

Porvoo Theological Conference
Skalholt, Iceland, 23rd – 27th September 2004

Session 10:
THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTEXT –
CHRISTIAN VOCATION IN THE FAMILY

Erling J. Pettersen
Director General/Church of Norway National Council

*How might we engage
in pastoral catechesis?*

We start

WHERE THE PERSON

IS.

Put away

*all the contrived notebooks,
curriculum, lecture notes.*

Bring out the scripture

lectionary and the

Prayer Book and

BE WHO YOU ARE –

vulnerable, speaking

of your own faith and

life-style in Christ from

your heart and mind.

Pastoral catechesis engages

us in telling our family

story...

(Walter L. Guettsche)

I

Home and Congregation in Partnership

Christian education in our congregations is struggling. We note it in our statistics. We see it on the faces of pastors, Sunday school teachers and parents. We are aware that as children get older they absent themselves from our educational programs.

Recent approaches to Christian education have simply not fostered the desired results. We want our children and adults to live confidently in the presence of a gracious and loving God who makes a critical difference for us and the world at large.

The problem is we have invested a lot of time and energy in a congregational model of how to nurture faith that has overlooked a basic biblical, historical and experiential truth: faith is formed in the context of primary relationships, especially those within our own homes. While recognizing that not all of our children have Christian homes in which to live, we need to recapture a form of Christian education that partners the ministry of home and congregation. Even our children who do not have a Christian family can benefit from the faith-nurturing environment of Christian homes that welcome them into their midst.

Scripture asserts that the role of family is fundamental to shaping people's values, beliefs and commitments. When Moses exhorts the people to pass on to their children what he had taught them, he does not suggest sending their children to Hebrew school, Sunday school or confirmation class. Rather, he states that God's Word is to be shared with the children "when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:7, cf., 11:19). Moses' experientially rich way of saying "Teach the children everywhere and always," begins with the life of the home.

The New Testament also affirms the role of the home in the nurturing of faith and life (cf., Acts 2:46; 10:24; 12:12; Ephesians 6:4; and 1 Timothy 5:8).

Martin Luther appreciated family life for its role in teaching the faith. The *Small Catechism* was written for the home. According to Luther's instructions in the *Large Catechism*, the "head of the household" should catechetically instruct the children at least once a week. Luther went so far as to state, "Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel." (*on the Estate of Marriage*).

All this is very different from how parents see themselves today. In Western industrialized societies, parents generally assume that their role is chauffeur and time manager: they are to bring their children "to church" and, preferably, on time.

However, numerous studies continue to indicate that mothers and fathers are the primary influences on a child's faith. What a parent –or other primary caregiver – says and does are key factors in a child's spiritual development. Yet, the way Christian education has been conducted in recent decades, would lead one to believe that parents are quite expendable.

Our liturgy of baptism emphasizes the partnership between ministry in the home and in the congregation:

"Together with this congregation and the whole church you (parents and godparents) receive a sacred responsibility

- *to pray for the child*
- *to teach it how to pray*
- *to assist the child to live by the Word of God and to take part in holy communion"*

A family educational model

The Church of Norway, in launching a new and challenging post-baptism program (0-18 years), recognizes that parents have a primary role to play in the faith development of their children. Oddbjørn Evenshaug and Dag Hallen, both scholars at the University of Oslo, have developed a model of the fundamental role of the family in the development of the child. According to them, it is debatable whether it is possible to describe religious development independently of a social and cultural context. In stage theories, developmental changes are viewed primarily as a function of maturing processes as a consequence of chronological age. The social and cultural content of the environment and learning are scarcely taken into consideration.

In accordance with their educational philosophy, Evenshaug and Hallen assume that the content of religion has to be transmitted to the child. Accordingly, we have to distinguish between religion and religiousness. Religiousness may be understood as our relationship to religion, and religious development as changes in this relation over our life span. This is a matter which the stage theorists do not accommodate satisfactorily. A theory of stages can provide descriptions of characteristic traits of the child's "receiving set" at various ages. These traits must, meanwhile, be interpreted in the light of the social and cultural context within which the development is taking place. A child's readiness for religion, therefore, must not only be studied and described as a process of development in stages, but also a process of socialization. Only in such a perspective, in the light of the particular experiences undergone or not undergone by the individual while growing up, is it possible to understand the individual differences found in this area.

Evenshaug and Hallen understand the process of socialization and education as one of interaction and communication. In interaction with the child, various socialization agents transmit cultural or social messages to the child. In our context the message is religion, and religion is conceived as a part of the historical tradition, i.e. the Christian tradition. Such socialization agents mutually interact. All of them represent in some way or other the larger society and culture. Compared to the family, however, other agents are secondary, in a chronological sense. The family has a surrounding function in early childhood. School, church, peer group, mass media, etc., form a more limited part of the psychological environment of the child. The social and cultural context of the process as a whole is the source of the content of communication.

In the process of socialization the family may be considered as a "filter" which modifies all other influences. The family's filtering function is a main point in the model. In a direct way, the family functions as a filter since it usually represents the child's first primary group, where the parents personify the norms and roles of culture and society. Furthermore, at least in early childhood, parents make the decisions about what sort of people, institutions, and other influences the child encounters. Indirectly, the family functions as a filter through the frame of reference which the child acquires in interaction with its parents. This frame of reference is important for the child's interpretation of the influence of all later sources.

In the present context the filter represented by the family consists both of general experiences in relation to the parents, and the more specific religious experiences gained – or not gained – in the family. It is not just a matter of whether children obtain information in the form of words about God in their home environment, It is a matter of whether they have the opportunity to discover religion in practice, to experience God as a living "thou" whom they may approach in prayers, hymns, and other forms of religious worship. Such a total transmission of the religious tradition enables children to interpret school and church teaching

on religion in a meaningful way, whereas those who lack such a basis of experience will be less able to do so.

This does not mean, of course, that such religious experiences necessarily will lead to religious commitment. In fact, the function of the family educational model is not to provide a basis for a cause- and-effect analysis. The function of the model is primarily to provide a point of departure for elucidating relations of intentions and functions in the problem area of child rearing and socialization. The main point of interest is to understand the flow of communication from the transmitter to the receiver, more than to explain the definitive results of the influence of different socializations agents.

Visible religion creates credibility

Dr. Sigmund Harbo, Stavanger, Norway, cites Hjalmar Sundén from Sweden, who maintains that the anticipation of the role of God and its concomitant frame of reference in most cases are determined by a so-called "total transmission of tradition". This comprises early firsthand knowledge by direct (and not only verbal) contact with religious life in the family. Thus, behind different religious attitudes in adults, we find both social learning and individual cognitive processes.

Sigmund Harbo has investigated the relationship between childhood experiences and ulterior attitudes to institutional Christian faith among Norwegian college students. He asks two questions: What connection is there between the parents' faith and their children's ulterior sympathetic/antipathetic attitudes? What is the importance of participation in religious practices and experience of internalized religiousness for ulterior conformity to the parental faith?

Harbo finds that there is a significant and positive relationship between degrees of personal religious commitment in the parental group and a sympathetic orientation in the student group. Antipathetic attitudes are accordingly connected to the absence of religious commitment in the family and sympathetic attitudes are connected to the presence of the same. Attitudes of rejection are nearly six times higher in families with two nonbelievers than in families with two believers.

Harbo's findings confirm Sundén's theory: the personal faith of the parents is essential in the transmission of traditions, because it is primarily this faith which regulates children's possibilities for direct contact with religious life and thereby determines the frame of reference to which all later influence is referred.

A total evaluation of Harbo's data suggests that most people's first attitudes to religion in early life are formed through experience linked to the socializers' own degree of involvement in religion and their way of transmitting it to the younger generation. Harbo's analyses confirm that students who experienced internalized religiousness, in the form of individual prayer for example, had to a significantly higher degree preserved the faith they were raised in than respondents who had not witnessed such expression of deeper religious involvement. In other words, we must assume that visible religion creates credibility, whereas invisible religion loses its credibility.

Harbo confirms that parents who give their children opportunities for direct contact with visible religious life, contribute decisively to the creation of cognitive structures which predispose children to corresponding patterns of behavior. Harbo affirms that the church has conceded too much to institutional care outside the home. Sunday schools and confirmation programs have not become supplements but substitutes for faith in the home.

A strategy for Porvoo involvement

According to Dr. David Anderson, USA, a recovery of the fuller vocation of the parent is vital for the recovery of congregational ministry, thus establishing a partnership between ministry in the home and in the congregation in faith maturation. In the Norwegian context, we find an explicit concern with this partnership model in the new baptismal program. An overall view of the program (0-18 years) shows that the accent is on working together in active partnership, with a concern for inclusion rather than separate programs.

The task of catechesis is a joint enterprise, a common adventure which parents and congregations share and in which they learn and grow together.

The faith of early childhood is decisive, and parents are an important element in the success of a complete Christian education program. Parents' role should be given more emphasis in catechetical programs. Congregations should provide access to varied and rich experiences in the faith community of the home through prayer, celebration/worship, and fellowship, keeping alive a sense of wonder. Catechesis also has to take place in the fuller context of Christian living and worship in the home in order to be effective.

Catechesis cannot be understood simply on a cognitive level, but must be related to the experience of life in the community of faith, in the home and in the congregation.

We have evidence suggesting that the home environment is critical to faith development. Both parental modeling and the family atmosphere have a measurable impact on what young adolescents value, believe, and do. Now the critical question is one of strategy: the churches are being forced to rethink the ways in which they support the family as the fundamental institution for the development of the life of faith. A strategy for Porvoo involvement needs to be devised. The Porvoo Communion should have a key role in promoting models of family ministries. This implies a radical shift in our understanding of catechesis, as the arena of learning experience ceases to be a church institution. In what ways, then, can families and congregations contribute to each other and in the broadest possible way learn from each other? These are questions to be answered by each one of the Porvoo churches.

II

Ministry with families

The first thing congregations and Christian education ministries need to do to connect learning in the home and congregation is to think differently about families. Ministry with families means more than being “family friendly” at church. It means helping households of various shapes and sizes to live together as a community of faith and as a community shaped by faith.

Four Keys to Partnering Home and Congregation in Ministry

In recent years at least four key factors have been identified as encouraging a life of faith in the home. They are:

1. caring conversation
2. devotional life in the home
3. family service projects
4. family rituals and tradition

Caring conversation

Henri Nouwen observes in *Letters to Marc about Jesus* that there are two kinds of time: urgent time and essential time. Urgent time screams at us and demands our attention and commitments: “Do this. Hurry up and finish that! You’re not ready!” Essential time, on the other hand, whispers and gently reminds us, “Have you taken time for loved ones, for quiet, for the care of others, for prayer, the Bible, and other forms of worship?” Essential time is often drowned out by the screams of the urgent. Anxiety about our use of time is a particularly western malady, but it is one that is encroaching on other cultures. We need to address this issue now.

Congregations are in an exiting and critical position to help individuals and households respond to essential time. Questions, conversational openings and activities that initiate caring conversation can be made a part of Christian education in the congregation and applied to our daily lives at home.

Dr. David Anderson, Lutheran pastor and expert in youth and family ministry, shares his experience with caring conversation in this way:

“Caring conversation indicates an interest in others – their hurts, their joys, their concerns and dreams, their needs and wants, their values and faith. Jesus exhibits such conversational style when he meets people in homes, on the road on his journeys, or when questioning or being questioned by religious leaders.

A delightful exercise to do with adults, youth, or in a cross-generational group is to ask, “Where is the holy ground of your lives?” that is, “Where do you have those conversations where memorable, intimate dialogue takes place – conversation that conveys the peace, hope and faith that God gives to your life?” The answers vary, but many are common from group to group: in the car, at the dinner table, tucking a child into bed, while doing chores, or while on vacation. The language of “holy ground” implies a recognized religious site that people routinely visit – churches, shrines, temples, mosques, and so on. But, when people reflect on their own life stories, they realize that their lives are holy ground. This has biblical precedent. Moses, for example, encountered God in a burning bush far from recognized religious sites while tending to his daily work.

An exercise such as the one described above helps people identify how God has blessed their lives with the precious ground of caring conversation. It is important for people not only to name these occasions but also to claim these times and places as their own and as a particular gift from God.

Finally, because it is precious, memorable, God-given ground, people need to find their way back to it. It is not enough for people to claim and name their holy ground; they need to find their way back to this holy ground again and again. People need a road map to help them remember how they got there in the past and figure out how to return in the future. It is not uncommon for people to remember and long for wonderful family occasions that fostered memorable conversations, but the road map that got them there has been lost as the family travels the highway of busy schedules and numerous obligations.

We regularly tucked our children into bed when they were little, but let go of that routine as they grew. Jeremy helped his dad get back to that routine a number of years ago. One night, after committee meetings in the congregation, dad came home bone tired and plopped down in his favorite chair. He thought everyone was asleep, but from a distance he heard his son’s familiar voice calling out, “Isn’t someone going to lie down with me?” What an opportunity to be reminded of how important that moment is, no matter what the age of the child. The memory of Jeremy’s voice and pleading question has served as a treasured roadmap kept for

constant reference, and through such mental recall, dad found his way back again and again to the holy ground of parent-child conversation.

Holy ground can easily be lost. Most families remember those times and locations in their lives that are no longer visited. Many family members might say, “We used to do that. Why don’t we do that anymore?” Constant vigilance is needed to keep households connected to the holy ground of their lives. Congregations attentive to the importance of such conversational space can do much to help families identify the importance of such space and can help them revisit these places to facilitate meaningful, caring conversation.”

Family Devotions

Family devotions are a challenge for most households. They can easily be abandoned or perceived as regrettable failures. Families need a variety of models and lots of encouragement in this area. Luther’s four-part outline for a devotional use of the *Small Catechism* is still of help today. When studying the Bible or Catechism, consider asking the following questions:

1. Instruction: What do I learn from this passage?
2. Thanksgiving: What do I want to thank God for in this reading?
3. Confession: What does this passage remind me that I have neglected, forgotten, or done or thought that I regret?
4. What do I want to include in my prayers that emerged from the first three questions? Who and what other concerns do I want to include in my prayers?

This outline is a guide, not a set of restrictions. With this and other models, families can have options for a free and relaxing devotional life, not one which is forced and labored. Many families and individuals need help with the language of prayer and faith. A devotional life is first and foremost a kind of consciousness and way of life, not a formula. Children very naturally use such language until they are socialized to learn that that is something only done “at church” and preferably by experts (like pastors and catechists). We need to remember that language shapes our consciousness and vice versa.

Strategically, perhaps the best place to begin a focus on family devotions is through simple table graces and bedtime prayers. Both can be taught in the congregation with encouragement for use in the home. Both fit into the rhythm of our daily lives and are fitting ways to connect with a gracious God who provides for our daily needs and who never slumbers nor sleeps.

Christians benefit from praying the faith, not just being schooled in the faith. Baptismal education in the congregation can do a number of things to help our homes be prayerful and reflective centers of the word of God.

1. Use table graces that households can take home for use
2. Offer classes that take the wisdom of the faith and transform it into prayers, table graces, and blessings for different occasions.
3. Teach families how to bring prayer, hymn singing, scripture reading, and blessings into the home.
4. Teach households how to use our worship books or familiar liturgies for devotions in the home. There are numerous possibilities, most of which are unknown to our families.

Family Service Projects

In an age aware of holistic approaches to life, we need to acknowledge that we do not just believe our way into action but act our way into believing. Nor do we just feel our way into behaviors but our behaviors lead us to certain feelings. Likewise, our service of others embodies the Word of God we pray, hear, and converse. (see James 2:18). Christian service is our Lord's definition of faithful leadership (Luke 22:26). In 1 John it is assumed that if one loves God who we have not seen, then we certainly will love our neighbor who we have seen (5:20-21).

The Effective Christian Education study conducted by the Search Institute in the United States concluded that adults with a more mature faith (stronger sense of a gracious God in their lives and a desire to serve their neighbor) tended to be those who could remember doing acts of service with their parents when they were young. What we hear is often lost to memory. What we do that serves our neighbor is often etched in our memories with the power to edify faith. With the foundation of Christian convictions, acts of loving service *bring home* the power and beauty of the Christian life.

It is not uncommon for youth groups to do acts of service as part of Christian nurture. Such youth activities have value in their own right. Intergenerational servanthood fosters storytelling and laughter that delights in a communal memory of faith active in love.

In our cultures dominated by things, power, and various status symbols, let the lives of people be enriched by the journey of faith that touches other lives, blesses the earth, and leaves a legacy of faith, hope, and love in Christ Jesus.

Family Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions are those patterns of behavior that can be expected to occur on a routine basis (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal, or annual). Aunt Ingrid making breakfast on Sunday morning could be a family tradition. Going to church together most every Sunday, saying good-bye to one another with a hug and kiss, having devotions, celebrating holidays with friends or family, or helping others in need on a regular basis are all examples of family rituals and traditions.

The expectation that these events will happen with some regularity makes them family traditions; how the traditions are lived out gives us the rituals. The consciousness of these traditions and rituals conveys family values, commitments and beliefs.

A Christian education program can help homes identify the routines that shape their family values, commitments, and beliefs. It can help families develop traditions and ritual patterns in a conscious way that are consistent with their professed values, commitments and beliefs. Creating family traditions and ritual patterns is a delightful intergenerational event for both congregation and home. Here are a few examples:

1. An intergenerational event can assist families to create seasonal traditions and rituals. Families can decide to use certain table graces, special greetings, blessing, songs, decorations, and other rituals as part of seasonal celebrations.
2. A service project can be planned that helps the season be a hope-filled one for others.
3. Help families look at how they begin and/or end the day together. A parent who discovers that his or her first greeting on most mornings is, "You're late!" might want to find another way to start the day. Ending the day with a prayer or a blessing expresses the forgiving and renewing power of the gospel.

Whatever we do in our educational ministry, our goal is to nurture and awaken the faith of the baptized children of God. With this primary goal in mind, we will want to explore ways for children and household to be blessed by caring conversations, devotions, service projects and rituals and traditions. In this way, our youth will be enriched by homes – their own as well as those of others – that nurture and awaken faith.

Marjorie J. Thompson, ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), with a long-standing interest in the area of spiritual formation, argues in her book “Family, The Forming Center”, that families are, by virtue of their social function, primary arenas for personal and spiritual formation. She stresses that if churches desire family formation to be explicitly Christian, they bear responsibility for helping families learn intentional Christian practices in the home, since the absence of such practices can scarcely be compensated for by the larger church.

In her Conclusions, Marjorie J. Thompson writes:

“My hope is not to burden the family with more things to do in an already crowded and stressful life. It is, rather, to help the family of faith see and understand its spiritual vocation. It is to encourage families to take heart from the simple truth that the Christian spiritual life can be lived within the structures of ordinary family life and need not be sought in ascetic feats, lengthy retreats, or solely in the activities of the local congregation. Families of faith can make faithful choices about their use of time, they can be intentional about structuring spiritual practices in the home, and they can view the ordinary events of life together as windows onto Gods abundant grace.

One of the most serious tasks of the church at large is to help its member families to be the body of Christ within the home – to become settings where unconditional love, affirmation, challenge to accountability, and forgiveness are known; to learn and share rituals, symbols, and stories of faith; to recognize and claim their special gifts and mission in the world. Then, as particular expressions of the all-inclusive family of God, church families become redeeming communities and thus sacraments of God’s grace. Over two centuries ago Jonathan Edwards identified the importance of the family in faith development:

Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by his rule. And family education and order are some of the chief mains of grace. If these fail, all other means are likely to prove ineffectual. If these are duly maintained, all the means of grace will be likely to prosper and be successful.

May we find in these words both challenge and courage to join the joyful task of giving ourselves fully to God in the fabric of everyday life, there to be met by the grace that alone draws our final destiny to Christ.”

Literature

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