

# Rethinking Christian Education

# FAITH FORMATION

## Called to Be Church

Baptism is a very big deal. In that radical act of being marked and set apart, we are joined to the Body of Christ, the church. This lifelong journey that begins in baptism challenges us to rethink and reexamine Christian education and what it means to be “formed in faith.” For too long we’ve had a vague sense that parish education is about religious information and acquired knowledge and we’ve often separated it from worship. Teaching the bible stories and learning the catechism are important baptismal promises. But when religious education becomes too goal-oriented and curriculum-conscious, we easily lose sight of the larger goal – hearing, seeing, being, tasting and touching God’s presence. Being sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever—grafted into the body of Christ—is much more than “Christian education.”



Faith formation is seeing ourselves as part of the faith story and knowing ourselves as part of the Body of Christ. To begin, we invite a return to the sources of the church’s life, the means of grace. Celebrating the sacramental life of the church, gathering together around the font and the table, hearing, reading, singing the weekly texts, all within the rich framework of the seasons and cycles of the church

year—form the foundation on which to build. Whether we’re planning worship, confirmation, adult education, or weekly sessions of Sunday School, the goal is a rich and multi-layered faith enabling us to encounter God in each other and in all of life.



Julie K. Ageson  
Director of the Resource Center, Eastern ND Synod  
Coordinator, ELCA Resource Centers

❖ **FAITH FORMATION** As part of a recent study leave, I spent some time learning about the Orthodox Church. Among the many aspects of Orthodoxy we explored were differences in the ways American Christians understand “parish education.”



In contrast to an American Protestant notion of Christian education as a way to teach religious information, Orthodoxy has emphasized ritual and worship. Faith formed in worship and ritual as a way of life is fundamental for Orthodox Christians. Many Protestant and Catholic Christians have come to understand Christian education similarly.

When the worship life and the educational life of a congregation are understood as separate entities, children and adults cannot see and make connections between what they learn, why they worship, and how they live a life of faith.

❖ **PRIMARY GOAL** At the heart of the matter is encounter with the living God. How does this encounter take place? How does it nourish and sustain faith? If, as John Westerhoff claims, “The present time is a thirsty one, looking for words that do not lie . . . and symbols that can be relied upon,” the church must share boldly its words and its symbols. The lifelong process of making connections between what we learn, why we worship, and how we live a life of faith is what it means to be the Body of Christ, the church.



❖ **WHAT ARE WE HOPING FOR?** My daughters are now away from home. They are each discovering and rediscovering for themselves what

Education in the church is more about faith formation than religious information. Jesus blessed children and taught adults. Rituals and habits of worship need to be connected to exploring texts and biblical stories. This implies a shift from schoolroom structure to participation in the community of faith.

this journey of life and faith is about. They ask hard and penetrating questions. They grew up in a household where “God-talk” was an everyday occurrence. They worshiped, went to Sunday School and confirmation, did service projects, went to youth gatherings. Even so, they wrestle with the faith and they have doubts. I, their mother, am a middle-

aged Christian whose life has been characterized by questions of faith. Just when I think I’ve figured it out, I’m introduced to a devout Muslim family and my neat answers must be reexamined in light of another way of seeing God.

Growing up Lutheran gave me an identity but it also gave me the freedom to question and continue to discover and rediscover all the ways God is revealed to us. Faith formation is about ongoing wrestling with God. What we are hoping for is that it will be compelling and engaging, capturing our energy and our imaginations, so that we become God-bearers, little Christs.

The following categories help distinguish different ways of thinking about faith formation. They take into account differing learning styles. In many cases, they intersect and overlap. By categorizing them in this way, we hope to stimulate some creative thinking. Hopefully, we'll glean the best from each in order to provide a rich mix of ways to live the faith we proclaim, to "be church."

## LITURGY and LEARNING

Worship is the cornerstone of Christian life and learning. Liturgy and learning is about integrating worship and education. Several years ago, John Westerhoff, Professor of Religion and Education at Duke University, wrote a classic work called *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Its straight-forward title resonated among Christians in the mid-70's no less than it does today. Acknowledging that traditional methods for teaching the faith were not as effective as they may once have been, Westerhoff proposed an alternative way of thinking about religious education. Cautioning against latching onto every new suggestion or idea and against simply rearranging or renaming Sunday School, Westerhoff suggested a new framework: the church's liturgy is the principle setting for sustaining and transmitting the faith from one generation to another.

Faith is formed by encounter with the living God in the word (scripture), in the sacraments (liturgy), and in life together (being church). Grafting children and adults into Christian community at key sacramental junctures of family life is important.

Under the category of "liturgy and learning," schoolroom structure in Christian education may be replaced or at least augmented with participation in the community of faith. Two basic premises undergird this approach: worship is the central task of Christians and the power of ritual forms and transforms. Christian formation and transformation are directly related to the proclamation and enactment of Christian faith. So the church's liturgy—its worship life—sustains and transmits the faith from one generation to another.





A congregation's worship life defines it as a community of faith. In their book, ***Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle***, John Westerhoff and William Willimon organize their approach in this way: they take the essential acts of the church and suggest ways of celebrating these acts so that they become nourishing, sustaining anchors of faith. In other words, the liturgy of life forms the basis for learning in the church. The whole span of life, from birth to death, is covered as the liturgy speaks to the landmark points in an individual's or a family's life.

This is a radically different way for "doing education" in the church. It takes seriously differing learning styles. It places worship at the heart of Christian life and learning. It acknowledges the wholeness of the liturgy, the way the liturgy forms Christians. For a detailed description of the shape of such an approach, see ***Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle***. A Lutheran introduction to the catechumenate and the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults offer similar models for thinking about worship-led education.

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

If encounter with the living God is our primary goal, experiential learning will be part of every approach. Experiencing the stories of God and participating in ritual and worship are modeled particularly well in the work of Sofia Cavalletti, a Roman Catholic biblical scholar and teacher of young children, and Gianna Gobbi, a Montessori educator. Through their collaboration, a way of teaching children to live a life "hidden with God" came to be called **Catechesis of the Good Shepherd**. Through a simple pattern of teaching the biblical stories, children are invited into biblical stories through ritual and play. The primary focus is encounter with the mystery of God in liturgy, in scripture, and in life. Cavalletti developed a second pattern for older children called **The Vine and the Branches**. These two approaches are both simple and profound. We have additional information in the resource center.

Opening up the richness of the biblical texts and stories is central. This means learning to read and to hear texts on both the DESCRIPTIVE and the SYMBOLIC levels—"immunizing" both children and adults against literal interpretations of scripture.



The work of Jerome Berryman in his experiential approach to faith formation is called **Godly Play**. It follows the same principles as Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and the Vine and the Branches. Scripture and ritual are central, using a careful telling of scriptural stories and engaging story figures and a variety of creative activities to encourage children to explore faith questions. Preview units and other resources are available in the center.

## INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

Another way to shape faith formation is through intergenerational and family-based learning. This approach takes seriously the promises made in baptism, that radical act of parents but the equally radical act of the church. It maintains that it is not acceptable for adults and children to go separate ways, children to Sunday School, adults to worship. It calls for teachers and faith mentors of all ages. And it assumes the attention and care of the entire community of faith to shape children and form faith. The church must be a “faith village” where parents and grandparents and others assume major responsibility for faith formation.

Encounter with the living God is hearing, seeing, being, tasting, touching God’s presence in one another, in mutual receiving and learning, in mutual announcing and listening—all ages learning and worshipping together.



This approach to faith formation is modeled by the YOUTH AND FAMILY INSTITUTE, FAITH INKUBATORS, and other intergenerational ministry models.



❖ **Youth and Family Institute** identifies nine stages of life for children including baptism, teaching a child to pray, bringing a preschooler to church school, joining worship in the early elementary years, receiving a Bible, receiving first communion, teen confirmation, witness and service as teenagers, and vocational exploration in high school. Four emphases form the basis for this approach:

conversation at home, family devotions, family service projects among generations, family rituals and traditions.

❖ **Faith Inkubators** supports the same model. Congregations following this approach work to help parents become primary faith mentors for their children. They've developed "Total Family Sunday School," small groups of children and adults who worship, learn, serve, and create together. Confirmation is led by both pastors and mentors, again in small groups with an emphasis on modeling the faith and creating faith mentors. In "Faith Stepping Stones," Faith Inkubators encourages rites of passage in worship with parental involvement: baptism, entry into Sunday School, first Bible, first communion, confirmation, small group ministry in high school, graduation.

## WORKSHOP ROTATION MODEL

Another way of thinking about faith formation that incorporates some of the approaches described above is the workshop rotation model. This model emphasizes development of biblical stories through

multi-dimensional teaching. Each week children rotate into a different workshop, studying the same biblical story for several weeks. This approach emphasizes variety and specialization on the part of teachers. It can be intergenerational and experiential. And it can incorporate ritual and worship. Workshops are also called "doors," "centers," and "adventure rooms."

They include art, audio and video resources, puppetry and drama, bible skills and games, music, and computers. Additional information is available from the resource center.



# CURRICULA

Living the liturgy means making connections between baptism as Christian initiation and the sacrament of belonging, eucharist as the sacrament of nurture that forms us for discipleship, and the word which identifies and nourishes us. God comes to us through these means of grace.

**The curriculum is God and God's people gathered together at a certain place and time in history.** The promises made at baptism include bringing

children to worship, teaching them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments.

As they grow, we promise to place in their hands the holy words, the scriptures. For Lutherans,

Luther's Small Catechism and the Bible are primary sources. How we use this "curricula" is

open for discussion. The lifelong process of making connections between what we learn,

why we worship, and how we live a life of faith is worthy of our best thinking and planning.

Information and preview copies of the following curricula are available from the resource center:



- + Lectionary-based Curricula
- + Faith Stepping Stones and Total Family Sunday School
- + Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle
- + Teaching Them to Observe: A Plan for Christian Formation
- + Catechesis of the Good Shepherd/Vine and the Branches
- + Intergenerational Learning and Mentoring
- + The Child in Our Hands
- + Sacramental Model
- + Workshop Rotation Model

# RESOURCES

The following resources are primary for rethinking Christian education and faith formation.

- **Helping Children Find God** by Helen Oppenheimer
- **Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church** by Maria Harris
- **Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle** by John Westerhoff and William Willimon
- **Come Unto Me: Rethinking the Sacraments for Children** by Elizabeth Caldwell
- **The Religious Potential of the Child** by Sofia Cavalletti
- **Building God's People** by John Westerhoff
- **Sharing Our Biblical Story: A Guide to Using Liturgical Readings as the Core of Church and Family Education** by Joseph P. Russell
- **The Good Shepherd and the Child** by Sofia Cavalletti
- **Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith** by John Westerhoff
- **Helping Your Child Discover Faith** by Delia Touchton Halverson
- **Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Christian Education** by Jerome Berryman
- **To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration** by Gertrud Mueller Nelson



**Julie K. Ageson**

Director of the Resource Center, Eastern ND Synod

Coordinator, ELCA Resource Centers

Eastern North Dakota Synod

1703 32<sup>nd</sup> Avenue South • Fargo, ND 58103

701-232-3381 • 877-895-4598 • Fax 701-232-3180

[julie.ageson@ecunet.org](mailto:julie.ageson@ecunet.org)