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Study guide

Faithful families

By Robert C. Blezard

“We’re really like a family here at our church.” The comment captures how many Lutherans envision the individuals and families that make up their membership, and it also describes the mutual enrichment that takes place. Faith brings families together as church, church helps families to grow in faith, and growing families grow the church.

Exercise 1: Varieties of families

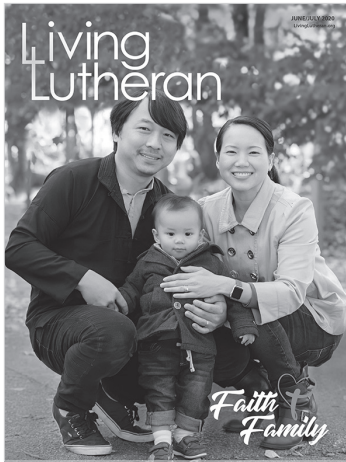
We have all sorts of families in our churches—those headed by single parents, by grandparents, by two moms or two dads, married heterosexual couples without children, LGBTQIA+ couples with no children, blended families, families whose members are of different races or ethnicities, unmarried adults who live together and more. Discuss:

- Perhaps using a church directory for assistance, how many different formulations of “family” can you identify in your church?
- How is today’s mixture of families in your church different from 20 years ago, in 2000? From 35 years ago, in 1985? From 50 years ago, in 1970?
- What factors have led to the wider variety of family structures and their widespread acceptance?
- What strength do these different family formulations bring to your congregation?
- How has your congregation adapted over the years to celebrate, welcome, support, encourage and incorporate different types of families? What more could it do?
- In what ways are you and your congregation enriched by a variety of families with different perspectives and life experiences? What have you learned?
- At the same time, what do all of these families have in common as followers of Christ, children of God and disciples on the same faith journey? What can you learn from one another?

Exercise 2: My “faith family tree”

Faith is a family matter for many Christians, with parents, grandparents and others leading the way to bring their cherished family members to the faith. What’s your family’s heritage?

Using a big sheet of paper, draw a family tree beginning with you and going back as far as you can remember. When done, as much as you are able, list the churches where your forebears worshiped. If they weren’t churchgoers or if you



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Study guide: **Faithful families** *continued*

don't know where they worshiped, describe their understanding of God and people as best you understand it. When done, discuss:

- What patterns do you see?
- How has faith been formed among generations?
- What has been the role of a congregation or the organized church?
- Who or what was instrumental in forming your faith?
- How has one generation to the next influenced the faith lives in your family?
- How is your generation influencing the faith of the next?
- How is your congregation influencing the faith?
- What conclusions can you draw about the role of family and church in passing on the faith?

Exercise 3: My church “home”

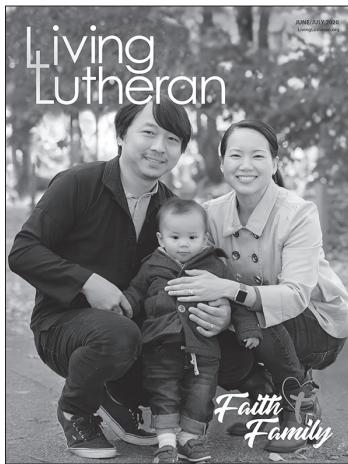
Many Christians describe their congregation as “home,” or “my home church.” Why is that? Do you? Let's explore.

The physical plant of your congregation is often the warehouse of memories and experiences in faith formation. Let's explore with a guided meditation. The study group leader can ask participants to close their eyes and take a mental “tour” of the building and grounds.

Going slowly, start with a good long visit to the sanctuary. Where are you in the space? What do you see? What do you feel? What do you smell? What do you hear?

Go through the rest of the building asking the same questions in the narthex, fellowship hall, meeting and classroom spaces, and finally outdoor structures and grounds. Then discuss:

- What are the strongest memories evoked?
- What parts of the building held special significance? Why?
- What objects or artifacts stood out as significant?
- What people did you remember? Why? Can you share?
- What experiences did you remember? Who was involved? Can you share?
- How has the congregation helped form you in the faith?
- Which is more important: The building or the people? Explain.
- In what way is your congregation “home”?
- Others also consider your congregation their “home.” In what ways does that make them like “family members”?
- How does your congregation encourage members to think of church as “home” and members like “family”? How could your congregation do better at this?



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Study guide: **Faithful families** *continued*

Exercise 4: Who am I?

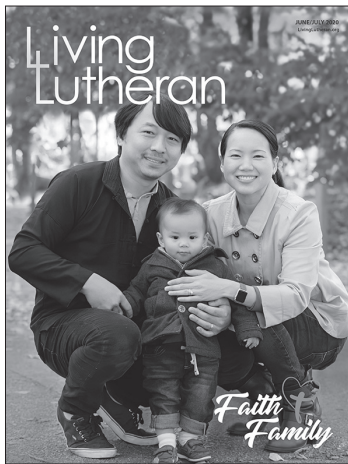
Jesus taught, “What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?” (Mark 8:37; The Message version).

Life is a journey of self discovery, and mystics through the ages have described faith formation as a process of discovering—and recovering!—our true identity in God. The Franciscan friar, teacher and writer Richard Rohr talks about the ego-driven “false self” or “small self” that is obsessed with such outward matters as appearance, education, jobs, wealth, success and so on. As we grow in discipleship and faith formation, we delve inward and find our true selves (see Rohr’s *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*; Jossey-Bass, 2013).

Evidence of how we as humans eagerly cling to our “small self” identity can be seen in the slogans and logos observed on bumper stickers and T-shirts. To build brand loyalty, organizations and businesses go all out to claim a piece of our identities, and we let them by wearing their logos, displaying their slogans and describing ourselves in their terms (I’m a Red Sox/Yankees/Cubs fan! I’m a Democrat/Republican/Independent! I’m a member of the ACLU/NRA! I’m an Apple user!). Or, look at how people describe themselves by their occupations or lifestyle choices (I’m a lawyer/chef/pastor. I’m a vegan/Paleo/carnivore. I’m a Harley/Chevrolet/BMW man. I’m a wine/bourbon/coffee snob). These “small self” identities aren’t necessarily harmful, and they don’t make you a bad person. But our true identity is much more than the sum of our affiliations and choices.

Faith formation is about stripping away our “small self” to find ourselves in God’s realm. The church teaches us that our primary identity, around which all else circulates, is expressed best at our baptism, when the pastor dips a finger in holy oil, makes two perpendicular lines on our forehead and says, “[Your name], child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 231).

- What does it mean to be a baptized child of God?
- Why does our identity as a child of God take precedence over all other claims to who we are?
- How long does it take to fully realize and live into our identities as children of God? How does it happen?
- Isn’t this the primary objective of faith formation—to help us live fully into our identity as children of God?
- Isn’t that the goal of every church activity and ministry (or, shouldn’t it be)? Explain.
- Which aspects of church life best help you to remember your true identity as a child of God?
- What do we experience as people of faith as we center our lives in faith and embrace our identity as children of God?



Study guide: **Faithful families** *continued*

- How has your church and church family helped you grow as a child of God? How is it continuing to do so?

Exercise 5: My church family

What is a family? Obviously it's more than just a matter of shared DNA and bloodlines. Explore:

What characteristics make a family a family? (Make a list on newsprint, whiteboard or paper. Give lots of time to make sure the list is as complete as it can be.) Then discuss:

- What do families do with and for one another?
- What does a family teach you?
- How do families handle stress?
- How do families create and maintain a sense of belonging?
- Are all families perfect? Explain.
- If a family is dysfunctional at times, is it still a family? Explain.
- What characteristics on your newsprint or whiteboard also apply to a congregational family?
- What other similarities are there between actual families and congregational families?

Exercise 6: Faith formation

One of the most important responsibilities of any congregation is to form people in the faith. But what is faith formation? One devout Lutheran quipped, "Faith formation is not just a newfangled term for Sunday school." Actually, there are a lot of ways to form people in the faith. It may involve Godly Play teaching tools for children, family camp and other outdoor ministry opportunities, youth groups where young men and women discuss their stress, or workshops led by a sexual health educator. But what is faith formation? Discuss:

- How would you describe faith formation? What does it mean to be formed in the faith? How does it happen?
- What is the role of Christian education in faith formation?
- What are the similarities between faith formation and Christian education? The differences?
- What other aspects of church life help form people in the faith?
- How does worship contribute to faith formation? Service? Small-group ministries? Giving? Community outreach? Others? Which is most important to you?
- Why is it important to form people in the faith? What happens when Christians are not formed in the faith?

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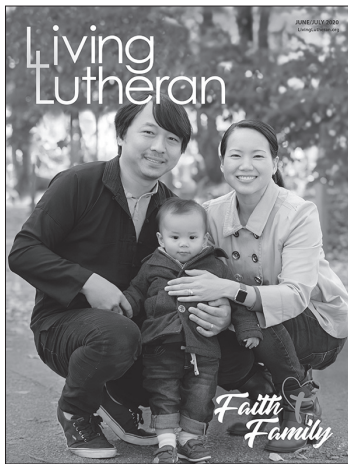
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Study guide: **Faithful families** *continued*

- How is faith formation related to discipleship?
- How were you first formed in the faith? What was the role of your congregation? What was the role of your family?
- What faith formation activities involved both you and family members?
- Who were the teachers who helped you from the congregation? From your family?
- Is Sunday school and faith formation only for children? Why or why not?
- For what reasons is it important that God's people continue to learn and grow in the faith?
- How does your congregation form people of all ages in the faith? Specifically, what programs, activities, etc.?
- How can your congregation do a better job? For action, draw up a faith formation improvement plan for your congregation and give it to your congregation council or pastor for consideration.
- End the exercise by coming up with a consensus definition: "Faith formation is"

Exercise 7: Make disciples, make people

The "Great Commandment" of Matthew 28:18-20a declares: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'"

- What is the difference between a churchgoer and a disciple? The similarities?
- How would you describe a "disciple"? What are the characteristics of a disciple? Behaviors? Attitudes?
- Is being a good disciple the same thing as being a good human being? What are the differences and the overlaps?
- Is it primarily the family's role to help groom a person into a good human being? Why or why not? How do congregations help in this task?
- Is it primarily the congregation's role to help "make" a disciple? Why or why not? How do families assist in this task?
- Can you describe someone who is both a great disciple of Christ and a great human being? Do you know someone who is both? (Can you share?)
- Putting the two aspects of development together, how do congregations and families work together to help nourish excellent human beings?

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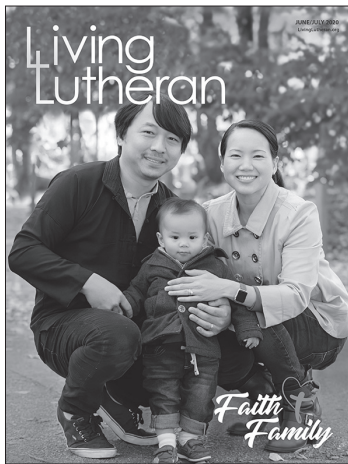
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Study guide: **Faithful families** *continued*

Exercise 8: Family letters

What does your faith family mean to you? As an exercise, invite your study group to write a letter “home” to your faith family using one of several suggested prompts. But first, the rules:

Imagine you are a child away at church camp and writing a letter to your faith family back in the congregation.

Write the letter in print, not script, to slow down your thoughts and access more of your child brain.

To avoid self-censoring or overthinking, keep the pen or pencil moving ... not stopping for more than a second or two.

Keep time—five minutes or so. Have the timekeeper give a 30-second warning before ending.

Choose one of the prompts:

Dear Church Family: I miss you guys!

Dear Church Family: I’ll always remember

Dear Church Family: What I really appreciate about you is

Dear Church Family: Did I ever tell you

All done? Share if you dare! Have fun.

Questions for discussion

- The church serves God’s people emotionally, physically and spiritually. For instance, some congregations host 12-step meetings and organize support groups for people dealing with challenges. Your pastor and other staff members are usually available to talk through problems and suggest how to get help. Why is caring for people an essential task of the church? What ministries of your church accomplish this work? Can you share a time when the church helped you with a difficult personal problem?
- Does someone have to be a Christian in order to be a good person? How does being a Christian enrich or inform being a good person? Describe the responsibility churches have to make members both better Christians and better human beings. What ministries of your church accomplish this task? In what ways has your church helped you to be both a better Christian and a better person?
- Faith is a family affair for many Christians, with the faith being handed down from generation to generation and enriched by participation in a community of believers centered around a congregation. What is your family faith story? What were the people, experiences and congregations that helped you get to

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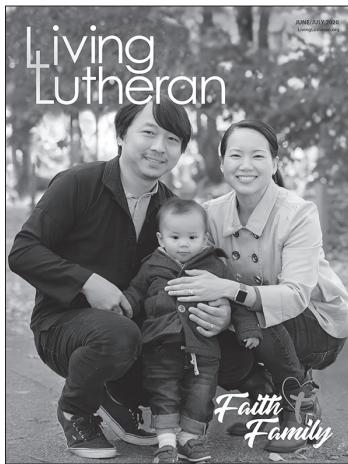
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Study guide: **Faithful families** *continued*

where you are today?

- What did church teach you about life's heavy, gritty, troublesome issues that arise in living every day? *Living Lutheran* profiled Kara Haug, a sexual health educator and counselor who works in church settings. Why is talking about sexuality an appropriate topic for churches to support? Why, in fact, is the church an ideal place to discuss issues that are controversial, complicated or subjects of confusion and misinformation? How can our faith help us to reach new understandings and coping strategies for life's thorny issues? What life topics has your church helped you to understand more fully? What issues would you *like* your church to talk about? (Make a list and pass it on to your pastor or congregation council.)
- Faith formation isn't confined to the four walls of a congregation. Camping and outdoor ministries, for example, create a worshipful environment that reveals and revels in God's glory amid creation. Moreover, camps and retreat centers provide opportunities for followers of Christ to mingle, share and enjoy fun fellowship. How do outdoor and retreat ministries complement the work of congregations? How can outdoor and retreat ministries enrich faith in children and adults alike?

Faithful Families

By Jennifer Bringle



The Saraka family
Photo: Courtesy of the Saraka family

In ELCA congregations, families come in myriad shapes, sizes and expressions. Each family is vibrant and unique, but all share a common belief in God that is nurtured through worship and fellowship. In this article you'll meet ELCA families who remain faithful as they overcome adversity, celebrate blessings and carry on with everyday life. Learn how their congregations have come alongside them to offer support through highs and lows.

"God provided the community around us"

John Saraka, 49, pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, Staten Island, N.Y.

Shannon Saraka, 46, occupational therapist

Abraham Saraka, 2
Congregation: Zion

John Saraka knows the power of faith in times of adversity. After losing his first wife to cancer, the pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Staten Island, mourned the loss of not only his partner but also a life and parenthood never realized.

Then he met his second wife, Shannon, and the two served as foster parents until she became pregnant at age 43. When the doctor declared her pregnancy to be at risk, she was hospitalized. Then, at 23 weeks—one week short of the typical threshold for fetal viability—she gave birth to their son, Abraham. He weighed 1 pound, 5 ounces.

"Everything was pointing toward he wasn't going to make it," John recalled. "He was so frail."

Fortuitously, three years earlier the Sarakas had moved to Staten Island, where nearby Richmond University Medical Center boasts one of the top neonatal intensive care units

in the nation. Abraham would spend 165 days there, enduring 10 surgeries over the first two years of his life.

"The surgeon was a person of faith as well, and she said, 'You take care of the prayers, I'll take care of the surgery,'" John recalled. "After the surgeries, she came to us and said, 'I didn't think he was going to make it when he first came, and here we are—that's God's hand.'"



"You see the loving community, and to be on the receiving end of that was incredible."

As the Sarakas navigated Abraham's surgeries and home care, their belief in God's goodness helped them cope.

"We clung to that faith, and there were days you didn't know how you'd make it through," John said. "God provided the community around us. I did a Caring Bridge page, and out of that we put together an online group called Abraham's Army—it was nationwide, with hundreds of people praying and checking on him. That was the strength we needed—the care and love and support from the church community and the larger community. That's the blessing."

For John, who has served more than two decades as a pastor, seeing his congregation turn the tables to offer him the same love and support he'd given them made the situation far easier to bear.

"The congregation was incredibly supportive," he said. "You see the loving community, and to be on the receiving end of that was incredible. They enabled me to have a paternity leave, and then I worked the weekends and was able to keep the connection with the worshiping community."

Today, Abraham is a healthy, happy toddler who has

reached the normal height, weight and development ranges for his age. The Sarakas marvel at their miracle child, who defied the odds and taught them an important lesson in faith.

"Seeing [Abraham] every day, [I know] God is real," John said.

"Sometimes you've got to hang on through the storms.

"Having walked through that with my first wife when she died, and Abraham, too, it's times like this that are the moments of life that remind you there's a Sunday, there's an Easter, there's a wonderful God."

Unconditional love and acceptance

Danny Sigmon, 44, campus administrator, New Hope Lutheran Church, Missouri City, Texas

Jorge Prato, 47, bank employee
Congregation: New Hope

Danny Sigmon and Jorge Prato weren't always Lutheran. Sigmon likes to joke that his Southern Baptist mother "raised me Lutheran—she just didn't know it." And Prato, a native of Venezuela,



*Jorge Prato (left) and
Danny Sigmon*

Photo: Courtesy of Jorge Prato and Danny Sigmon

grew up Catholic. But the couple came to the ELCA—Danny in college and Prato when he moved to the United States—and found a place of love and acceptance.

“One of the reasons I’m still a Lutheran is I spent 25 years hiding, and I don’t have to do that—I can be with Jorge and have our family, and it’s totally fine,” Sigmon said.

The couple feel that love especially at their congregation, New Hope Lutheran in Missouri City, Texas, where Sigmon has worked since 2001, first as director of worship and now as campus administrator. Before they could legally wed, Sigmon couldn’t sponsor Prato for his green card, but the church rallied around the couple.

“New Hope is very special to us as a family, being enormously supportive

of us,” Sigmon said. “For many years it was touch-and-go with immigration to get his green card, and our church wrote letters to Congress and did so many things to support us during that time.”

Prato eventually gained his citizenship in 2013, when same-sex marriage was legalized in California, and the couple traveled west to marry after being together for nearly a decade.

“The sweetest thing was people here were really upset because they wanted to be part of it,” Sigmon said. “Our 10th anniversary [as a couple] was that next March, so we did a blessing after a civil ceremony here, and almost the entire church showed up. It was joyous and marvelous and beautiful. They’re just super-supportive and treat us like anyone else.”

In the years since, Prato’s parents have moved to the United States and live next door

to the couple, who reside with their birds and cats. Sigmon and Prato love having family so close by, and they feel blessed to have such a close-knit, community-minded church family that has embraced them and shown them the true meaning of God’s unconditional love.

“It has been a beautiful example for the rest of my family, as well,” Sigmon said. “Because many of them are from a more conservative ilk, it kind of blows them away seeing that kind of acceptance coming from a church.”

“God does not give up on us”

Kate Neiss, 37,
freelance college consultant
David Neiss, 43, *controller for*
Apothecary Products
Addison Neiss, 10, *fifth grade*
Ryne Neiss, 7, *first grade*
Brook Neiss, 4



Congregation: *St. Andrew Lutheran, Eden Prairie, Minn.*

After relocating to Minnesota from Chicago, Kate Neiss knew finding the right church would make her family feel at home in the new city.

“Right away I wanted to find a church to help us build a community, just because I didn’t have a job where I could meet new people,” she said. “I wanted to find a place that had a strong children’s ministry and opportunities for the kids, as well.”

They found all that and more at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in the Twin Cities suburb of Eden Prairie. Shortly after they first began attending, Kate joined the congregation’s Band of Sisters women’s group to meet new people, and many became some of her closest friends.

“It was such a gift to find a group of women to sit with, be

myself with, share my heart with, cry with and know I could call any of them for help,” she said.

Kate wasn’t the only family member making connections at St. Andrew. Her daughter, Addison, has enjoyed meeting new friends and exploring her faith in the church’s many youth programs.

“I go to Fuse—it’s for fifth- and sixth-graders,” Addison said. “It’s really fun and helps me keep my faith in these hard times. We just had a Zoom meeting with everyone this week.”

Addison also participates in the youth minister assistant program, helping with services, and attends the church’s Summer in the Pines camp, which is open to parishioners and the larger community.

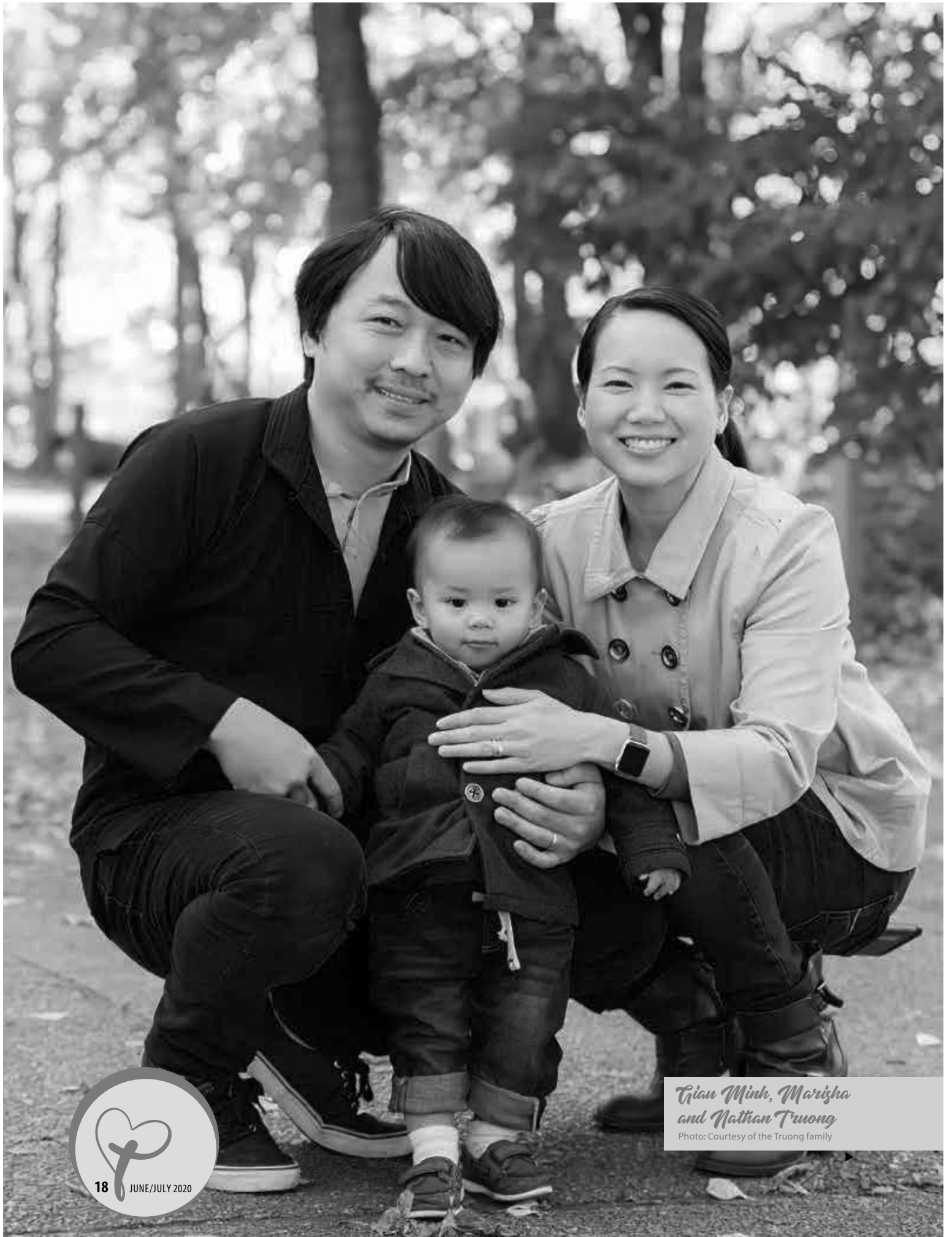
“It’s a really great ministry because we have friends and neighbors who send their kids who don’t go to church normally,” Kate said. “For some

youth, that’s their main way of feeling God’s presence.”

St. Andrew has become an important ally for Kate and her husband in raising their sons. Both boys have special needs, and Kate said the congregation has been a strong advocate for them and other children like them.

“Arlene Flancher, our director of children’s ministry, asked to sit down with me to talk about ways we could make Sunday school and future programming more accessible for children with learning/social/emotional challenges, because she was seeing a huge need for kids with sensory issues affecting their church experience,” Kate said.

“We brainstormed together and came up with more ‘choice’ time during Sunday school, so the kids who were sensory avoidant didn’t have to be overwhelmed in the gym with games, running around and



*Tran Minh, Marisha
and Nathan Truong*

Photo: Courtesy of the Truong family

loud crazy noise, and [could] stay in the classrooms to draw and read instead ... and the kids who were sensory-seeking—like my boys—could burn off their energy without upsetting kids who didn't have the same output.

"It was such a blessing to have a staff member with power over programming decisions be open to adapting and tweaking things so that families could get more out of worship. So [that's] a great example of how St. Andrew has been there for us, too, not giving up but being a constant source of support and love."

Such love and support are something Kate and her husband carry over into their lives and parenting. "For me, faith in those moments is just not giving up and knowing God does not give up on us. Even if we give up and question, he never gives up on us," she said. "And I've really tried to instill that with the kids. I'm just trying to model persistence and constant love, knowing that doesn't just come from me, that comes from God. That's another huge part of our faith journey as a family."

Congregation feels like home

Marisha Truong, 33,

*forensic accountant,
certified fraud examiner*

Giau Minh Truong, 43,

*independent artist, program
manager, lighting designer*

Nathan Truong, 2

Christine Tupaz, 65,
retired teacher

Huoi Truong, 63, *retired chef*

Kiet Truong, 75, *retired manager*

Congregation: *St. Paul Thai
Lutheran, Forest Park, Ill.*

For Marisha and Giau Minh Truong of Forest Park, Ill., the journey to create a family has spanned many years and thousands of miles. Giau Minh's parents came to the United States as refugees from Vietnam.

Marisha's mother's family came from the Philippines and her father from Thailand. When Marisha and Giau Minh married, their union merged Vietnamese, Philippine, Thai and American cultures.

"We have seen how God has blessed us in so many ways by bringing our family to this wonderful country," Marisha said. "We wouldn't have been blessed with so much freedom and so many opportunities if it wasn't God's plan to bring us all here."

Today the whole extended clan lives in the Chicago suburb of Forest Park, where they're active members of St. Paul Thai Lutheran, a congregation that has welcomed their multicultural family with open arms. And as Marisha and Giau Minh raise their young son (with another child on the way), that welcoming spirit has been a gift.

"Our different cultures, including languages—we speak five languages in our home: Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog and English—are also blending for our son to appreciate all the different beauty that God has created for us," Marisha said.

"The church has made us feel included by giving us a space and the support to explore many ways to show our love for God. Our faith has taught us how to work together to fulfill God's missions. Our faith has also given us the ability to forgive and allows us to open up our hearts to love and understand different perspectives from people of different generations, cultures and backgrounds.

"We find that we love and understand each other more deeply, in ways that we never could without

"Our congregation has always been very supportive of our plans and ideas."

our faith in the Lord Christ Jesus."

Marisha and Giau Minh have become very involved at St. Paul Thai. She serves on the congregation council, and both help plan such events as a pop-up community dinner. The Truongs even planned to travel abroad as missionaries, but they've put that on hold until after their second child is born. In the meantime, they continue sharing God's love here at home.

"Our congregation has always been very supportive of our plans and ideas," Marisha said. "We appreciate it when our voices are heard and our ideas are supported by our congregation as we find ways to give back. It makes us feel like being home with family who are always so loving, caring and understanding." †

Visit livinglutheran.org to read a longer version of this story, which includes an additional profile of Kelly Sherman-Conroy, Ciaran Conroy and Joan Conroy, members of Nativity Lutheran Church, St. Anthony, Minn. Download a study guide at the website under the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.



Jennifer Bringle is a writer, editor and lifelong Lutheran who lives in Greensboro, N.C., with her husband and son.