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Finding faith tracks
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Study guide:

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Finding faith tracks

How families become fluent in the language of faith

By Robert C. Blezard

It's one of the pressing faith issues of our time: How do we pass on the traditions of our faith to a new generation that is culturally so different from their parents and grandparents? As with most challenges, it requires diligence, intentionality, patience and creativity.

Exercise 1: Your faith

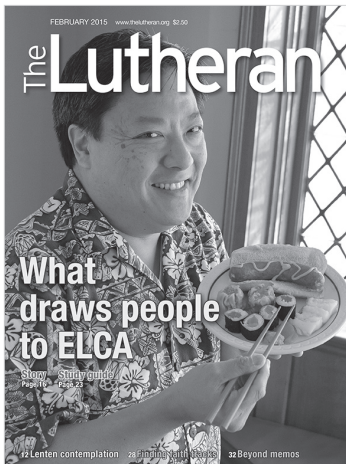
- Who or what laid the foundations for your faith?
- Is there a particular person—a relative, a Sunday school teacher, a pastor or a mentor—who helped you come to faith?
- What role did your church play?
- Were there books, TV shows or movies that were helpful?
- How did that transmission of faith fit the times in which you grew up?
- Would the same influences and approaches work on children today?

Exercise 2: Key issues

- In your opinion, how well is our church and culture doing in passing the faith along to our children? On what do you base your assessment? What are your observations?
- As we think about passing on the faith, what is at stake for our church? For our children? For our culture?
- If things don't change, what will be the consequences?

Exercise 3: Whose job is it?

- Everyone agrees that it's important to teach faith to our children, but who bears the primary responsibility for doing so? Does it lie with parents and family or with the church they attend?
- If families, are parents typically equipped and prepared to do the job?
- How can congregations do better in helping families teach their children faith?
- If the responsibility lies primarily with congregations, how can pastors and Christian educators do better?



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- If parents and congregations share the responsibility, how can they work together to be more effective?

Exercise 4: Faith knowledge

When you think of passing on the faith, what elements come to mind? Beginning with the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, make a list of the things a child (or any new Christian) really ought to know about the faith. When done, discuss:

- How do the items relate to one another?
- How do they open the door to deeper faith?
- Now rank them in order of importance. Which items are absolutely essential?

Exercise 5: Faith formation

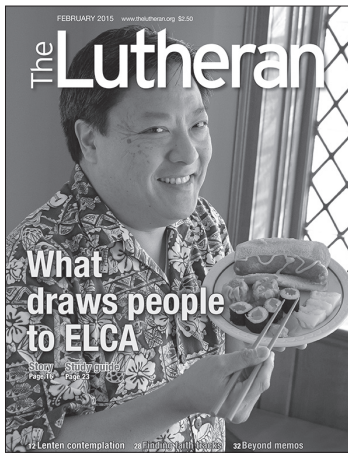
- What is the difference between faith learning and faith formation?
- Does faith learning necessarily lead to faith formation?
- Of the two which is more important? Why?
- Can you have faith formation without faith learning?
- How has faith learning and faith formation intertwined in your life?
- How can a wise congregational leader keep the two in optimum balance?
- When it comes to passing on the faith to a new generation, what's the best balance and approach?

Exercise 6: Faith practices

- What is the difference between learning about prayer and actually praying? Between reading a book about liturgy and going to a worship service?
- What faith practices, or disciplines, have you engaged in? How regularly?
- What do your faith practices mean to you? How have they helped you grow in faith?
- How can you give the children in your life or church an appreciation for faith practices? Why is it important?

Exercise 7: Goals

Does your congregation have an explicit, written statement of philosophy or mission that guides its efforts in Christian education? If so, examine it closely



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and then discuss:

- Does the statement address the learning and faith formation needs of both children and adults?
- Is it broad enough to give leaders and learners freedom to be creative, to adapt and to grow?
- Is it focused enough to give them clear objectives?
- Does it address faith learning and faith formation outside of church as well as inside?

If your congregation does not have such a statement, devise one that would meet the needs and desired outcomes for the 21st century. Give it to your pastor or congregational council for possible implementation.

Exercise 8: Bible stories

- What are your favorite Bible stories?
- What role did they play in your faith development?
- How important are they to your faith now?
- When and how did you learn them?
- Are Bible stories taught the same way to today's children?
- How can you, in your family role, help teach Bible stories to children? In your role as a church leader?



SHUTTERSTOCK

Finding faith tracks

How families become fluent in the language of faith

By Elizabeth Morgenstern Paul

“Train!” I exclaim, pointing at the tracks.

Driving down the road with my 5-year-old son, I often find myself pointing out the trains we pass. Since he was born he, like his dad, has loved trains. As a result, I can name all the characters of *Thomas the Tank Engine* and *Chuggington*. I know the best locations for spotting trains in the Twin Cities, and I’ve been to just about every train museum in Minnesota and its surrounding states.

Knowing my son’s love for trains, I learn about them, talk with him

about them, and look for places to point them out. I don’t want him to miss these sightings. But I have to wonder: Do I point out God sightings in our world as often as I do trains?

No matter whether they are interested in trains, sports, music, horses, fashion or any of the other countless possibilities, we parents learn, teach and interact with our children, becoming fluent in the language of their interests. Do we spend just as much time becoming fluent in the language of faith?

When I think about what I want

my son to have in his heart when he grows up, I could take or leave trains. What I really want him to have is a relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. I want him to know that God’s story is important and that he is part of it. I want him to experience God’s grace and know God’s love. I want him to have a prayer life, a faith life, a love of God.

I want him to know he is a child of God, loved and forgiven, named and claimed.

If I’m so quick to take up my son’s interests, perhaps I should take just as much time and effort to learn to see God’s work in our lives. After all, we have stories to read, knowledge to share and many opportunities for fascinating conversations around faith with our children. The truth is that dropping our children off at Sunday school isn’t enough. They need to worship with us. They need to see us praying. They need to hear the Bible stories in our voices. And they need to know how we articulate our faith, how we answer hard questions and why all of this “stuff” is so important.

Are we pointing out the God sightings in our lives?

It might seem daunting at first, but it’s not that different from pointing out trains. When faith is woven into our everyday lives, God becomes familiar to us. God becomes known to our kids through regular interactions with the divine. So how do we weave a thread of faith into our daily lives?

To begin we must be comfortable talking about faith with our children.

Talking about faith honestly doesn’t mean you have all the answers. “I don’t know” is a wonderful answer to any child’s question, especially when followed by “let’s figure it out together.” When talking about trains with my son, I don’t

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know all the answers. It's the same with God.

Likewise, we can point out where God answers our prayers and where God works in our world. If you have trouble seeing it yourself, ask your kids where they saw God today. Often the answers are inspiring and moving.

When you are in the car, ask your children about Sunday school or a worship service. Or tell a story about Jesus. Say a prayer for the ambulance that passes by.

Pray before meals and at bedtime. At the dinner table, share your "blessings" and "burdens" as a family—parts of your day that were wonderful and things that challenged you.

Read a Bible story at bedtime. Give your child a baptismal blessing each night: "(Child's name), child of God, Jesus loves you and so do I." Ask your children for prayer requests, and then pray them together.

These don't take much time, but parents need to be willing to take the lead. Start the habits of faith in your children and in yourself. Point to God in your lives. Welcome our Lord as part of daily, family life, not just during Sunday morning worship.

What relationship do you want your children to have with God when they grow up? That is the relationship we must model now. Trains go where their tracks lead. We lay the tracks for our child's faith life. So where are you leading them? □



Author bio:

Paul is a director of Christian education and mother of two living in Minnesota.



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Favorite family faith resources

Though parents are the primary people to pass faith on to their children, they aren't asked to do it alone. Numerous resources can help. The first place to start is with your congregation. What kind of take-home materials can it provide that relate to Sunday school or worship each week? What kind of family activities can it lead or suggest to spark faith conversations?

Beyond your congregation, there are a host of good books and free resources. Here are some of my favorites:

- *Vibrant Faith@Home* (www.vibrantfaithathome.org): Family devotions, conversations, prayers and interactive ideas for families to talk and learn about

God together. Great options for seasons, life events, holidays and everyday life.

- *The Spark Story Bible* (<http://wearesparkhouse.org/kids/spark/bibles>): A good children's Bible helps introduce the Scriptures in narrative and accessible ways. A favorite is the Spark Story Bible, which chooses great stories to share and includes bright, colorful illustrations.

- *Family Faith Walks* (www.cph.org/p-411-family-faith-walks.aspx): This book, by Concordia Publishing House, has a year full of walks that your family can do with tie-ins to faith. It's great for a kinesthetic learner or if you are an active family together.

Elizabeth Morgenstern Paul

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