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(page 28)

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Study guide:

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Let's raise disciples

We should allow children to model Christ for us too

By Robert C. Blezard

It's our primary job as parents, mentors and mature Christians to raise our young children in the faith so they will grow up knowing the love of God, the freedom of a Christian, and the security and joy of Christian community. Changes in our wider culture have made this more challenging in recent years. But with awareness, creativity and hard work, we can certainly do better.

Exercise 1: Your upbringing

- Take turns discussing: What is your earliest memory of church life?
- What three words best describe your experience of church as a child?
- What elements of church were the most fun? Why?
- What aspects were not fun? Why?
- Did your church experience get more enjoyable or less enjoyable as you grew older? Why?
- Describe your most memorable church experience when you were a youth.
- How did maturing into an adult change your faith? Was it for the better?
- As a child growing into a youth, and then adulthood, what could have made your church experience better?

Exercise 2: Their upbringing

- How would you describe the church experience of children in your congregation today?
- In what ways is it different from when you were a child? Is it for the better or worse?
- What influences from the wider culture are most responsible for changing the experience of church for today's youth versus when you were young?
- What influences from church culture are most responsible?
- Which bears greater responsibility: a wider culture that changes rapidly for youth or a church culture that does not change rapidly enough for our youth?
- What can we do about it?



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continued

Exercise 3: By the numbers

- How many youth and children attend worship at your church?
- What percentage of the worshipers do they comprise?
- How many attend Sunday school and youth activities?
- How much higher or lower are those figures than 10 years ago, 25 years ago or 50 years ago?
- The No. 1 need or goal at many congregations is bringing more children and youth into the life of the church. How would you rank the priority of that need or goal in your congregation? How has that need/goal been expressed?
- What evidence suggests that your congregation is committed to children and youth?
- How could you do better?

Exercise 4: Shh!

- Children are notoriously wiggly, and they sometimes use their “outside voice” when an “inside voice” is required. How does your congregation respond to wiggly, boisterous children?
- Does your congregation expect children to behave like adults—sit quietly and be still? Is this realistic?
- Brainstorm 10 creative ways that your worship service could provide an opportunity for children to be wiggly and boisterous (and maybe for grown-ups too).
- How does your congregation respond to parents of wiggly, boisterous children? Is the response done in a way that honors families and encourages parents to bring their children back?
- What are alternatives to scowling and dirty looks?
- Brainstorm five ways your congregation can make worship more “family friendly.”

Exercise 5: Worship experience

Ask each member of the study group to work individually and rate the overall kid friendliness of your congregation's worship on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “not at all” and 10 being “extremely,” and write the number on a piece of paper.

Then ask them to rate the kid friendliness of these specific parts of worship: The music, hymns, prayers, sermon, eucharist and overall character. (If there is more than one service, rate each one and discuss later why there may be different scores for each.)



Study guide: **Let's raise disciples**

continued

Now ask each to share their ratings and the reasoning behind them. Then discuss:

- What specific qualities make a worship experience kid friendly? What qualities make them kid unfriendly?
- How much work does your congregation have to do? How can you change the worship culture?

Exercise 6: Listen

What do your congregation's children like or dislike about church? Do you know? Have you asked them?

Convene a panel of children and youth (maybe different ages in different sessions) and ask them to describe their experience of church life. What things are best? Good? So-so? Not so good? Awful? What changes would make it more enjoyable? More meaningful? More enriching? Listen deeply (and without judgment) to their stories, ideas and dreams.

When done, compile a report or action plan for your pastor, congregation council or youth committee.

Exercise 7: Discipleship

In the Great Commission, Jesus commands the apostles to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). What qualities identify a person as a disciple? Separate into groups of three or four and ask each to come up with a "job description" for a disciple.

- Discuss, compare and contrast your definitions.
- What does good discipleship look like for an adult?
- What does discipleship mean for a child?
- How can your congregation do a better job of raising up adult disciples? Child and youth disciples?

Exercise 8: Faith formation

Sunday school used to be the primary means by which a congregation would train, educate and equip people to be disciples. Discuss:

- How has Sunday school changed? Why?
- How has Christian education as a whole changed? Why?
- In the absence of Sunday school classes and traditional Christian education offerings, how are people learning about the faith?
- What resources or tools are readily available for self-study, family learning or exploration in informal small groups?

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continued

- How well does your congregation encourage and equip individuals or families for self-learning?
- What kind of books, tapes, videos and other resources are offered in the congregation's library or education center? Are they adequate? What else is needed?
- How could your congregational website be better used as a resource for spiritual growth? What materials would assist parents in developing faith in their children and family?
- How well does your congregation use social media to engage and equip youth and develop them in the faith? How could it do better?

For action: Ask experts

Elementary schoolteachers are masters at engaging children. They know how to mix into a program or experience just the right balance of fun and work, movement and stillness, noise and silence, energy and quiet in order to keep children involved and learning.

Invite the schoolteachers of your congregation or community to review all aspects of your church life—worship, education, fellowship, etc.—and suggest changes, innovations or techniques that would engage the children more effectively.

Let's raise disciples

We should allow children to model Christ for us too

Text by Amy Lindeman Allen Illustrations by Fran Lee

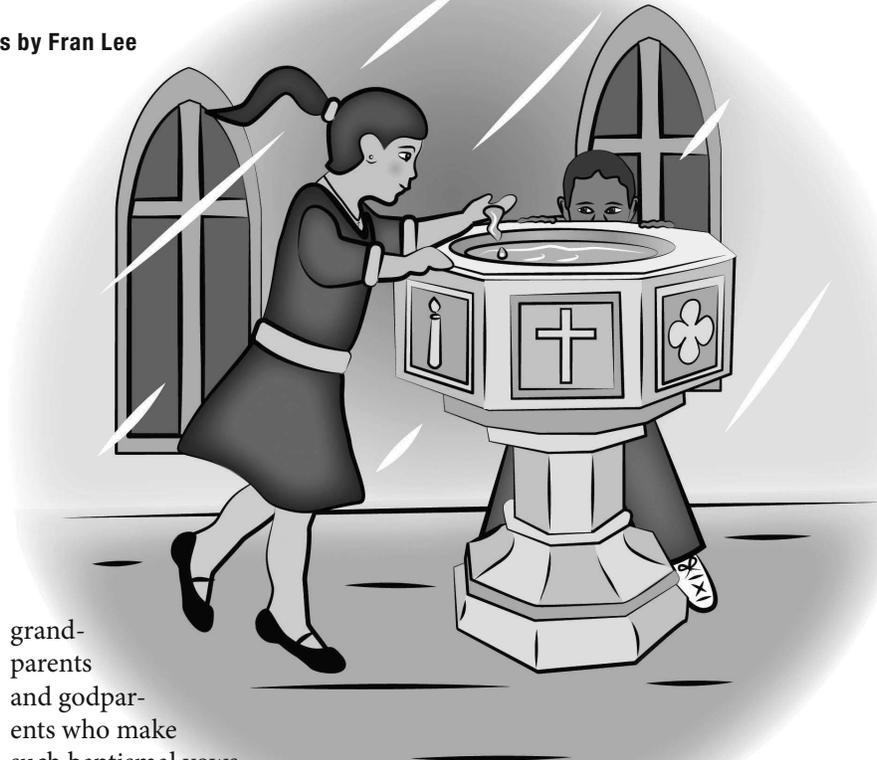
Christian parents and caregivers have the difficult and blessed task of raising disciples. When our children are baptized as infants, we profess our belief in their full and complete membership in the body of Christ *from the start*.

We also promise to teach and model what that means: to “bring them to the word of God and the holy supper, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer ...” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 228).

Secular parenting calls this “being the example.” If you want your child to read, let them see you read; to exercise, let them see you exercise; and so on. The apostle Paul called it imitating Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). In either case, we know that children learn by imitating the adults in their lives.

As both a pastor and parent, I try to model discipleship. My children (7, 4 and 7 months) sit in the front pew with me every Sunday, not to mention all of the other fellowship and service opportunities that bring us to church. The two older girls know when to sit and stand, how to fold their hands, and they even use fancy church words like “altar” and “hymnal.” They have been communing since they first reached for the bread, and the baby will too. When the bread and wine are lifted, I exclaim, “There’s Jesus!” and my children know he is present in their lives.

But I’m not unique. Most parents,



grand-parents and godparents who make such baptismal vows

really mean them. We tell our children about Jesus, take them to church and teach them to pray. We sing them songs like “Jesus Loves the Little Children” and, at our best, model this faithfulness in our lives.

At the risk of self-congratulation, until recently I felt I’d done a pretty good job teaching my young disciples. Then one morning as I was dressing my then 2-year-old for church, my false confidence came crashing down. My dear child parroted my use of the word “church,” adding with all due severity, “*Quiet voice!*”

An example of decorum

Somewhere along the way the intended message had been lost. Despite my careful planning and deliberate instructions, my toddler was learning that church was about

being quiet rather than about being the body of Christ. And, I’m ashamed to admit, I know how it happened—after all, *we are* the example.

The sitting and standing, the folded hands and impromptu explanations of the real presence come at a cost. In between this “good” church behavior are whispered lectures, confiscated toys and tottering toddlers on both hips. Sometimes we only make it to the “right” position in time for the last petition of a prayer. And that’s OK because we’re learning.

But from our place in the front, where the children can actually see what’s going on, I’ve also received a fair number of “looks.” After a few well-intentioned reminders about the nursery and cry room when my second child hit the toddler phase, I

became self-conscious.

My priorities morphed from my children and I living into our call to discipleship together to not letting them embarrass me. While I steadfastly refused to take my children to the nursery so they could worship, my tone changed. I became quicker to snap. Wary of every stray noise, I began reminding my girls frequently: “Shhh—quiet voice.” And they noticed.

Hearing my refrain in my daughter’s voice led to a double take. The other refrains that punctuated our life together matched my expectations. At school I encouraged, “Learn lots!” With friends I exclaimed, “Have fun!” But at church, with the mantra, “Shhh—quiet voice!” I muddied the waters.

Just as surely as school is centered on education, my children were experiencing church as a place that centers on silence and decorum, where they, with their eager voices and wiggly bodies, were more of an imposition than a part.

But Jesus says ...

This is a far cry from “Jesus loves the little children.” Nor is it what discipleship is about. Jesus isn’t concerned about decorum. He never hushed his disciples. But Jesus *does* reproach his disciples when they attempt to prevent a group of little children from approaching him.

Jesus reminds adults that our calling is not simply to teach kingdom behavior to children but to learn it from them too. To allow children to model Christ *for us*. For “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:17). So what if we listen to Jesus? What if we let our noisy, wiggly children be the example? I gave it a try.

When I listened to my children’s voices rather than silencing them, amid the giggles and chatter I learned that there’s more to wor-

ship than looking good to my neighbors or being able to hear the preacher. I learned about community.

A community in which, through bread and wine, Jesus dwells in my toddler’s tummy. A community that inspires my children to want to “share the peace even with the villains from their toys and TV shows. A community into which my 7-year-old is excited to invite displaced families through our congregation’s new shelter initiative. “Because,” as she reminded me, “every child should have a home.” But most of all, a baptismal community.

So I have a new refrain. These days as we enter worship, instead of pre-emptively shushing my children, I pause with them at the baptismal font, mark a cross on their foreheads and say, “Child of God, you are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of



Christ forever.”

And lest I forget, *they* remind me that I am too. □



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