. Over their elementary school years, the girls accompanied us to junior-high activities (where they looked up to the older kids), to church picnics, to Sunday School and worship services. We made home Advent wreaths and said grace before meals, talked about the true meaning of Christmas and Easter, and made sure that church services superceded Santa and the Easter Bunny in importance as much as possible. They went to Sunday School. They participated in Youth Group. (I think we'd all like to see our children--even after they grow up-- as part of a church community. It gives us some illusion of control, of influence, of safety, in a way. But I think we are wrong about that. Alcohol, drugs, and dangerous behavior are not barred by a church door.)

5.

In short, I don't think we did anything out of the ordinary, other than being active in the church, and making it possible for the girls to be active as well--and to express our pride in them for the things they did as members of the congregation.

In that regard, I remember a congregational meeting where some issue involving the youth groups was being voted upon. The chief proponent of the measure (I've forgotten what it was, but it was something that would have affected the kids) was a well-respected, but somewhat pompous elder, old enough that he was willing to disregard the effect on the younger members of the congregation. Our older daughter--who was barely 16--stood up in the meeting and took him on and won the point. I had never been prouder of her. Members of the congregation crowded around her after the meeting to congratulate her and offer their support and praise.

6.

BUT, then they leave home. Like we all do. And somehow, that change in circumstance often takes them away from the church. I'm not sure that that is always a bad thing. Maybe you have to go away in order to appreciate what you have received--and come back in order to give it to your children.

7.

In spite of their differing choices, I don't think that our daughters are that different when it comes to their moral compasses, but one has chosen the more generally-accepted, church-joining, active-membership response. The other has chosen to function more independently, among a community of like-minded friends.

8.

What can we do to see our children grow as Christians? Value them. Respect them. Offer them opportunity. Give them models. Encourage them to be models in their own right. And be patient and trust that the seeds that we've planted will indeed grow and bear fruit.

- **Mrs. Mary McElveen**, member of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House