PASSING ON
THE FAITH

Radical
A Model for Youth and
Family Ministry
Revised

Merton P. Strommen, PhD
Richard A. Hardel, DMin

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Foreword to First Edition

Families have extraordinary power to shape the lives of their children. This is so obvious that one would think it unnecessary to say. Unfortunately, a conspiracy of social forces has diminished the influence of family. Take, for example, the importance of a child's educational achievement. Educators know that the highest level of learning occurs when family and school interact as partners, moving in the same direction during a child's educational development. Families create positive learning environments at home—modeling, encouraging, and rewarding learning, while schools respect and encourage this family engagement. The family-school partnership is reinforced by frequent parent-teacher dialogues and parent engagement in school policies and programs.

This partnership is essential. Unfortunately, it is also uncommon. National studies tell us that all too often families give away their power and depend on schools alone to promote their children's achievement. And then the finger pointing begins. Teachers blame parents for being too busy with work and personal agendas to be attentive to the family role in learning. Parents blame schools for being out of touch with family pressures. Certainly, the reasons for parents' lack of involvement are complicated. But the reality is that family influence on learning has gone underground; it has become a latent, dormant power.

Families' influence on faith development parallels this reality. We know from documented studies and from our own intuition that parents are essential actors in their children's faith journey. Theoretically, congregations should support families in activating and using this power. Just as quality learning results from a strong family-school partnership, family strength results from a solid congregation-family partnership. Again, the ideal gets sabotaged. The trend is for families to depend solely on congregations to nurture faith just as they tend to depend solely on schools to nurture academic achievement.

Now is the time to awaken a sleeping giant—the power of parents to teach and nurture in partnership with the institutions designed to support them in their efforts rather than replace them. *Passing On the Faith* is a timely, urgently needed guide for awakening the considerable power of family life in the faith journey of children. Weaving together the wisdom of its authors, stories from the field, and recent research, this book offers a compelling case for rethinking the role of congregations and for unleashing the capacity to trigger the faith-building capacity of families. Offering clear and doable steps to guide families through the transformation, *Passing On the Faith* proves to be very practical.

I recommend this book with the highest enthusiasm. It represents an important paradigm shift. Someday, because of this wise treatise, congregational leaders will evaluate their successes as much against the standard of how well they have empowered families as against the standard of how well they have "programmed" the precious and fleeting time they have with children and adolescents. And as family empowerment grows, faith will blossom far beyond the limits of the congregations.

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Peter L. Benson, PhD
President
Search Institute

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Preface to First Edition

This book addresses a major concern of Christian parents and congregational leaders: How can we increase the likelihood that our children will be committed to Jesus Christ and a life of service when they graduate from high school? We, the authors, address this concern with a new paradigm—a partnership between congregation and family in which primary responsibility for faith development is assumed by parents. We are passionately committed to this paradigm, arriving at similar convictions despite our contrasting orientations.

I, Merton Strommen, founder of Search Institute, have served thirty years as a research scientist at Search Institute and at other serving institutions. Search Institute has garnered knowledge on church youth through national frontier studies involving youth, congregations, colleges, seminaries, schools, and youth-serving community organizations. Because Search Institute is an independent agency, it is free to focus its studies on matters of faith, beliefs, and values. Psychologists and sociologists ignored these subjects in 99 percent of the studies they carried out in the early 1900s.

These three foci reflect my years of working with students and youth, both as a college pastor and as national youth director for the Lutheran Free Church. My work in these ministries raised questions that I thought research could answer and provided a theological setting for interpreting the research information.

The most influential and shaping influences of my life, however, are my two families. One family is my parental family, which is headed by a clergy father and mother of deep faith. This family helped me find my life direction. My other family is the family formed by me, my loving wife, and our five wonderful sons. This family has deepened my faith in Jesus Christ, inspiring me and providing me with much wisdom and spiritual insight.

I, Dick Hardel, was raised by a meddling Methodist mom and a hardworking German-Lutheran dad, who loved the Lord and loved the church. I attended Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod schools for twenty years, from first grade through seminary. This classic

education has helped me throughout my twenty-plus years of ministry as a parish pastor with a focus on youth and family ministry. I have also served as a pastor of smaller and yoked (connected) rural congregations in South Dakota and larger suburban congregations in South Dakota and Florida. One of the congregations in which I served as pastor also had a parochial school.

In addition to my ministry training and experience, I have also been trained by older Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus clowns to be a clown myself. For more than twenty-five years, I have been a Christ clown. I established Christ Clown College and have taught hundreds of youth and adults the art of clown ministry, traveling throughout North America and Europe.

For about three-and-a-half years I served as an assistant to the bishop of the Nebraska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Because I was such a right-brained, creative thinker, I had no administrative responsibilities; rather I was a creative resource for the 274 congregations in the synod at that time.

My passion for ministry with children, youth, and their families connected me to the research of Dr. Strommen at Search Institute and the Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College, where I have served as the executive director for the past five years.

Dr. Strommen and I both grew up in homes where the Christian faith was expressed and practiced. We both have a passion for strengthening families to nurture faith in the home. Merton is definitely a left-brained, sequential thinker. I am a playful right-brained person who thinks in pictures. Thus, this combination of our minds has produced a book that includes both research and stories.

Major research studies form the basis of the many facets of the conceptual model in this book (see page 14). We draw on four decades' worth of studies conducted by Search Institute, which are broadly enhanced by corroborative research from other sources.

Although some of the studies are from past decades, we still use them because their information is significant. Many of the older studies used multivariate analyses of data to identify underlying variables. This type of in-depth study is quite different from studies that involve simple polling efforts. Information from studies based on nothing more than percentages from polls has a much shorter life.

To illustrate the strength of our older studies, a fifteen-year trend analysis of data from a study called *Five Cries of Youth* showed almost no change in four of its five major facets of church youths' life. The study showed that over the years, the facets were scarcely affected by cultural determinants such as national events, increased media exposure, or national shifts in value orientations. This is the type of bedrock research information that we share in this publication.

This book is also filled with a wealth of examples of what dynamic congregations are doing to nurture faith among their people. Many of these examples come from unpublished material that resulted from a unique follow-up to Search Institute's *Effective Christian Education* study. In the follow-up study, researchers visited thirty congregations that were labeled "exemplary" and twenty-four ethnic minority congregations that were not involved in the original study to identify characteristics of congregational life contributing to their dynamic faith life.

Through our research and analyses of personal experiences, we intend to show why congregations should adopt our radical paradigm of youth and family ministry—a paradigm that will help congregations move from vision to action.

Preface to Revised Edition

At a pastor's conference a few years after the first edition of *Passing On the Faith* was written, I gave a presentation on the radical model for the twenty-first century for discipleship and evangelization. Afterward, a participant came up to me, thanked me for my presentation, and said, "But you forgot one circle of relationship with God." Before he could speak it, I said, "The circle of creation." "Exactly," he responded. I invited him to tell me more.

The man was Dr. Edward J. P. Hauser, who at the time was on the faculty of the University of North Carolina in Asheville and also was chairperson of the North Carolina Synod Bishop's Task Force for Caring for Creation. Since then I have learned much from him and many others about the environment and the need for Christians to care for creation. As a result we have revised both the radical model for youth and family ministry and Passing On the Faith. This new edition presents the expanded model, which includes the circle of creation (see chapter 9), and has also been updated throughout in light of new ideas and research that have emerged during the past decade. This includes research reported in *Soul Searching* (Oxford University Press, 2005), by Christian Smith, and the *Exemplary Youth Ministry Study* done at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, which confirm and update the focus and themes of this book.

This book is about passing on the faith from generation to generation, throughout the milestones of a person's life. Faith is created and nurtured by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. The vision underlying the radical model was developed in light of the theological principle that faith is formed by the Holy Spirit working through personal, trusted relationships, often, but not always, in our own homes.

Each concentric circle in the diagram that describes this vision represents a category of relationships in which the Holy Spirit nurtures and forms faith. The original circles of children and youth, family, congregation, community, and culture are now surrounded by the new circle of creation. The cross of Jesus Christ is in the

center and connects to each circle. A youth and family ministry for the twenty-first century connects all the generations in the total ministry of the congregation and, through the cross of Christ, recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit shaping faith in all the circles of relationships.

What is radical about the model is putting children and youth in the center of the ministry and surrounding them with the primary church, which is the family, or household. The word *radical* does not mean "far out." It means "to go back to basic principles." That is what we are doing in this book.

The foundational theology of this holistic vision is a radical theology of the cross. A theology for the twenty-first century must bring radical good news. It must be realistic about the human condition in our world; it must clarify the relationship between God and human beings, bring people together, and enable them to live in a close relationship with God, one another, and all creation; it must bring freedom, justice, and mercy; and it must give and sustain life. This vision calls on members of the Body of Christ, the Church, and especially those who are trained as leaders within the communities of faith, to be agents of transformation in the world. A theology of the cross is a theology of faith and revelation. Faith is necessary in order to see God's hidden revelation. Through faith, human beings are able to recognize God in the Incarnation, in creation, in humility, in the shame of the cross, in suffering, in the empty cross and the empty tomb, in Resurrection, and in "the least of these."

Only through faith can people see God's love, mercy, gracious will, and marvelous saving acts in Christ. Through the cross, God reframes how people see God active in everyday life and in all the circles of relationships. The cross of Jesus Christ calls people of faith to live in the world, in a relationship with God and with all creation, so others can see the grace of God.

Dr. Dick Hardel

Conceptual Model
Youth and Family Ministry
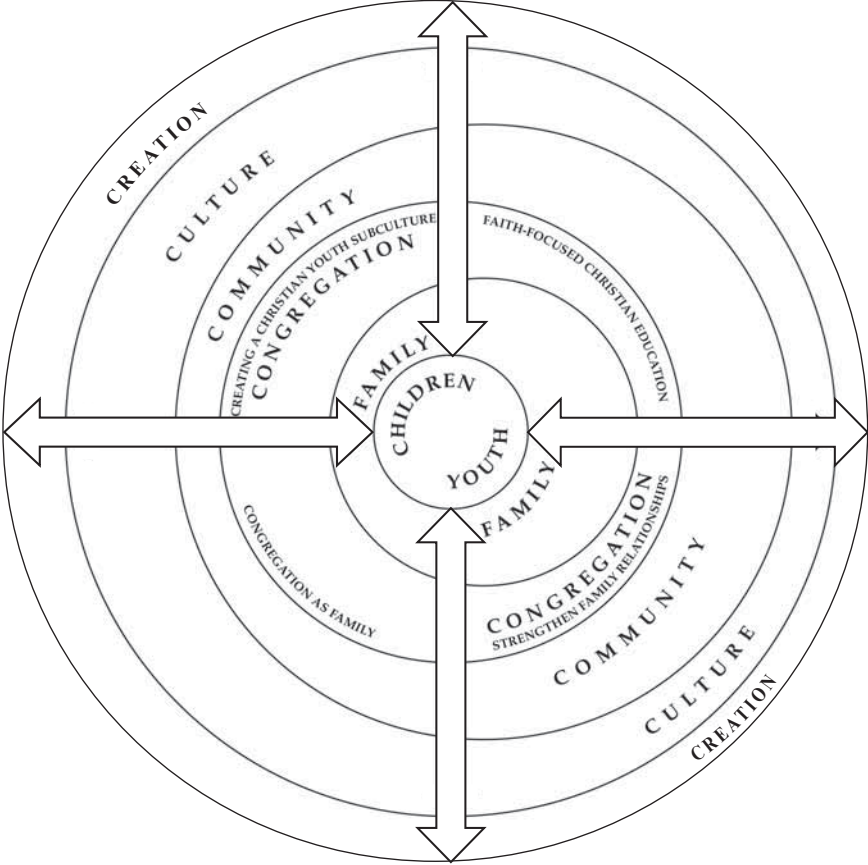
Chapter 1

What Is Youth and Family Ministry?

Thirty-five years of research in the Church shows that the relationship of faith to daily life has changed in our culture. According to major studies Search Institute has conducted in all the largest church bodies in America, fewer church families are producing the kind of youth whose hearts are committed to the mission of J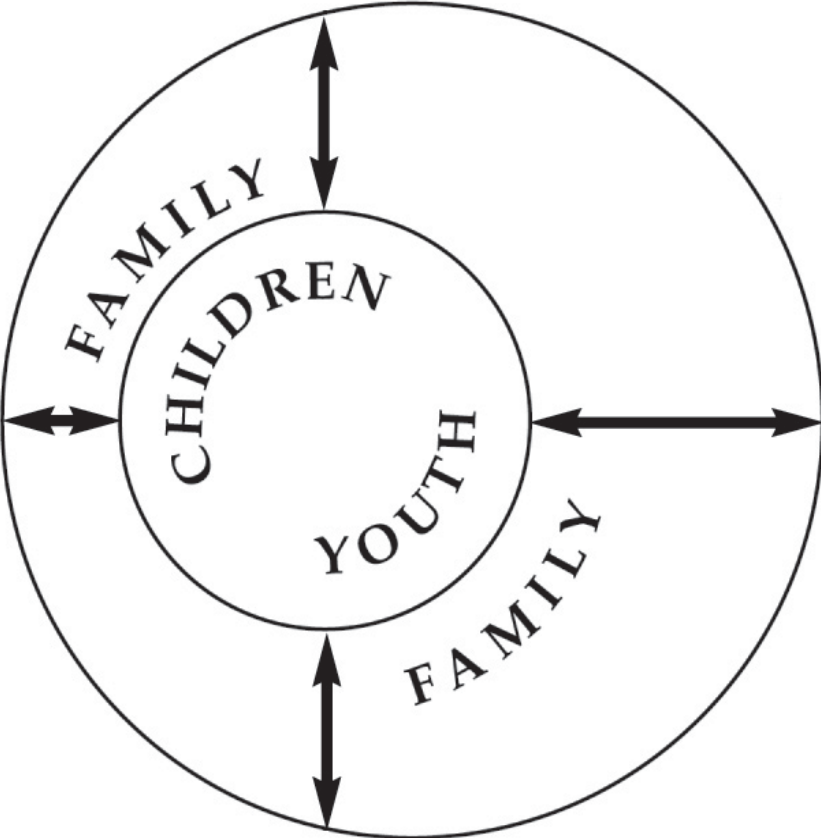esus Christ. The studies conclude that we are losing our youth from the church and the faith as they turn to at-risk behaviors.[1]

In the book *Soul Searching,* Christian Smith explains that a large number of young people in the United States value religion not for the sake of God nor for its offer of life-transforming truth that brings eternal salvation. Rather, they value religion because it helps them be happy and make good choices.[2]

> It appears that only a minority of U.S. teenagers are naturally absorbing by osmosis the traditional substantive content and character of the religious traditions to which they claim to belong. For, it appears to us, another popular religious faith, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, is colonizing many historical religious traditions and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.[3]

Why are we losing these children? Because the tradition of passing on the faith in the home is disappearing for many members of Protestant and Catholic congregations. A study conducted in 1980 called *Young Adolescents and Their Parents* involved a national random sample of eight thousand adolescents whose parents were members of congregations in eleven different Protestant and Catholic denominations. The study showed that "God, the Bible, or religious things" are seldom discussed in church homes. Only 10 percent of church families discusses its faith with any degree of regularity; in 43 percent of the homes in these denominations, faith is never discussed.[4]

A similar study conducted in 1986 involved 7,551 students from 196 randomly selected Catholic schools. When asked how often their family talks about religious things, only 17 percent of the students claimed to discuss such topics at least once a week.[5]

In 1990 a national sample of youth and adults from six major Protestant denominations was asked the same question. Their response was no better: 35 percent of the youth, ages sixteen to eighteen, said they rarely, if ever, talked about faith or God with

their mother, and 56 percent reported not ever having such discussions with their father. When asked how often they have devotions or worship as a family, 64 percent reported that their family rarely or never did so. Only 9 percent reported holding family devotions with any degree of regularity.[6]

As is obvious from these percentages, faith sharing is not happening today in most families of the church. It seems as though parents do not recognize their role in the faith growth of their children. As a result, children lack the undergirding that comes from being raised in homes that take matters of faith seriously. The effects of this lack are being noticed. A 1997 national study entitled *Kids These Days: What Americans Think About the Next Generation* reported that two-thirds of the two thousand adults surveyed came up with negative adjectives like *rude, wild,* and *irresponsible* when they were asked to describe teenagers. Nearly half of those surveyed described younger children as spoiled, and only 37 percent believed today's youngsters might eventually make this country a better place.

This study clearly demonstrates a fundamental concern about teenagers' moral and ethical values: "Americans are convinced that today's adolescents face a crisis—not in their economic or physical well-being but in their values and morals."[7] Only a minority of families today are orienting their children to a life of faith, service, and responsible living. This does not have to be our future. Strong, ethically oriented, life-shaping families are indeed as possible today as they were decades ago.

God's Vision for Today's Families

Two basic concepts in the Bible reveal God's desire for families. The first has to do with *relationships.* The Scriptures focus not on the family as a collective unit but on how the relationship with a gracious God is passed on from parents to children; hence, what is written applies equally well to single-parent households, blended-family households, or any configuration that makes up a family. The Scriptures focus on the grace of God, no matter the family.

To children, Paul writes: "Honor your father and mother . . . that it may be well with you and you may live long on the

earth." To parents, Paul writes: "And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:2–4, NRSV). Paul preaches that mutual love and respect between adult and child is an important part of a family relationship. Each member of a family is to treat the others with the same love God shows us. As Jesus says, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12, NRSV).

A second requirement for families involves *priorities*. Christ says: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you" (Matthew 6:33, NIV). "These things" includes family life. In case we fail to get that point, Jesus spells out his claim for being the center of our lives when he says:

> Anyone who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it. (Matthew 10:37–39, NIV)

According to the Scriptures, a strong, life-shaping family needs to build and maintain two key relationships—a strong family relationship and a strong relationship with God. These relationships are two sides of the same coin. One side encourages bonding between parents and children. The other side encourages bonding with Jesus, the Christ—a relationship that enables the gospel of grace and forgiveness to be lived out. When these two types of relationships characterize a family, the family indeed becomes strong and life shaping. This is only possible, however, if parents seek to develop these essential relationships.

An important question to ask is, How can the congregation most faithfully and effectively encourage and support faith formation in the home, intentionally attending to its critical role in the family-congregation partnership?

A New Paradigm Is Needed

Church leaders increasingly realize that a child's life is directly affected by what happens in the home. Leaders recognize that to

pass on the faith from generation to generation, a new paradigm of ministry is needed—one that is holistic and connects children, youth, family, congregation, community, culture, and creation. These are all areas of relationships where the Holy Spirit works and shapes faith. Faith formation is for everyone, not just children. The journey of faith is a community activity that connects to all the concentric circles of relationships. To effectively pass on faith from generation to generation, the domestic church (home) and the public church (congregation) must work in partnership.

The current paradigm has subtly conveyed the impression that faith is nurtured only in the church buildings. This has ultimately institutionalized the faith, a phenomenon found in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

Fr. Robert Stamschror describes how this has come to characterize the Roman Catholic Church:

> The common understanding of the role of the family as a partner with the institution in faith formation was to give birth to the child, present it for baptism, enroll it in a Catholic school or CCD program, and make sure that the child attended Mass and received all the appropriate sacraments. It is important again to note here that the operative perspective of Faith during these times was primarily focused on the content and forms of Faith, that is, the beliefs that the church taught about God and what a Catholic practice should be in the light of those beliefs.[8]

In parallel fashion, the teaching and nurturing of faith in Protestant congregations today is associated primarily with the church building, or what is often called the "Godbox." When people talk about God and faith only in the buildings of the congregation, then God is in a box. Over the years the message has been, "Let the professionals do the teaching. They know best." So, parents send their children to the church for Sunday school or other religious instruction, handing the responsibility of faith education to the teachers.

Parents who believe their responsibility has ended when they have transported their children to church schools are not bad parents, however. They simply do not know how to nurture the faith, because it probably was not modeled in their own homes when they were growing up. The good news is that some parents want to

learn how to form and nurture faith in their children; they want to participate in the family-congregation partnership.

In this book we use the term *family* in its broadest definition. A single person has a family, because she or he converses with at least two or three people two or three times a week if not daily. This unit, then, constitutes family. Some families may have children, whereas others may not. Like families in the Scriptures, we include friends and mentors, as well as relatives, in our definition of *family*. Our family is those people with whom we share our faith, values, and purpose as they relate to a life of hope and love.

A Realistic Vision: Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth

The vision we authors present in this book is a partnership between family and congregation that will encourage and support the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth that mark a life of commitment to Jesus Christ and a life of witness and service. We have identified the following ten characteristics:

1. Trusting in a personal Christ
2. Understanding grace and living in grace
3. Communing with God regularly
4. Demonstrating moral responsibility
5. Accepting responsibility in a congregation
6. Demonstrating unprejudiced and loving lives
7. Accepting authority and being personally responsible
8. Having a hopeful and positive attitude
9. Participating in the rituals of a Christian community
10. Engaging in mission and service

Dare we pray that God can accomplish these characteristics in the lives of youth and adults? Knowing that God has accomplished them in the lives of many former youth and adults, we must now determine how we can help increase the probability that these characteristics will become a reality for the youth and adults currently in our congregations.

The answer presented in this book considers the interactive effect of six levels of influence: peer (youth to youth), family, congregation, community, culture, and creation. Each level of influence significantly contributes to the characteristics we desire

for our children and youth, and each level needs to be part of our ministry.

Though six levels of influence are involved, the most powerful influence comes from the family, especially parents. The evidence is overwhelming that the probabilities of seeing committed youth are greatest when family members are bonded to one another in close relationships and bonded to God in close relationships. Recent research on the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers confirmed the importance of parents and extended family in faith formation.

> Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misperceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives.[9]

The term *probability* is one we use advisedly, because we cannot guarantee that specific children will mature with a committed faith. Faith is a gift from God to be received and nurtured by sinful human beings, and although the Christian faith is given to children in Baptism, not all children are willing to retain this gift through daily renewal. Not all parents who have their children baptized teach and nurture this faith in the lives of their children. The influence of family, peers, congregation, community, culture, and creation determines whether children and youth become people of mature faith. Faith is formed by the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships in all six of these areas.

A New Paradigm for Faith Formation

A faith-formation paradigm limited to religious instruction for children and a youth group for high school students no longer equips one generation to pass on the faith effectively to the next generation. A paradigm shift is needed—one that results in a more comprehensive approach and fosters faith through relationships with peers, family, the congregation, the community, culture, and creation (see fig. 1).

Figure 1

Our Desired Outcomes

Committed Youth Who Are

- Engaging in mission and service
- Trusting in a personal Christ
- Participating in the rituals of a Christian community
- Understanding grace and living in grace
- Having a hopeful and positive attitude
- Communing with God regularly
- Accepting authority and being personally responsible
- Demonstrating moral responsibility
- Demonstrating unprejudiced and loving lives
- Accepting responsibility in a congregation

The need for this shift is widely felt. In September 1976 the United States Catholic Conference's (USCC's) Department of Education published *A Vision of Youth Ministry.* Now, more than three decades later, new challenges confront the Roman Catholic Church's ministry with adolescents. In 1997 *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* was published as a comprehensive and holistic ministry with younger and older adolescents. It includes an emphasis on the church of the home, or the family, as the first community and the most basic way in which God gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. This vision, also emphasizing extended family, the parish, the positive building blocks of the whole community, and the present culture, helps congregations move into a new paradigm of youth and family ministry.[10]

John Roberto, founder of the Center for Ministry Development, created an approach to faith formation that embraces the vision of moving beyond a schooling paradigm to a "whole Church" paradigm. Called *Generations of Faith,* the approach stresses lifelong faith formation centered on the events of Church life, on faith growth in the home, and on connecting all the generations.[11]

Such a paradigm shift connects silent generations (people over sixty-five years of age), perhaps the most-churched group of people in the history of our country, to the millennial kids, who do not know the stories of God's gracious love and how these stories relate to their lives. This new vision identifies the family as God's domestic church and the congregation as God's communal Church. The peer relationships, home, congregation, community, culture, and creation are viewed as providing the context within which faith-lives are shaped.

As the first and most basic community, the family acts as a model for other, larger faith-learning communities. Diana Garland, director of the Family Ministry Project located at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, in Kentucky, defines *family.* According to her, the model of family that Jesus endorses is the adoptive family. The last act of Jesus' earthly ministry recorded in the Gospel of John enacts that adoptive model. Jesus turns to his mother and says, "Woman, behold your son." Then turning to the beloved disciple he says, "Behold your mother." The Church follows Christ by ensuring that no one in the family of faith is familyless—everyone is adopted into the family.[12]

A Partnership Between Family and Congregation

In her book *Family: The Forming Center,* Marjorie Thompson raises the all-important question "What if the family were not merely an object of the church's teaching mission, but one of the most basic units of the church's mission to the world?" She continues, saying, "What I am suggesting is that the communal church and the domestic church need to recapture a vision of the Christian family as a sacred community. This will require an awareness of the 'sacred' in the 'secular,' of God in the flesh of human life."[13] Wendy Wright, in her book *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating the*

Contemplative Spirit at Home, gives lessons on gaining awareness of discovering the sacred that is present in the busyness of everyday family life.[14]

Stamschror, former editor for Saint Mary's Press Family Faith-Life Resources, identifies this awareness as an important part of family life, saying, "A personal and trusting adherence to God is the proper aspect of faith to be nourished in the family setting."[15]

In its latest conceptual model, *Passing On Faith,* The Youth & Family Institute presents a partnership of family and congregation in which the home is viewed as the primary place for teaching and nurturing the faith. Because the beginning years for this are pre-birth to age six, and most Sunday schools do not begin instruction until a child is age three, half the primary years for nurturing faith are lost for children who do not receive this guidance at home. The congregation is available simply to strengthen parents and other primary caregivers in their ability to evangelize the children whom God has placed in their lives.[16]

Many congregations already have begun faith formation ministries based on the suggestions and concepts of Marjorie Thompson, John Roberto, and The Youth & Family Institute. In 1991 Our Lady of Guadalupe, a Roman Catholic church in Helotes, Texas, adopted an alternative model to religious education called family-centered catechesis. Their approach is based on a "Family Perspective" document prepared by the United States bishops in 1988, which includes the following four principles:

1. *A Christian Vision of Family Life*
   The family has a unique identity and mission that permeates its tasks and responsibilities.

2. *The Family As a Developing System*
   The family is not a collection of individuals but a living and developing system whose members are essentially interconnected.

3. *Family Diversity*
   Diversity in structure, economic status, special needs, ethnic and religious heritages, and the influence of societal trends affect the roles and activities of families today.

4. *The Partnership Between Families and Social Institutions*
   Partnerships need to be formed between families and the institutions that share family responsibilities.[17]

Cynthia Tejeda, coordinator of Family Faith Development and Social Concerns at Our Lady of Guadalupe, remembers the benefits that came to her home from a family life program in her congregation when she was a ninth grader. Curious about how these ideas could affect the parish she now served, she introduced family-centered catechesis to several families gathered in a home. Out of this small pilot effort has emerged a family-centered approach that has established a new paradigm for religious education.

To provide resources and support for parents involved, her congregation introduced three options for families to choose from. The first is a type of family Sunday school for all ages: a parish-based, intergenerational faith-formation experience for the whole family offered one Sunday a month. In addition to a thirty-minute gathering and family activity period, there is a forty-five-minute learning time for each age-group: children through adults.

The second option is a program called *Seasons of Faith.* It is for all ages, and it uses a home-based approach to a family-centered catechesis. Each household is provided a home resource book (with lectionary-based lessons for each week) and an adult workbook along with an age-appropriate book for children and youth. Parents are instructed how to use these materials in settings other than the classroom.

The third option focuses on a parish-based experience that is offered three times a month for different age-groups. The classes are facilitated by an adult, high school peer minister, or mentor. Parents can choose to be involved in one, two, or all three of these options.

As might be expected, this revolutionary innovation took time to establish, and it received resistance at first. Some said: "We hired you to teach our children and youth. That is your job, not ours. You have the training and expertise." Others said: "We can't be responsible for the faith development of our children. We don't know what to say. We have had no training in Christianity since childhood." A few families actually left their churches to find other parishes to be responsible for their children's religious education.

But Our Lady of Guadalupe has not suffered. When the family-centered catechesis was introduced in 1990, there were seven hundred families in the parish. By 1998, there were 2,400 families,

with 65 percent of the members under thirty-five years of age. Obviously, parents with children have been joining this parish.

Although much of the growth has to be credited to the congregation's location in a quickly growing area, the paradigm shift has not deterred people from joining. On the contrary, parents have expressed enthusiasm for this approach, saying:

- "We appreciate being involved in our child's learning."
- "We appreciate the availability of options and the flexibility this approach gives our family."
- "We have closer family relationships."
- "We are getting acquainted with the Bible and learning how to use it."
- "We are having prayer together as a family."

Tejeda, who has had the full support of her pastor and church council, identifies the following assumptions underlying the paradigm they have adopted:

- The family is the domestic church.
- Family life is sacred and holy.
- Both parish and family have responsibilities in promoting family faith growth.
- Because family life has changed significantly, approaches to religious education must reflect, respect, and embrace the contemporary family.
- Parents are the primary educators of their children in faith.
- Families and the parish need time to adjust to change; fear and resistance should be expected.
- Parents and guardians need resources and support to build confidence in their ability to form their children in faith.[18]

Another congregation has also shifted responsibility. Concordia Lutheran Church in Kirkwood, Missouri, decided to shift the responsibility for faith formation to the family. Ben Freudenburg, former minister of Christian Home, took sabbatical visits to various congregations only to realize that the congregation of which he was director of Christian education was church-centered and home-supported. Excited to take on the challenge of developing a home-centered, church-supported congregation, he introduced the idea to his senior pastor and the governing board. The idea gained full support. To reflect this shift, the congregation revised its mission statement to read as follows:

> Concordia-Kirkwood is a sending community called together by the Spirit of Christ—celebrative and imaginative in worship, *SEEKING TO MAKE THE CHRISTIAN HOME THE PRIMARY AGENCY FOR FAITH FORMATION*—shaping, nurturing and equipping the people of God for the ministry for which they have been gifted and to which they have been called.[19]

This mission statement, the result of a long process, is undergirded by the following basic assumptions:

• Our world has changed from a "churched" to an "unchurched" society.
• The critical unit to hand on the faith and its resulting values is the Christian home.
• The Christian congregation is a most valuable community for meeting an unchurched society through the Christian home.

This particular congregation decided to use the phrase *Christian home* rather than the word *family,* because many people feel excluded by the word *family*. The word *agency* refers to home because it is to be seen as a "God-ordained place." The phrase *primary agency* draws attention to the fact that the home is to receive the primary attention and energy of the congregation.

The mission statement also identifies the areas in which the shift of responsibility is to occur: worship, home, and training. The shift to becoming family centered is seen in such programs and activities as family daily vacation Bible school, family Bible hour, and family worship services. Parents shift from being cooks and taxi drivers to being equippers of faith. For Freudenburg, a program of training parents to communicate, show caring, and become involved in faith building is at the heart of a congregation's ministry.

Convinced by his studies and observations that faith should be taught and modeled in the home, Freudenburg decided he should begin in his own home. Over a period of time, he tried to create in his own home what he would like to see become a reality in the homes of his congregation. In a book based on his experiences, *The Family-Friendly Church,* Freudenburg lays the groundwork for a shift in thinking from a church-centered, home-supported ministry to a home-centered, church-supported ministry.[20] This shift, however, requires families to be strong, receiving encouragement from many areas.

Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, South Dakota, has experienced phenomenal growth as a faith community by using the model of The Youth & Family Institute that focuses on a partnership of home and congregation in nurturing faith, living well in Christ, and passing on the faith. They are responding to basic questions people ask: "What does it mean to be family? Could it be about God? To whom do we turn for help?" The buildings of Bethlehem Church have become a training center to equip uncles, aunts, godparents, neighbors, friends, grandparents, and parents in how to nurture faith and pass it on to the children in their lives. They gather people of all generations to help with this discipleship training.

Many faith communities of the Roman Catholic Church are experiencing the joy of new growth through the work of John Roberto and the leaders of *Generations of Faith.* Their work includes a focus on the partnership of domestic church (home and family) and public church (congregation) in lifelong learning of faith.[21]

Strategies for Strengthening Family

Assist Parents in the Baptismal Journey

To help congregations shift the responsibility of religious instruction, Dr. Roland D. Martinson, professor of pastoral theology at Luther Seminary; Dr. Richard Hardel, senior fellow and former executive director of The Youth & Family Institute; and David W. Anderson, program director of The Youth and Family Institute, have developed a strategy for ministry that fosters a partnership between the communal and domestic churches. They call it *Passing On Faith.*

The partnership is introduced by a home visitation team made up of a male and a female, one of them being from the most-churched generation, those over age sixty-five. The teams meet with families at various milestones (e.g., Baptism, the start of school, driver's license, Confirmation, graduation, new job, retirement). Before a Baptism, for example, the team prepares the family and child for the upcoming milestone by presenting information on baptismal grace, the importance of prayer, faith communication in the home, child development, and faith-informed child rear-

ing, as well as ideas and resources for maintaining faith life in the household. During the visit, the families are given a *FaithChest* and a *FaithLife in the Home Resource and Gift Guide.*[22]

Stored in the *FaithChest* and listed in the *FaithLife in the Home Resource and Gift Guide* might be the following items: musical CDs, a Bible, faith-in-daily-life storybooks, a baptismal candle and other remembrances of one's Baptism, *FaithTalk with Children* cards, games, and DVDs. These items can be used for communicating faith at times when family members intersect with one another—bedtime, car time, lap time, sick time, mealtime, vacation time, and other significant family times.

The *Passing On Faith* model presents six strategies that connect the milestones in a family's life with God. The milestones are to be celebrated not only in the home but also in a congregational festival worship service followed by a reception for the child and the family members. These worship celebrations and all other worship services are designed to be friendly for children and youth as well as adults.

During these contacts the congregation informs the parents of positive, Christian parenting support and resources available in a variety of forms, varying from moms' and dads' days out, to parent support groups, to DVDs, to classic parenting books, to family counseling, to parenting mentors and networks.

Recent research confirms that if we want Christian children practicing faith, then we must have practicing Christian adults. If our desired outcomes are nurturing faith and passing on the faith, then it is more important for children to be worshiping in corporate worship (Mass) with their parents and family than to be in Sunday school without their parents or family.

Congregations in the *Passing On Faith* model also sponsor intergenerational training events to equip uncles, aunts, moms, dads, grandparents, godparents, and other caregivers with the skills and understanding needed to nurture faith at a specific milestone in a young person's life. To assist congregations in sponsoring intergenerational training events that connect faith with specific milestones, The Youth & Family Institute has created a *Milestones Ministry Manual* that includes intergenerational helps within corporate worship and also activities for other intergenerational events. You can find this resource on their Web site.

Work for Long-Lasting Marriages

In their book *A New Day for Family Ministry,* Richard Olson and Joe Leonard conclude that congregations must have an active ministry that focuses on strengthening existing marriages. A partnership between household and congregation requires stable and long-lasting marriages. It is important to counter the shattering effect of divorce by helping couples make their relationships enduring and by helping divorced people develop new relationships, healed, healthy, and hope filled.[23]

To help the Church realize this objective, Mike McManus and his wife, Harriet, of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, developed a "Marriage Savers" movement. They introduced the idea of citywide agreements about marriage preparation and marriage agreements to pastors and congregations. According to McManus, the divorce rate in Modesto, California, the first city to adopt such an agreement, dropped 40 percent during one decade. Obviously other factors could have contributed to this drop, but the contribution of "Marriage Savers" to the drop is evident. A 12 percent drop was noted in Fairbanks, Alaska, over seven years; a 28 percent drop in Peoria, Illinois, over six years; and a 35 percent drop in Modesto, California, over eleven years.[24]

When St. Paul and Minneapolis adopted the Twin Cities Community Marriage Policy in 1997, they became the largest metropolitan community to have adopted a marriage agreement. The signers included bishops and denominational executives from a diverse Christian spectrum, along with representatives of the Jewish and Islamic communities. The policy calls for a minimum of four months of marriage preparation and a minimum of four premarital counseling sessions that involve use of the Bible, a premarital inventory, and intensive education. In addition, the faith leaders are expected to do the following:

- strongly encourage additional retreats, classes, and marriage enrichment opportunities designed to build and strengthen marriages
- train mature couples to serve as mentors to engaged couples, newlyweds, or couples experiencing marriage difficulties
- use or develop programs for couples with troubled marriages, allowing some mentoring to be done by couples whose own marriages were once in trouble

- use or develop support systems for couples with stepfamilies and couples of different religious backgrounds[25]

Greater care in preparing couples for marriage and in strengthening these marriages will enhance the partnership between family and congregation in the faith formation of children and youth. Preparation can address the growing phenomenon of couples living together before marriage. By 1990, 45 percent of unmarried adults had cohabited, and 39 percent of married couples had lived with their spouse before marriage.[26] But living together before marriage is no guarantee of marital success; in fact, couples who live together first divorce at higher rates (38 percent) than couples who live separately before marriage (27 percent).

A study entitled *The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce,* by researchers William Axinn and Arland Thornton of UCLA, confirms this data. They found that marriages preceded by cohabitation were 50 to 100 percent more likely to end than those marriages not preceded by cohabitation.[27]

Encourage Parents to Be Spiritual Leaders

In "The Role of Work and Family in the Faith and Value Formation of Children," Dr. Roland D. Martinson notes the central role parents have played in passing on faith to their children.[28] The parental role was established by Moses when he instructed parents to keep the theological and ethical core of God's word at the center of Israel's life:

> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6–9, NRSV)

This is *radical*. This is going back to basic principles. Note in the text above that the home is the primary place of faith formation, not the temple or synagogue. The responsibility to teach and nurture faith is that of the parents and extended family.

Walter Brueggemann, theologian and seminary professor, notes that in the biblical world, the family is the primary unit of meaning, shaping and defining reality: "One major function of

intergenerational life is to transmit the stories and promises which identify the family, so that each new generation has an inheritance that gives both identity and roots, purpose and vocation."[29]

The major ritual and tradition through which families in the Old Testament celebrated God's story and Israel's identity was the seder meal (ceremonial dinner) held every Friday evening when the family gathered at the table. During this and other family rituals, the father and mother functioned as priest, spiritual teacher, and leader.

In the *Passing On Faith Conference Participant's Manual,* David W. Anderson notes that Martin Luther, in his sermon "The Estate of Marriage," reflected his convictions about the role of father and mother in these words:

> Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the Gospel. In short there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal.[30]

There are, of course, many families in which only one parent is able to serve as a spiritual leader. Though the task is more difficult for that parent, the objective of making the home a center for nurturing the faith and experiencing the presence of God should remain the same.

An important aspect to consider in fostering the family as God's domestic church is the role of father. Organizations such as the Promise Keepers, the National Center for Fathering, and the National Fatherhood Initiative emphasize that fathering is one of the most important and challenging tasks men face. These and other organizations have worked to revitalize congregational men's groups and return men to a greater sense of responsibility for their roles as spiritual leaders in their homes. Many denominational men's organizations, as well as local congregations, have responded to the need to strengthen the father's role as a nurturer of faith in the home through spiritual renewal retreats, workshops on developing spiritual disciplines, and seminars on spiritual leadership in the home. Lyman Coleman, working with The Youth & Family Institute, has developed a powerful ministry with men, Men Marked with the Cross of Christ, to help them grow in faith and become strong spiritual leaders in the home and congregation. He first

began working with some Roman Catholic men's ministries and then with Lutheran and Presbyterian men. In the book *Coming of Age,* the authors, Dr. David Anderson, Dr. Paul Hill, and Dr. Roland Martinson, encourage congregations to mentor young men to be faithful fathers and pass on the faith to their children.[31]

This important role of spiritual leader is increasingly neglected as the presence of fathers in many families diminishes. Wade F. Horn, director of the National Fatherhood Initiative, says that in 1960 the total number of children living in fatherless families was fewer than eight million. By 1997 the total had risen to nearly twenty-four million. Today nearly four out of ten children in America are being raised in homes without fathers, and authorities predict that soon it will be six out of ten.[32]

In addition to the absence of fathers, the absence of mothers is also increasing. Mothers seem to be abandoning their children, turning the responsibility over to the grandparents. Across the country more than 633,000 grandparents have become the primary caregivers for more than one million children.

Connie Booth, a counselor with Lutheran Social Service in Minneapolis, has witnessed this increase in Minneapolis. "It seems to be connected with the rise of the crack cocaine epidemic," she says.

> [Mothers] got involved with drugs or alcohol and because of that they are no longer able to parent. In some cases, the kids were just dropped off on the grandparents' doorstep. In other cases, the grandparents had to really fight to get the kids out of the home.
>
> [This problem] crosses all socioeconomic bounds. We have grandparents in the inner city and in our wealthy suburbs who are raising their grandchildren. Nobody seems to be immune to this. Many are caring for their grandchildren in an unofficial capacity. They don't want to report their children to the county social workers, so they simply step in and do what needs to be done.[33]

The statistics show the increasing number of parents—mothers and fathers alike—who renounce their responsibility to be spiritual leaders in the home. This lack of responsibility comes at a high cost not only to the children being neglected but also to society as a whole.

Consider the High Cost of Neglect

Jack Westman, child psychiatrist at the University of Wisconsin, used calculations based on the cost of public services in Wisconsin in 1994 to create a worst-case scenario. He chose a child born to an incompetent single parent on welfare who grows into a habitual criminal and spends forty years of his life in prison. The cost to society is two million dollars. This stands in contrast to the one million dollars contributed by a productive child raised by a competent parent.

Westman believes that the right to parent should be earned, because parenting is a responsibility and a privilege. His argument is that incompetent parents cost society enormous amounts of money; therefore, some requirements should be placed on parents. In his controversial book, *Licensing Parents: Can We Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect?* he suggests the following three requirements:

1. Parents must be at least eighteen years of age.
2. Parents must make a written commitment to rearing a child (similar to applying for a marriage license).
3. Parents must attend parenting classes before the birth of their child.

Westman says his requirements encompass three key predictors of bad parenting:

- being too young to control one's life
- having no commitment to child rearing
- having no knowledge of child rearing

He is joined in his argument by David Lykken, a professor at the University of Minnesota, who since 1970 has worked on a world-renowned study of twins. His research on psychopathic personalities has led him to examine the link between children born out of wedlock and violent crime. Out of his research has come the book *The American Crime Factory: How It Works and How to Slow It Down.* Lykken notes that the "American Crime Factory" is turning out potential sociopaths at an ever-increasing rate. Instead of building more and more prisons, we should be trying to stop the assembly line.

Hennepin County officials in Minneapolis have estimated that in terms of 1988 dollars, they have spent more than $2 million dealing with the seventy offenses committed by seven children of

one family. A total of twenty-nine institutions and programs have been used in an attempt to rehabilitate members of this family—to no avail, however.

Reviewing the records of ten other such families, a probation officer, David Seeler, said, "It's baffling to see how ineffective all these programs are, and it's disturbing to see the court throw all this money at these kids with no results. The flip side is: What else can one do?"[34]

The difficulty of changing the lives of young people raised by incompetent parents is discussed in the book *Castaways: The Penikese Island Experiment.* The author, George Cadwalader, a Marine veteran of Vietnam, established an Outward Bound–type program for juvenile delinquents on Penikese Island off Massachusetts. He hoped that the delinquent kids would learn self-worth by living in a pure environment and would grow in self-confidence by participating in outdoor activities. After fifteen years of experimenting with this, he tried to evaluate the results of his effort. Of the first 106 boys who came to Penikese out of troubled homes, only sixteen turned themselves around. The other ninety went on to live lives of destruction.[35]

Although these cases are extreme, they do illustrate how vital it is for children to be raised by loving, responsible parents if they are to develop the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth.

The importance of family life is being identified by many voices. Knut Andresen, then general director of the Church of Norway's National Council and author of "Youth in the Church of Norway," asked why 85 percent of youth are losing contact with the church after eight months of Confirmation classes, after one year in a church youth group, or in better cases, after six years as a member of a youth organization. After examining the data of an extensive survey, he came to the following conclusion:

> One explanation is the family. We never talk about faith at home. That goes for regular churchgoers. They are mostly leaving it to the professionals—that means the pastors, the lay staff, and other church officials—or to grandmothers. They might worship in the church on Sunday, but they don't have family devotions, prayer, or Bible reading. They might talk about faith with other members of the congregation, but they are very seldom talking about faith at home.[36]

Figure 2

Change in Family Closeness
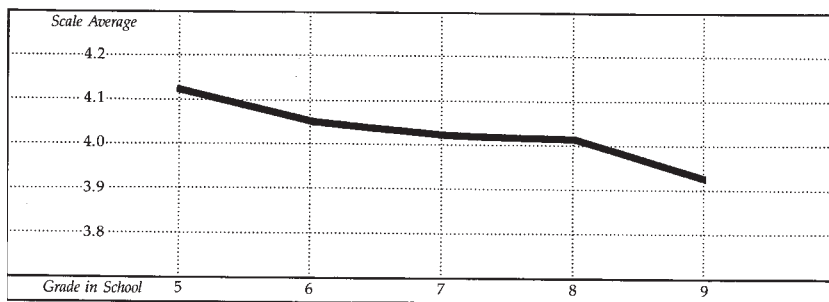
Item: "Members of my family get along well with each other." Based on the aver-
age of 5 items. 5 = almost always true; 4 = often true; 3 = sometimes true; 2 = true
once in a while; 1 = never true

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Provide Help in Parenting

People learn by experience. For this reason it is easy to assume that
the new parents, not the older ones, need instruction and minis-
try. Research shows, however, that experience does not necessarily
equip parents for the responsibilities they face in this role.

Evidence from two major studies shows that family relation-
ships decline in closeness as parents gain experience. Family uni-
ty and closeness decline steadily from the childless stage to the
adolescent-raising stage in the family cycle. Relationships are at
their lowest ebb when children are adolescents.

This was discovered in a national study of eight thousand early
adolescents and ten thousand parents randomly chosen from con-
gregations in eleven major denominations. Youth and parents, in-
dependent of one another, both reported less unity and closeness
as the children moved in age from fifth to ninth grade (see fig.
2). There was a discernible decline in parental harmony, commu-
nication, parental control, and expressions of love as children ap-
proached adolescence.[37] It is apparent that parents need more than
experience to develop the kind of families that are life shaping.

Though premarriage counseling, family counseling, and youth
counseling are made available, people still may seek divorce, have

children out of wedlock, or remarry to form a stepfamily. In other words, a ministry is sharply limited in its ability to alter the nature of family structures other than to emphasize the importance of long-lasting marriages and to model such marriage relationships.

Nor can much be done about the resources people bring into a marriage such as income or level of education. True, some things can be done to improve the level of income or to encourage further education, but as a whole, little can be done to alter these factors in family happiness. The same applies to such background variables as race, gender, and age. These are givens that do affect family happiness, but little can be done to change them.

What, then, is within the scope of a ministry to parents? The one area of possibility can be labeled *family relationships.* At least five such variables are open for ministry:

1. marital relations or parental harmony
2. children's relationships with their residential fathers
3. children's relationships with their residential mothers
4. children's relationships with their nonresidential mothers
5. children's relationships with their nonresidential fathers

These variables are the most important in determining whether there are close relationships and happiness in a family. What is our basis for saying that?

In 1994 Alan Acock, sociologist at Oregon State University, and David Demo, professor of family studies at the University of Missouri, conducted a study called *Family Diversity and Well-Being.* They surveyed 13,017 households, collecting information on four thousand variables that would represent American families and households in their full breadth.[38]

From this study, Acock and Demo have been able to identify which factors are most influential in shaping the happiness, well-being, and emotional adjustment of children and parents. They studied the simultaneous effects of family structure, family resources, background variables, and family relationship variables. They found that family structure has a modest effect; family resources such as income and education have little effect; background variables have very little effect; and family relationship variables have an enormous effect on family happiness, irrespective of family structure, family resources, or background variables.

Family relationship variables are the aspects of family that can be influenced by congregational ministries. In the following list,

Dr. David Stoop summarizes what many counselors and psychologists have defined as characteristics of a healthy family:
• It is balanced; it can adapt to change.
• It handles problems on a family basis, not just an individual basis.
• It has solid cross-generational connections.
• It maintains clear boundaries between individuals.
• Its individuals deal with one another directly.
• It accepts and encourages differences.
• It accepts the thoughts and feelings of others.
• Its members know what they can give to others and what they can receive from others.
• It maintains a positive emotional climate.
• Its members value the family as "a good place to live."
• Its members learn from one another and encourage feedback.
• Its members are allowed to experience their own emptiness.

In short, the well-adjusted family has found a balance between two seemingly contradictory dynamics—being close and being separate. When either of these two dynamics gets seriously out of balance, the result is family dysfunction.[39]

God's desire for close family relationships can be viewed as a goal for closeness without possessiveness. It is a dimension of family life that a pastor can address.

A Vision for a Christian Family

We are aware, however, that a family is a complex organism in which the attitudes, values, and actions of each member interact with one another. Changes do not come easily, because of the unpredictable reaction of different members to any proposed change. Each individual family and each congregational family is unique. Though we recognize the family as a system in which each member often lives out a designated role, we believe changes are possible where there is both intention and willingness to live by God's promises in the Bible.

Eight desired outcomes (to be described in chapters 2 and 3) combine to shape the lives of children and youth. Each desired out-

come contributes to the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth. The more factors found in a family, the greater the likelihood that these ten characteristics will describe its youth.

We believe that these eight desired outcomes can be developed over time and that strong, life-shaping families are as possible today as they were fifty years ago. Many of today's families can prove this to be true. The one difference for today's families is that parents must become more intentional about what they do or don't do as a family. Becoming more intentional means doing for our families what we do in the area of health: stop doing the things that make for ill health (e.g., eating unhealthy foods, using drugs, smoking) and begin doing those things that make for good health (e.g., exercising, praying, eating healthy foods).

Chapters 2 and 3 identify those aspects of family life that make for good health and strength; chapter 2 identifies four factors that make for close family relationships, and chapter 3 identifies four factors that make for close relationships with God. If these factors are made a part of family life, they will vastly increase the probability that children will demonstrate the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth at high school graduation.

The Ten Characteristics are best established in a young person's life when home and congregation partner in nurturing faith, living well in Christ, and passing on the faith.

Strengthening Family Relationships

The diagram shows concentric circles with labels: FAMILY, CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILY in the inner circles, and CONGREGATION STRENGTHEN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS around the outer arc. The fan segments read:

- Parental Harmony
- Effective Communication
- Wise Parental Control
- Parental Nurturing
- Becoming Gospel-Oriented Parents
- Communicating Moral Values
- Being Involved in Service Activities
- Sharing Faith at Home
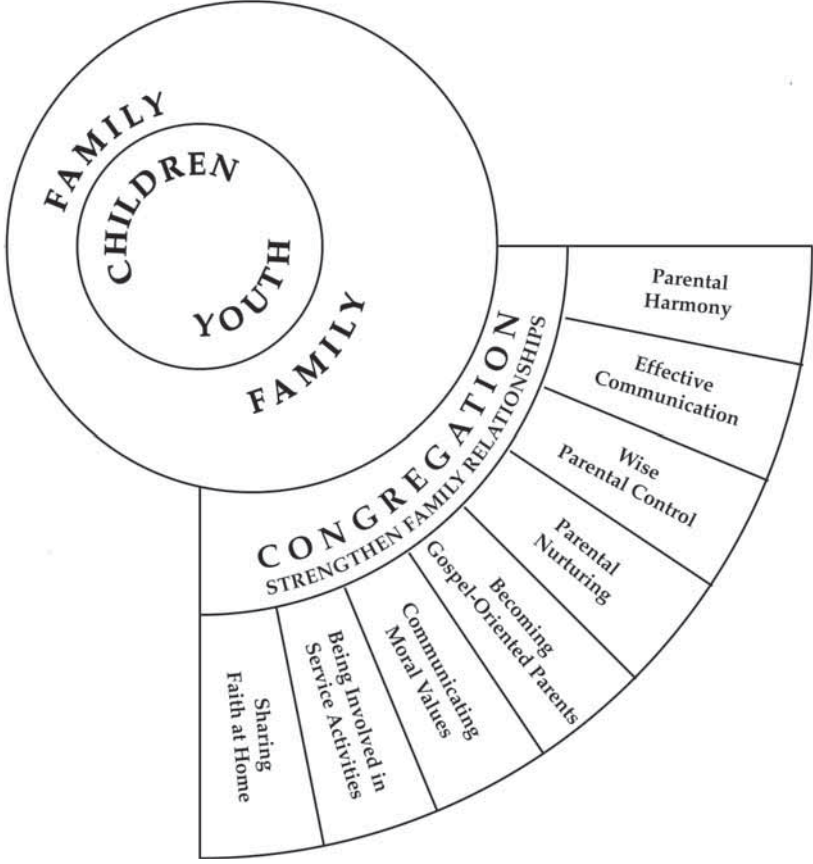
Close family relationships are important because faith is formed by the Holy Spirit through personal, trusting relationships. Healthy relationships within families can be developed and strengthened in four ways, each contributing to the formation of committed children and youth:

• parental harmony
• effective communication
• wise parental control
• parental nurturing

A Christian congregation can minister to families in all four ways because it is the one institution where membership and programs include all ages; it is the one organization whose purpose and message is to affect close family relationships; it is the one place where parents can experience the redemption found in a personal relationship with God. Through God, parents can find an inner sense of personal harmony that is essential for close relationships.

Parental Harmony

Parental harmony is the starting point. Of all the factors contributing to family disunity, marital discord is the strongest; it is at least twenty times more powerful a predictor of family disunity than is divorce.[1]

Parents set the tone and establish the atmosphere within a home. Their feelings about each other determine the climate of a home, establishing an atmosphere of love, trust, and security that nurtures the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth and Children. Parental warmth and affection are important factors in healthy child adjustment and in turn are linked to the quality of marital relationships.[2]

Acock and Demo find a direct relationship between children's well-being and parents' marital adjustment. Marital stability, specifically the mother's marital happiness, shapes the context in which children live.[3] Parental harmony is far more important than family structure in contributing to children's adjustment, self-esteem, and various measures of psychological well-being.[4] It enhances their

happiness, bolsters their academic performance, and plays a pivotal role in their socioemotional adjustment. The quality of family relationships accounts for much of the variation seen in the emotional adjustment of adolescents.[5]

Effects of Marital Discord

The importance of parental harmony in contributing to close relationships is seen in the long-lasting effects on children exposed to marital discord. In her fifteen-year study on the long-term effects of divorce on children, Judith Wallerstein found that almost half the children raised in families characterized by marital conflict, upon reaching young adulthood, were described as "worried, underachieving, self-deprecating, and sometimes angry young men and women. Many were involved in multiple relationships and impulsive marriages that ended in early divorce."[6]

A follow-up study conducted in 1993 to check the validity of Wallerstein's findings used longitudinal data from a national sample of American children born between 1965 and 1970. The study found that among eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds from disrupted families, 65 percent had poor relationships with their fathers, and 30 percent had poor relationships with their mothers. A total of 25 percent had dropped out of high school, and 40 percent had received psychological help. Although the study was controlled for demographic and socioeconomic differences, it nonetheless shows that youth from disrupted families are twice as likely to exhibit these problems as youth from nondisrupted families.[7]

The research evidence from a number of studies is overwhelming. Parental harmony contributes enormously to the emotional health of children, whereas marital conflict is devastating in its long-lasting effects. Without question, an important ministry of a congregation is to promote parental harmony.[8]

Dynamics That Erode Parental Harmony

Those who conduct discussion groups with parents report that most parents find it difficult to acknowledge there are any difficulties in their family. Many will say their family is very loving and caring when it is not so. Others will refer to their family as quite religious when there is little evidence of this quality. The one thing a

family is most ashamed of is often the very thing they try to cover over with a myth.

When parents were asked to characterize themselves in the *Young Adolescent-Parent National Survey,* the adjectives that the ten thousand parents favored to describe their relationships with others were *gentle, kind, confident,* and *warm.* Though fathers saw themselves as less able to devote themselves completely to other people than did mothers, they still regarded themselves as strongly helpful and somewhat aware of the feelings of others. Mothers considered themselves able to devote themselves completely to others, aware of people's feelings, and very warm in interpersonal relationships.[9]

Few parents realize that their behavior may be altered by emotional dynamics hidden from their conscious awareness that can subtly cloud their understanding and perception. If this happens, otherwise loving and insightful parents lose their ability to see that certain actions are inappropriate and at times hurtful to family relationships.

Unhealthy Behaviors Experienced in One's Family of Origin

As children grow into adults, they often become more and more like their parents, repeating behaviors their parents displayed at home. This can be a major deterrent to parental harmony. A pastor's wife once said, "What can I do about this habit of yelling at my kids? I don't believe that's the way to handle a situation, but it was the way Mom did it at home. It frightens me to think my children will do the same unless I change."

Repeating past behaviors can result in perpetuating verbal or physical abuse of one's spouse. If a father is critical, abusive, or at times violent with his wife, his son may be inclined to similar behaviors as an adult.

The behavior adopted from one's parental home, of course, may not be as obvious as verbal or physical abuse. It may be as subtle as the tendency not to express one's feelings, not to say "I love you," not to take an interest in the children, or not to pay attention to household responsibilities.

I (Merton Strommen) was influenced by my father, a Lutheran pastor who had a reputation of being strict. I had no idea I would repeat his behavior when, at age eighteen, I became a schoolteacher responsible for twenty-eight rural students in seven grades. I was

determined to be a good teacher, and I worked hard at it, but, as I soon learned, my approach needed changing.

One night at the farmhouse where I roomed, I received a visit from the chairman and a member of the school board. They wanted to talk privately with me. They told me that some of the children were afraid of me and did not want to go to school. At first I was shocked, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that my dad's strictness was surfacing in me and my teaching.

With this new insight, I set out to make changes that would positively affect the atmosphere of the school. Instead of pressing for perfection and correct responses from students, I began to concentrate on building relationships with them. I invited the students to help me put on the play *A Christmas Carol,* and I proposed the formation of a melody and rhythm band. In a short time, the students and I had developed an atmosphere conducive to working and learning as a team.

Because my strict demeanor was brought to my attention early on, I was able to recognize the pattern and make some important changes in how I related to the students. As a result we developed an atmosphere of working and learning together.

Wounded Memories, Hurtful Remembrances

A second deterrent to parental harmony is found in traumatic past events. Past experiences can profoundly affect how a person perceives and relates to a spouse and children. Unhealed and wounded memories can hinder people from developing close, long-lasting relationships. For this reason, mothers and fathers need to take time to recall and share experiences of their past with their spouse and their children. Doing so can help a spouse better understand a current reaction to an unhappy situation.

I (Merton Strommen) have a friend who told of an experience that haunted her throughout the few years of her married life. When she was in her early twenties, her mother died suddenly. No longer living in her hometown, my friend had to rush home for the funeral and hadn't had a chance to grieve. Her family gathered in the church basement prior to the service, and at the sight of their grief my friend began to unleash her feelings. The pastor, noticing her sobs, took her aside and sternly told her to stop grieving lest she unnerve her father. In response, she stuffed her feelings inside and buried her grief.

In the years that followed, she was haunted by a recurring nightmare in which her mother dug herself out of the grave, walked disheveled to the window of her father's house, and saw the woman to whom he was now married. Angered, her mother went to the door and pounded with her fists.

It was not until my friend's marriage had ended in divorce that she was finally able to shed some tears. Reverting back to the role of a daughter who had cried in her mother's lap, she cried for four hours over both the loss of her mother and the loss of her husband. After this period of grief, she felt a sense of peace, and never again did her nightmarish dreams recur.

Many people are hindered from developing close, long-lasting relationships because of unhealed, wounded memories. That is why a ministry that enables people to uncover such memories and become free of them is so releasing and redeeming.

Unmet Personal Needs, Unfulfilled Ambitions

A third deterrent to parental harmony occurs when parents try to live out unfulfilled dreams through their children. In doing so, they become prey to emotional upheavals every time their children show an inadequacy or fail to live up to the parents' expectations. This often shows up in youth soccer or baseball games when a father who never made it in athletics yells in disgust, trying to coach his child to succeed in doing what he never succeeded in doing. Or, a father-coach expects his child to do better than the others simply so the father can look good as coach.

Feelings of Failure

A fourth deterrent is found in parents who feel like failures. Half the parents in the *Young Adolescent-Parent National Survey* carry a nagging thought that they are not as good a parent as they should be. A national study of church women shows that this feeling of having failed as a parent increases with age and is strongest in widowed women over sixty-five.[10]

It is difficult to realize how deep and pervasive are the feelings of inadequacy that trouble many parents. Fathers thinking they have not succeeded in the work world are especially sensitive to how they are regarded as a parent. Mothers who try to maintain a job and care for household duties are particularly conscious of how

their children respond at home or school. Of the fourteen concerns that surfaced in a national study of church women, the top ranked concern is worry over children.[10]

Parents who have been self-critical and troubled with low self-esteem since their youth are especially susceptible to feelings of failure; hence, they are likely to overreact when their children fail to obey or show proper respect. They interpret this as another sign of failure. Their natural reaction to the misbehaving child is to become more controlling and rule-oriented parents.

Each of the four deterrents to parental harmony can cause parents to become extremely angry about insignificant incidents. In some cases parents become so angry they are afraid they might hurt their spouse or children. Others react by becoming depressed and withdrawing into a lonely and condemning silence the whole family experiences but does not understand. Either reaction creates marital conflict and establishes a climate troubling to the children.

Stresses That Intensify Underlying Dynamics

Stress intensifies the effects of the four deterrents to parental harmony and further disturbs other relationships within the family. This stress is created by such things as work overload, the loss of a job, financial hardship, a major illness, a tragic accident, a natural disaster, a disability for a family member, a move to a new community, or an arrest.

A well-documented factor in the lives of working mothers is *multiple-role stress*. Although many mothers today are part of the work force, most of their husbands have not significantly increased their own household and child care responsibilities.

Since 1965 John Robinson, a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, has conducted four studies on how Americans use their time. Every ten years he has asked a group of several thousand randomly selected adults to keep a diary for one day, requiring them to record what they did at particular times throughout the day. From these studies Robinson has concluded that the proportion of time parents spend with their children hasn't changed much in thirty years: mothers continue to spend about four times as much time with their children as fathers do.[11]

Other studies support Robinson's conclusion. In her study of fifty families, social scientist A. Hochschild reported that this un-

equal sharing of responsibility is the single most important cause of marital conflict.[12]

Another stress factor that disturbs family relationships is the loss of a child. Psychologist David M. Kaplan and his research team studied forty families that had lost a child to leukemia. Seventy percent of the parents showed evidence of serious marital problems. Forty percent of the families noticed the development of a serious drinking problem in at least one parent, and 43 percent of the mothers lost their ability to perform household duties. In addition to Kaplan's study, other studies show a high rate of divorce in families that lose a child.[13]

In most cases, the negative effects of any stress factor can be lessened by better communication between husband and wife. Because each partner experiences grief and handles emotional difficulties differently, it is important that couples share and listen to each other's deepest thoughts, feelings, and judgments. My wife and I (Merton Strommen) noticed the strong difference between our experiences when we compared first-draft copies of our account of the death of our son David. The difference was so marked that we retained these separate accounts in our book *Five Cries of Grief*.[14]

When good communication between husband and wife does not occur, the negative effects of stress can result in an even more stressful situation—divorce. As the divorce rate continues to increase—up 60 percent between 1980 and 1990—some parents and children continue to suffer from its effects.[15]

Parental roles differ substantially after divorce. Before parental separation, fathers usually carry major responsibility for the economic support of the family, but after divorce, the responsibility shifts substantially to mothers. This means that in single-parent families, the mother bears not only the load of household and parental responsibilities but also the pressing load of financial responsibility. This can often result in negative feelings toward the absent father, which can further affect the general climate of the home.

As the climate of the home changes, children become affected. In the first year after divorce, both boys and girls show more anxious, demanding, noncompliant, aggressive, and dependent behaviors with peers and adults than do children in nondivorced families. Young boys seem to be particularly affected. The result is a spiral of escalating hostility between mother and son.

The effects, nevertheless, are seen with all children, no matter their sex or age. The effects of marital discord and family disruption resulting from divorce are still visible in children some twelve to twenty-two years later. Children of divorced parents often develop poor relationships with their parents and high levels of problem behavior.[16]

> Parental separation and divorce are disruptive life course events that usually restructure relational networks and generally depress religious participation. Divorce and the death of a parent can also precipitate emotional crises for parents and children alike, which can be expressed as resentment or anger toward God.[17]

If remarriage occurs after a divorce, another stressful situation is introduced—stepparenting. Initially children can be resistant to the entrance of a stepfather or stepmother, because they view this person as an intruder who broke up their parents' marriage. Consequently, it takes longer for trust and acceptance to become established in a stepfamily. However, over time a sense of well-being can develop. In their study of American households, Acock and Demo found that mothers in stepfamilies exhibit a sense of well-being that is considerably higher than mothers who divorce but do not remarry. In fact, the sense of well-being is almost as high for re-married mothers as for mothers in first-marriage families. The initial stress apparently mitigates after the first three years of a newly formed family.[18]

What Congregations Can Do to Promote Parental Harmony

What about the dark side of family life in a congregation? To what extent are divorce, domestic violence and abuse, AIDS, suicide, and incest taking a toll on family life? That is what members of the Family Ministry Committee for the Southeastern California Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church wondered. For seven years they had been addressing the easy family issues. They had scheduled seminars on preparing for marriage, enriching marriage, developing parenting skills, and learning to evaluate family history. They had built an extensive resource library of videos, seminar workbooks, and audiotapes. They wanted to keep a positive attitude, yet they felt uneasy. If bad things are happening, they

thought, and we pretend not to notice, are we really fulfilling our congregational ministry? How does this affect church members? If we avoid the dark side of family life, will the congregation think the church is completely out of touch with reality?

With the help of the Center for Health Research at Loma Linda University, the committee decided to carry out a scientifically designed survey of families. Sixteen hundred names were randomly selected from the conference membership rolls. The committee then contacted each chosen member by mail or in person. Unfortunately the survey yielded a response rate of only 35 percent, too small a return rate to accurately generalize the findings. The survey results do demonstrate, however, that there is indeed a dark side to family life in congregations. It even exists in a church body (Seventh-day Adventist) known for its promotion of high standards and biblically oriented lifestyle.

The list of percentages that follow reflects only the experiences of those who responded to the survey. (Note: one can assume that if all who were asked to complete the survey had responded, the percentages would be lower. It is likely that many who did not respond felt the questions did not apply to them and hence did not participate.)

- Twenty-four percent have been divorced or permanently separated.
- Thirty percent were physically abused at home before age eighteen.
- Forty-three percent were emotionally abused at home before age eighteen.
- Sixteen percent were victims of incest before age eighteen.
- Thirteen percent have abused drugs or alcohol.
- Thirty-seven percent have lived with a drug or alcohol abuser.
- Thirty-five percent know someone who is HIV positive (has the virus that causes AIDS) or has AIDS.
- Twenty-seven percent have had suicidal inclinations.

The Family Ministry Committee published the results of the survey in a book called *Resources for Family Ministry.*[19] The book also addresses such issues as domestic violence, eating disorders, suicide, unwed pregnancies, child abuse, and rape, giving a description of each behavior, symptoms of each behavior, and suggestions for controlling each behavior—both immediately and over time.

In addition to providing this printed resource, the Family Ministry Committee has also established an anonymous counseling service for clergy families out of the conviction that marital conflict in a pastor's home can create unhealthy congregations. The need for this service is indicated by the fact that in a conference of 180 pastors, seventy made use of this counseling service.

What did those experiencing crises view as helpful and redemptive? According to the authors of *Resources for Family Ministry,* Fred Kasischke and Audray Johnson, here are the main suggestions survey respondents made:[20]

• Personal contact is most effective. Assistance with child care, calls on the telephone, or home visits are especially appreciated.
• Support groups are essential. Ninety-three percent of the survey respondents say the Church should provide support groups for people experiencing crises.
• Family training seminars help. Seminars that focus on family crises and equip individuals to communicate better are highly recommended.
• Pastoral counseling is helpful, but 92 percent of the respondents felt that pastors should be trained to be more effective in counseling.
• Printed material has limited effectiveness. Though viewed to be of some value, such materials are least effective in achieving personal healing.

The authors indicate that healing takes place when family crises are openly acknowledged, when families feel supported in a caring group setting, when families experience concrete acts of love and concern, and when all efforts are bathed in prayer.

The All Saints Church in Phoenix, Arizona, has made great efforts to build harmony between spouses in the community. Church members took a look at marriages and divorce rates and recognized the need for the congregation to be intentional about supporting marriages and strengthening families.

Under the leadership of Linda Staats, the minister of faith and daily life at All Saints, the congregation developed a marriage ministry. The church began by training married couples who have been married three or more years and who exhibit a strong faith to be marriage mentors to engaged couples. Each couple took the Prepare and Enrich Inventory, developed by David Olson of the Univer-

sity of Minnesota, and attended six weeks of two-and-a-half-hour classes on marriage enrichment, during which the couples became a support group for one another. The couples were asked how they could best use their gifts to mentor an engaged couple. Some chose to work one on one with a couple while others chose to lead support groups of engaged couples. In three years, six such support groups were formed.

As a policy, the congregation's family ministry works with any couple that wants to develop a strong, Christ-centered marriage. Each couple pays a fee of four hundred dollars that covers the various wedding expenses and the cost of premarriage preparations and postmarriage support services. Like their mentors, each couple must go through the Prepare and Enrich Inventory. They also must attend a daylong Marriage Marathon Retreat in which they participate in a communication workshop. Continuing support is offered for every newly married couple either through a small support group or an individual mentor couple.

The All Saints marriage ministry program works with young people before they become engaged. Mentors teach young people how to recognize a healthy relationship between spouses and how to choose a mate who will help foster a healthy relationship.

Effective Communication

A second factor in strengthening family relationships lies in the quality of communication between parents and their children. An important part of children's development and well-being is the relationships they have with their parents. The more time children spend with their fathers, the better their measures of well-being and emotional adjustment. Children's well-being is highest when mothers interact enjoyably with their children, and it is lowest when interaction becomes difficult and unenjoyable.[21]

Communication in the home is vital because it contributes so powerfully to these family relationships. When open communication is lacking between husband and wife, it usually is lacking between parent and child. Though easiest to establish when children are small, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish as

Figure 3

Change in Youth's Desire
for Communication with Parents

Scale Average

Girls

3.5

Boys

3.4

3.3

3.2

3.1

From Strommen and Strommen,
Five Cries of Parents, p. 75

Grade in School 5   6   7   8   9

Question: "For each of the following five items, tell if it is something you want to talk about with your parents more, less, or the same as you do now." (Participants in the survey were then to answer this question for issues relating to drugs, friends, school, ideas of right and wrong, and sex.)
5 = much more; 4 = a little more; 3 = about the same; 2 = a little less; 1 = much less

the children move into early adolescence; usually after fifth grade, boys and girls begin to lose interest in communicating with their parents. Figure 3 shows the result of a study of eight thousand early adolescents, shows this decline.

Though this decline in interest is real, it does not indicate a complete loss of interest. The first study conducted by Search Institute (1960), a national study of Lutheran youth and adults, revealed the extent to which communication in the home was regrettably lacking for most church youth and parents. These youth and parents said they wished they could talk with one another about significant issues, but for some reason this was not a part of their family lives.

Thirty-two years later (1992), Search Institute probed further into this issue by conducting a national survey of youth and parents in eleven major Catholic and Protestant denominations. To gain insight into young people's desire for parent-youth commu-

nication, the institute described typical adolescent issues and then asked, "If you were in the following situations, to whom would you most likely turn for help or advice?" Here were their choices:

- a parent or guardian
- a friend my age
- an adult friend (not a relative)
- a priest, minister, or rabbi
- a teacher or school counselor
- nobody

One might expect that the majority would prefer their peer group and select the response "a friend my age." One also might expect that fewer youth would select "parent or guardian" if they thought their parents were serious about matters of faith. These expectations were tested.

A sample of one thousand parents was selected from the data bank of more than ten thousand parents who had participated in an earlier study called the *Early Adolescent Study*. Chosen were parents who considered religion important, who were service oriented, who were concerned about their child's views of right or wrong, who allowed their children to question rules, and who prayed.

After the parents were isolated, their adolescent children were selected from the data bank and their preferences noted regarding with whom they would prefer discussing particular problems. Here are the results:

- When having trouble in school, I would turn to . . .
  a parent or guardian = 55 percent
  a friend my age = 15 percent
  a teacher = 17 percent
  all others = 12 percent
- When wondering how to handle my feelings, I would turn to . . .
  a parent = 51 percent
  a friend = 21 percent
  nobody = 9 percent
  all others = 18 percent
- If some of my friends start using drugs or alcohol, I would turn to . . .
  a parent or guardian = 45 percent
  a friend my age = 19 percent

a teacher = 10 percent
an adult friend = 9 percent
nobody = 9 percent
a minister or relative = 12 percent
- When having questions about sex, I would turn to . . .
a parent or guardian = 53 percent
a friend my age = 19 percent
nobody = 10 percent
all others = 17 percent
- When feeling guilty about something I have done, I would turn to . . .
a parent or guardian = 40 percent
a friend my age = 25 percent
a minister or priest = 11 percent
nobody = 9 percent
all others = 15 percent
- When deciding what to do with my life, I would turn to . . .
a parent or guardian = 66 percent
nobody = 10 percent
a friend my age = 6 percent
all others = 18 percent

Although the percentage of adolescents who chose "a parent or guardian" diminished as the adolescents moved from fifth to ninth grade, never did the percentage of those who chose "a friend my age" equal or exceed the percentage of those who chose "a parent or guardian." It should be noted, however, that parents in this study are members of a congregation and may be seen as more trustworthy because of this.

This study, just like Search Institute's first study done in 1960, reveals that both youth and parents want to communicate with one another on issues that are more than superficial. Youth prefer to discuss their problems and concerns with their parents rather than their peer group even though they may see their parents as being serious about their faith.

In spite of this declared interest in communicating with one's parents on sensitive issues, again only a minority of youth reports that this actually happens. When I (Merton Strommen) was listening to a group of young people evaluate a videotape called *Learning*

the Language of Faith in the Home, I noticed that they spoke appreciatively of the family devotions they saw, wishing their parents had started this with them when they were young. When asked about starting family devotions now, they responded negatively, saying that because their family had never discussed important issues, it would seem phony and unnatural. When asked to identify what they deemed necessary for communication to be established in their home, they came up with three excellent suggestions for parents:

1. Take time to share ideas and listen to what we have to say.
2. Initiate discussions using current world events. Such discussions will build a bridge of communication over which religious subjects can more easily move.
3. Give us the freedom to disagree with you and to hold a position that differs from yours.

This third suggestion was given with some feeling. The young people wanted the freedom to explore various positions in order to arrive at a position they could feel was theirs.

These youth, whose parents were leaders in the church, appeared convinced that once communication had been established about ordinary events, discussions of faith could become natural in their homes. This was indicated by their willingness to pray together with their family and to use the Bible in discussions of current events and issues.

Communication, a key to close family relationships, needs to be improved in most families. We (the authors) see this every time we do a congregational survey in preparation for a *Vision-to-Action* workshop (an eight-hour event to establish priorities for youth and family ministry). In this survey youth and adults are asked to rank the importance of several family functions and to tell how well each is being achieved in their own families. The function that invariably draws one of the highest ratings of importance is "to encourage parent-youth communication through classes on discussing adolescent issues with youth." This function, however, usually ranks among the lowest for achievement; the gap between the rating of importance and the rating of achievement for this function is usually one of the largest found among the thirty-two items in the survey.

How Communication Might Be Encouraged

H. D. Grotevant and C. R. Cooper have studied the effect of different patterns of family communication on adolescent identity formation. They have found that boys are more likely to achieve a sense of identity when their father initiates compromise, inquires about their feelings, and allows for differences of opinion. They also found that all family interactions are important to a girls' identity formation.[22]

Congregations can help parents do a better job of communicating with one another and their children, but one wonders to what extent this is being done. In the *Effective Christian Education* study, Christian education coordinators in each of the six major denominations were asked if their congregation was "providing classes for parents on effective parenting or communications." Only 8 percent indicated that their congregation was providing such assistance.[23]

To address this issue, The Youth & Family Institute has developed a training program, an adaptation of the Peer Ministry training program of Dr. Barbara Varenhorst, called *Faith and Skills for Parenting.* The program helps parents communicate better with their children, become more aware of the importance of good communication, and develop caring skills for their home settings.

The *Adoption Study* conducted by Search Institute further identifies the importance of communication in the home. It shows that a parental stance of openness and a willingness to talk are the two most important factors in determining whether adopted adolescents are referred for psychological counseling. The study also shows that adoptive parents are seemingly more aware of the importance of communication than are biological parents and therefore work harder at conversing with their adopted adolescent. A total of 65 percent of the adolescents in this study say, "I have lots of good conversations with my parents." Such communication helps bring about the needed close relationships.[24]

Verbal communication, however, is not the only form of communication that helps form these relationships. Communication also involves a ministry of presence in which parent and child spend time together. Dr. David Elkind, noted child and adolescent psychologist, stated in a 1997 conference to Christian educators in San Diego that "when children act up they probably do not need a time-out, but a time-in. They need to be with their parents and be

included in a close family." As a man who loves sports, I (Merton Strommen) found that when I was a young parent, wonderful communication occurred when I played basketball or football or rode bikes with my children. We enjoyed these times together, and playing together helped us know one another better even though we exchanged very few words.

Starting Early with Communication in the Home

Communication between parents and children starts early. During the first three years of a child's life, connections between neurons are formed in the brain, leading to the development of language, emotion regulation, and academic ability. By talking and reading to their children during the first few months of life, parents establish the foundation for language development.

To test the effect of communication at an early age, two psychologists, Betty Hart and Todd Risley, recruited forty-two families with infants between seven and twelve months of age. Their parents were either welfare recipients, blue-collar workers, or professionals. Once a month for three years, observers visited the families' homes, recording how much communication between mother and child took place while the mothers cooked dinner, folded laundry, and watched television. The analysis of these observations, published in Hart and Risley's book *Meaningful Differences,* revealed a distinct correlation between social class and level of communication.[25]

"The differences were amazing," says Risley. "The welfare child heard six hundred words an hour, the working class child heard twelve hundred words an hour, and the professional child heard 2,100 words an hour—a staggering amount." Not only did children from highly verbal families hear more words, but also the parents asked them more questions and repeated or expanded upon comments the children made. This positive feedback reinforces children's verbal expression and learning and balances the more negative, controlling comments parents make, like, "Get your feet off the table" or "Put your shoes back on."

Risley found that by the time the children reached four years of age, the disparity in the number of words they knew showed up on IQ and vocabulary tests. Three-year-olds from the talkative families had higher IQ and vocabulary scores than three-year-olds from

taciturn families. Similar results were found in the *Fullerton Longitudinal Study*, which tracked the development of 130 children from the time they were one year old until they were eight years old. The evidence clearly shows that communication in the home is vital for a number of reasons:

• It enhances the academic success of the child.
• It helps shape the child's self-image.
• It builds bridges for sustaining communication about personal issues.
• It creates close family relationships.

Deterrents to Husband-Wife Communication

If communication is so vital, why is it so often lacking? A large part of the answer lies in gender differences. Gender differences can create difficulties in communication between men and women. The *Boston Couples Study* revealed that females tend to disclose material that is personal and feeling-oriented, whether positive or negative. Males, on the other hand, tend to favor information that is factual, relatively neutral, and positive in tone.[26]

In addition to their difference in choice of subject matter, men and women differ in their reasons for avoiding self-disclosure. This became evident in a study conducted by Burke, Weir, and Harnson, in which a group of husbands and wives were asked why they avoid self-disclosure. Almost half the wives said "they did not want to burden or worry their spouse." Only 18 percent of the males chose this same response. More men identified their spouse's lack of knowledge of the situation and their own desire to keep home and work problems separate as the most important reasons for avoiding self-disclosure. None of the women gave these reasons.[27]

Gender differences in communication become most evident when a couple loses a child. Men and women grieve differently, and this contributes to their inability to understand each other. Because men favor the factual and more objective aspects of life, they often find it difficult to share their grief reactions. When my wife and I conducted grief sessions for parents who had lost a loved one, we noticed that usually only mothers attended. Privately they would confess that they had tried to bring their husbands but found them unwilling to participate.

A significant part of communication between husband and wife is the nonverbal aspect of communication. To illustrate, husbands of unhappy wives are typically less able to read their wives nonverbal cues than those of strangers. Where there is misinterpretation of facial expressions and an inability to sense the tone of one another, misunderstanding and ill will are more likely to occur.[28]

Deterrents to Parent-Youth Communication

Certain patterns of parental behavior serve as turn-offs to youths' interest in communication with their parents. These deterrents are rooted in parents' preoccupation with their own concerns. Some common patterns of parental behavior illustrate how parents fail in listening to their children:

• listening with half an ear
• listening with a judging attitude
• listening to recall a similar experience in their own life

A parent who listens with half an ear pretends to listen but continues doing whatever he or she is involved in. It doesn't take an adolescent long to realize that she or he does not have Mom's or Dad's full attention. This can cause the adolescent to walk away in anger.

A parent's judging attitude reveals itself when Mom or Dad says something like, "Yes, but . . ." or "Yes, I hear you, but I disagree with what you are saying." Instead of listening to understand what an adolescent is saying, the parent judges the attitudes or behavior of the youth. When a parent corrects or passes judgment on the attitudes or behaviors of an adolescent, he or she only stymies further conversation.

A parent who listens to recall a similar experience in his or her own life is making a well-meaning but self-centered effort to be reassuring. Instead of actually listening to the youth, the parent says, in effect, "I want you to listen to something that happened to me." This shifts attention away from the concern of the youth and refocuses it on the personal interest of the parent, causing the young person to feel that further conversation is useless.

These three listening mistakes hit home with a lot of parents. Unfortunately, these common deterrents to parent-youth communication prevent the close relationships that result from commu-

nication of the heart. Learning to listen with the heart is the only way parents can come to understand one another and their children.

What Congregations Can Do to Teach Effective Communication

Because listening is basic to communication, a useful ministry in a congregation is to help husband and wife learn to listen from the heart. Once this basic approach is mastered, parents can use it to develop closer relationships with their children. The three important guidelines for listening discussed below can be promoted by congregations and practiced in congregational events. They are not techniques, but they are stances to be learned over time as one shifts one's approach from being the superior person in the conversation to being one who listens and talks as a peer.

Guideline 1: Encourage Expression of Feelings

Listen in ways that encourage expression of feelings. Not until the speaker identifies feelings with words can there be any real communication. To encourage such expression, the listener needs to convey an attitude of warm interest, free from a spirit of judgment or criticism. A spouse or adolescent can quickly judge an attitude from the listener's tone of voice or facial expressions.

To encourage such expression of feelings, a listener can use verbal responses. *Affirming responses* such as "I can understand what you are saying" or "I appreciate your willingness to tell me that" make it easier for the speaker to continue. *General leads* that give the speaker freedom to share what he or she chooses work better than specific questions. Authority figures tend to use specific questions that can put a speaker on the defensive or in a dependency role. When specific questions are used repeatedly, answers tend to get shorter and shorter until eventually conversation stops. More general questions, such as "Do you mind telling me more about that event?" or "Could you give me an example?" convey an open-endedness that allows the other person to share what he or she wishes.

Guideline 2:
Listen to Discern the Other Person's Perspective

Trying to view a situation through the eyes of another is a deliberate effort to know the inner life and feelings of that person. A listener can help this active process along by using two additional kinds of *feedback responses.*

One feedback response is to convey that the listener is trying to understand what is being said. Such phrases and questions as, "Let me tell you what I am hearing to see if I am on target," or "In other words, this is how you view the situation. Does this sound accurate?" can allow the speaker to clarify any misconceptions and then continue with the conversation.

A second useful feedback response involves clarification or interpretation. Rather than just restating or summarizing what has been heard, the listener tries to interpret what she or he has heard. The interpretation comes from listening with a "third ear"—noticing the feelings being expressed along with the words and putting them together. A clarification offered in a tentative way could be as follows: "You feel you're being picked on. Is that right?" or "You feel blamed for everything that happens. Is that correct?" If the interpretation is off target, the other person is encouraged to continue talking and correct the impression. The net effect of this kind of listening from the heart is a closer relationship between the two involved in the conversation.

Guideline 3: Listen with a Sense of Hope

It is important to express the conviction that there is hope, regardless of the situation at hand. This hope can be based on the listener's faith in the speaker and in the possibilities seen in that individual. The ultimate source of hope, however, is centered in the belief that with God nothing is hopeless. The listener's confidence in God's power to transform gives the one struggling with a problem a sense of hope. Christ is present, reaching over the shoulder of the listener to transform the situation.

Wise Parental Control

A third contributor to close family relationships is wise parental control—that is, the way parents set boundaries and exercise discipline in their home. Parents' approach to discipline shapes not only the emotional climate of a family but also the child's personality, character, and response to the Gospel.

Three Types of Parental Discipline

Through a lifetime of careful studies, Diana Baumrind was able to identify three types of parental discipline:
• autocratic
• permissive
• democratic
Most parents tend to use one of these three types of discipline. Each approach is associated with contrasting kinds of behavior. Autocratic and permissive discipline create distance between parent and adolescent, whereas democratic discipline encourages family closeness. In other words, the way parents treat their children evokes either a positive response or a rebellious rejection of the very behavior parents idealize.

Parents who discipline their children autocratically—with rigid rules, harsh words, and cruel punishment—can expect to see their children involved in rebellious or at-risk behaviors. Parents who permissively give their children whatever they want can also expect to see negative effects. Parents who use a democratic approach, however—an approach that is flexible and Gospel-oriented—are likely to see their children developing the Ten Characteristics of Youth Committed to Christ and living a life of witness and service.[28]

Search Institute tested Baumrind's findings with data from one of its own studies of 10,467 parents drawn into a national random sample. The result of Search's studies are included in the descriptions that follow.[29]

Autocratic Discipline

This type of control characterizes one who values obedience as a virtue and favors punitive or forceful methods to curb the self-

will of a child. As a method of discipline it is not foreign to church people. In Search Institute's *Early Adolescent Study,* four thousand of the ten thousand–plus parents leaned toward autocratic discipline. In response to the statement "I will not allow my child to question the rules I make," one in ten parents said they "often" take this stance, and another 30 percent admitted to taking this stance "sometimes."[30]

An even stronger indication of parents' tendency to be more rigid or controlling was their response to the statement "I expect my child to believe I am always right." A surprising 19 percent of the mothers and 25 percent of the fathers said this is "often" true for them. If we include the many who agreed that they "sometimes" take this position, we would find that half the parents of early adolescents try to give the impression that they are always right at various times.

Bradley Strahan, a psychologist at an Australian college, highlights the significance of control in parent-child relationships. When children reach adolescence, a major change they must make involves entering into a new relationship with their parents. The ways parents respond to this change are good indicators of whether the adolescents will achieve a sense of independence without disconnecting from the family. Strahan also points out that adolescents whose parents adopt an autocratic approach to parenting are less likely to engage in the vital exploration processes of adolescence and are therefore more likely to adopt external rather than internal moral standards. Generally, these adolescents are more prone to peer pressures because they have learned to rely on external sources of control and approval rather than internal self-control.[31]

In a two-year longitudinal study of adolescents' moral reasoning, L. J. Walker and J. H. Taylor found that when parents inquired about children's opinions, asked clarifying questions, and paraphrased the children's words to ensure understanding, the children were more likely to grow in their moral reasoning. Parents who directly challenged, lectured, or critiqued their children were most likely to have children who developed very little moral reasoning over the time of the study; in fact, the nature of parent-child interaction was more predictive of growth in moral reasoning than was the influence of the parents' own level of moral reasoning.[32]

In spite of its negative effects on close family relationships, many parents use autocratic discipline with increasing frequency as close relationships begin to decline. Search Institute discovered in a study of 7,050 adolescents (a national random sample of youth from several denominations) that in families of overly strict or controlling parents the greatest rebelliousness takes place.

A Study of Generations (a study based on a national random sample of Lutherans) found that parents who were autocratic in their approach to discipline tended to be law-oriented in their understanding of Christianity, viewing Christianity as basically a set of rules and standards that must be obeyed.[33] The sobering evidence is that adolescents raised under autocratic control are more likely to engage in stealing, lying, fighting, and vandalism, and to experience feelings of social alienation and age prejudice throughout their lives. In addition, these youth are more likely to reject traditional moral standards and involvement in a congregation and are less likely to relate well to people, instead adopting a prejudicial and judgmental spirit.

Permissive Discipline

Permissive parents see themselves as a resource to be used as children wish—not as the people responsible for shaping their children's future behavior. Strangely, this approach can be as negative in its effects on children (and on close family relationships) as an autocratic approach.

Children raised by permissive parents are less likely to go out of their way to help people and less likely to live by the moral standards of their parents. They are more likely, however, to become involved in such hedonistic behaviors as use and abuse of alcohol, drugs, and sex and are more likely to seek out movies that are sexually explicit and erotic. Children living in such homes have trouble believing their parents really care about them. They often interpret permissiveness as rejection.[34]

Despite its obvious negative effects, a significant number of church people lean toward permissive parenting. When asked how often they let their children do whatever they want to do, more than one-third (37 percent) of parents responded "often" or "very often." One-fifth of parents questioned admitted to being too lenient, often letting their children off easy. The significance here is

that this failure to set boundaries contributes neither to close family life nor to adolescents' moral development.

Democratic Discipline

Democratic parents value both independence and disciplined conformity in their children. They combine firmness with the freedom of a democratic setting, affirming their children's individual qualities and style while at the same time setting standards for future conduct.

Search Institute's *Early Adolescent Study* found that when asked to respond to this statement—"I give my child a chance to talk over rules not liked or understood"—more than half the parents claimed to do this "often."

Adolescents raised under this type of discipline are far more likely to reflect positive characteristics; they are more likely to be service oriented, concerned about people, free from feelings of alienation, and committed to a religious faith. In addition to its positive effects on children, democratic discipline also fosters family closeness and parental affection.

A study designed to assess the possible connection between parents' use of social control and college students' use of marijuana reinforces the positive long-term effects of democratic discipline. Researchers found a high use of marijuana among students whose parents were permissive disciplinarians and a medium use among those whose parents were autocratic disciplinarians. The students who reflected a low use of marijuana were those raised by democratic disciplinarians. Researchers concluded that the quality of parent-child interaction, the parents' respect for the children's participation, and the mutual sharing and listening to one another, fostered a commitment to the parents' values.[35]

What Congregations Can Do to Encourage Wise Parental Control

The method of discipline a parent uses strongly influences the behavior of the children and the closeness of the family members. For a congregation wishing to further strong, life-shaping families, it is clear that an important aspect of congregational ministry is one that helps young parents adopt a democratic approach.[36]

Offering classes that teach young people (including young parents) how to establish clear rules and boundaries, how to be consistent in defining and applying clear consequences when boundaries are broken, how to discipline when not in the presence of others, how to handle conflict in a positive way, how to use good judgment to take a flexible stance, and how to avoid the use of sarcasm can be a good way to start.

The limits this type of approach places on children are very effective. Children and youth do best when they grow up with a strong sense of what is expected of them. Young people whose parents limit certain activities and place restrictions on where and when they may be involved are more likely to have positive attitudes about their God, their church, and their family.[37]

Parental Nurturing

A fourth contributor to strong family relationships is parental nurturing. This involves parental acts and attitudes of love that enhance and nurture the well-being of children and result in positive emotional bonds or relationships between parents and children.

Significance of Bonding and Attachment

A body of research has developed around what is called the attachment theory, which suggests that each individual has an attachment behavioral system that is active from cradle to grave and explains how children and parents form bonds with one another. The theory suggests that children constantly monitor the whereabouts of their parents. If parents are close, children feel secure. If parents are out of sight, children feel threatened. The ability of children to seek out their parents when threatened and the ability of parents to provide comfort when children feel this way is critical in the development of positive parent-child bonding.

Children whose parents are always emotionally available develop certain mental images of their parents and of themselves: they see their parents as trustworthy and themselves as worthwhile. Studies have consistently found that optimal adolescent development is fostered when parents combine high levels of care and sup-

port with attitudes and behaviors that promote growing autonomy and independence in their children.

When my (Merton Strommen's) grandson was born almost four months prematurely, he lay in his incubator weighing less than one pound. Doctors deemed it important that he receive as much physical contact as possible, so I would visit him often, sticking my hand through the glove in the incubator to let his tiny fingers curl around my little finger. I would sing to him, talk to him—I wanted him to know I was there.

When I was ready to leave and would start to withdraw my hand, I could feel his little fingers tighten around my little finger. He did not want me to go. A bond was being formed, and I was becoming important to him. Because he was sensing my love and feeling a sense of security, he was learning to trust and love me. Today a powerful bond exists between the two of us.

A four-year study of adoptees randomly selected from the adoption files of four states (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Colorado) provides evidence supporting the power and significance of this kind of bond. Search Institute calls it the key to healthy family relationships and the key to adolescents' well-being. When there is no emotional bonding, the picture changes. Twenty-five percent of adopted adolescents in this study who were not emotionally bonded to either parent showed signs of rebellion, rejection, and oppositional behavior (delinquency, drug abuse, etc.). Clearly, the lack of emotional bonding between parents and adolescents has serious consequences.[38]

On the positive side, youth who are affectionately bonded with both birth parents or both adoptive parents are most likely to abstain from at-risk behaviors. If an adolescent is attached to only one parent, involvement in at-risk behaviors increases.

When Attachment Weakens

According to the *Adoption Study,* the attachment or emotional bonding between parents and adolescents diminishes as children grow older. Almost 20 percent of the parents involved in this study indicated that the attachment they felt when their children were two years of age was gone by the time their children were adolescents.

Figure 4

Change in Demonstrative Affection by Parents

Scale Average

Grade in School
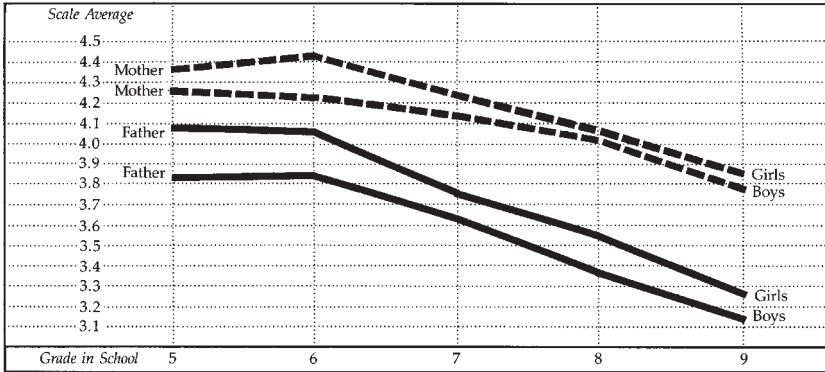
Item: "How often does your mother/father hug or kiss you?" Based on the average of 5 items. 5 = daily; 4 = couple of times a week; 3 = one to four times a month; 2 = less than once a month; 1 = never
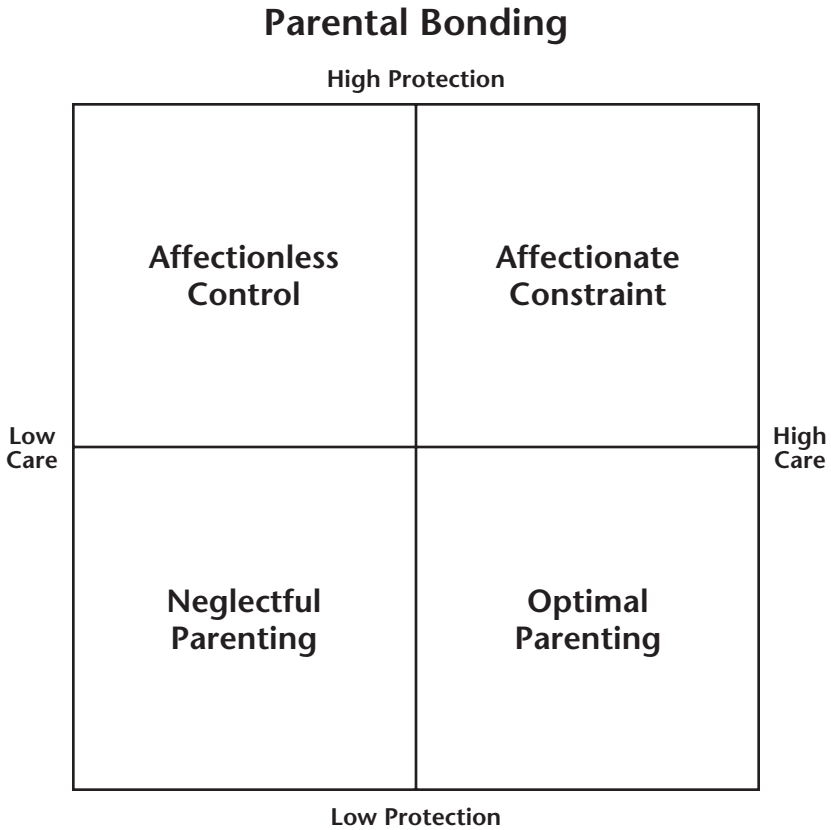
From *Young Adolescents and Their Parents: A National Portrait,* copyright ©1984 by Search Institute®. Reprinted with permission of Search Institute®. All rights reserved.

This reduction in affection as children grow older agrees with the *Early Adolescent Study.* It shows a dramatic drop-off in affection as adolescents progress in school. The percentage of parents expressing verbal affection ("I love you") went from 50 percent for fifth graders to 30 percent for ninth graders. The percentage of parents showing physical affection (hugs or kisses) dropped from 73 percent to 40 percent within the same age-group (see fig. 4). As might be expected, fathers proved to be less demonstrative in showing affection than mothers. Although expressions of love and caring tend to diminish as children grow older, they remain essential elements in the development of close family relationships.[39]

A useful instrument for assessing the presence or absence of parental care and protection is found in the *Parental Bonding Instrument.*[40] One set of items assesses coldness, neglect, and rejection; a second set describes parental care and warmth; a third set identifies behaviors related to the promotion of autonomy and independence; and a fourth set describes parental intrusiveness.

These four scales make it possible to identify four quadrants. Those experiencing:

Figure 5

Parental Bonding

High Protection

Affectionless Control	**Affectionate Constraint**
Neglectful Parenting	**Optimal Parenting**

Low Care (left) **High Care** (right)

Low Protection

- high care and low protection
- high care and high protection
- low care and high protection
- low care and low protection

Youth who rate their parents high in care and low in protection are the most psychologically healthy individuals. On the other hand, those youth who describe their parents as high in protection and low in care are the most psychologically vulnerable. Figure 5 is based on Parker's *Parental Bonding Model.* Note in the figure how parents tend to fall into one of four quadrants with respect to providing care and protection.

In a national study of 1,115 randomly selected Australian youth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, youth who scored in

the optimal quadrant—high care and low protection—showed a distinct advantage in psychological adjustment over youth scoring in the other quadrants. They also were the most committed to the Christian faith.

The overwhelming conclusion from this carefully crafted study is stated in these words, "The nature and quality of the relationships between parents and their adolescents are of critical importance for an adolescent's adjustment and mature response to the Christian faith."

The author, Strahan, underscores this point when he says, "It is important for parents to recognize that *how* they engage their children in family religious activities is more important than *whether* children participate in family religion or not. It is quite possible for the *how* of religious practice to be destructive and thus deny what is presumably the real meaning and purpose of religion."[41]

A Caring Environment

The power of a caring environment is evident in the data collected in a massive study of twelve thousand parochial school adolescents (grades six to twelve) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States. The study included thirty-eight items that describe indicators of faith and ultimately measure the youth's maturity of faith. It also enabled the youth to describe their home, school, and church environments.

- Of those youth unable to report a caring environment, only 5 percent gave evidence of a mature faith.
- Of those reporting only one caring environment, 17 percent gave evidence of a mature faith.
- Of those reporting two caring environments, 30 percent gave evidence of a mature faith.
- Of those reporting three caring environments—home, school, and congregation—53 percent gave evidence of a mature faith.

These statistics clearly suggest that the more caring environments an adolescent experiences, the more he or she will grow in faith.[42]

After analyzing data from his study of Australian youth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Strahan emphasizes the significance of the parent-child bond in adolescent development (see fig. 6). He says, "The quality of the parent-child bond is more important than the parents' religious practice for predicting adjustment and support of a religious faith."[43]

Figure 6

The Power in Caring Environments
Percentage of Youth with a Mature Faith
Students in Grades 9–12

From Roger L. Dudley, Faith in the Balance, p. 295
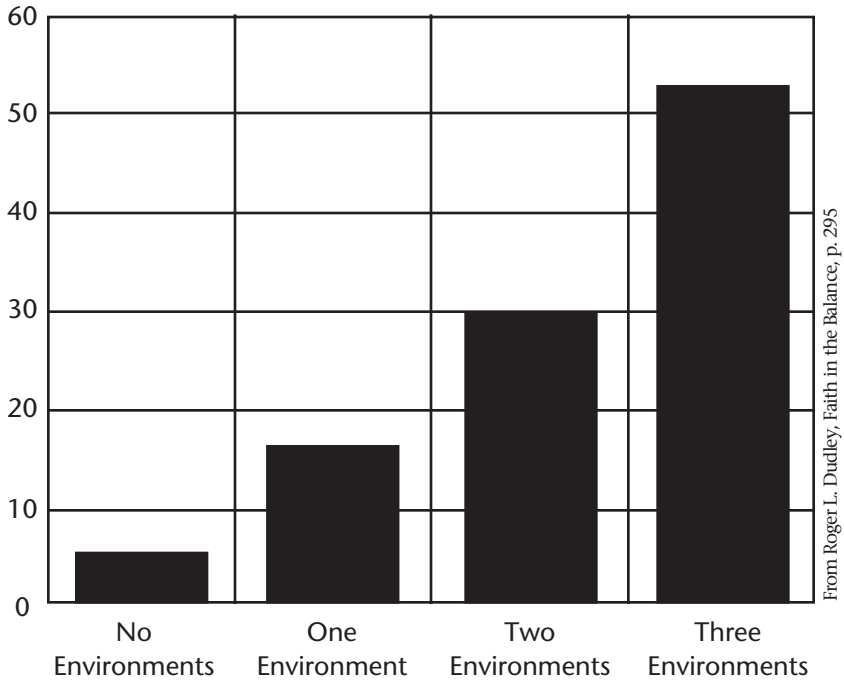
The quality of this bond depends upon the parents' capacity for warmth and affection. Developing this bond takes time; there are no shortcuts to close relationships built on mutual respect and affection. A strong commitment of time and energy is necessary.

Caring Parents

To pass on faith to our children, we need parents who are AAA (Triple A) road servants as described by David Anderson and Paul Hill in their book *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear*. Parents are road servants because they serve children on the journey of faith. AAA parents are

- **Authentic.** They have integrity and character. They know they need forgiveness, and they place their trust in Jesus Christ. They do not try to be "cool" or to be their child's best friend.

- **Available.** They take the time to listen to their child and have caring conversations with her or him. They see every milestone in the child's life as an opportunity to connect with God.
- **Affirming.** They affirm the identity of their child as a child of God, that the love of God is in them, and that the child is to live in a way that makes a difference in the lives of others.[44]

As important as it is that caring lay adults work with the youth of a congregation, it is even more important that parents reflect three facets of Christian parenting: communication, caring, and commitment to faith-building.

Irene Strommen, former trainer of trainers in peer ministry, has developed a program called *Faith and Skills for Parenting* to train parents in these three facets of Christian parenting. The program introduces parents to the skills involved in family conversations, teaches them how to listen to what their children are saying, and shows them how to interpret nonverbal communication. This training helps parents build a healthy sense of worth in their children, establish a helpful approach to discipline, learn how to confront sensitive issues, and assist children in decision making.[45]

Seraphim Communications, Fairview Behavioral Services, and Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota produced a four-video Christian parenting series based on the asset development research of Search Institute entitled *It Takes More Than Love.* The four sessions focus on the following topics:

Intentional Parenting

This session begins by teaching parents to look at parenting as asset building rather than problem centered. This first session reiterates to parents that nothing can substitute for time and attention; building assets in children requires commitment and strong intention.

Value-Centered Parenting

This session aims at encouraging parents to instill a sense of worth and value in their children. Our culture's values are based on external factors such as wealth, beauty, and success, but parents must value their children as unique gifts. Children who feel valued tend to adopt the values their parents model, and to practice value-based behaviors.

Nurture-Centered Parenting

This session introduces boundaries as an extension of values. Because the purpose of parenting is to prepare children for confident adulthood, setting value-based boundaries both teaches and prepares children to be responsible and capable.

Inclusive Parenting

This session reminds parents that raising children is a complex and intense task that moms and dads can't do alone. They need a larger community to help in this task. Just as children need support and love from other adults, so do parents.

Saint Mary Catholic Community of Helena, Montana, has developed its own godparenting program that has had wonderful effects on the youth involved. Starting when they are freshmen in high school, groups of youth meet with an assigned volunteer couple once a week through the end of the youths' senior year. Meeting each week in a home, the youth come to know one another and their volunteer "godparents." At the end of the first four-year period of the program, all but one of the nineteen seniors who had originally joined were still participating. The director of Christian Formation and Youth Ministry in the Helena community was impressed by the effect the volunteer couples have had on the youth ministry. In a letter she writes, "In close to twenty years of working with youth, I have never seen such a 'good return' of seniors."

Close Family Relationships Foster the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth and Children

The four family-strengthening characteristics—parental harmony, effective communication, wise parental control, and parental nurturing—contribute greatly to the development of committed youth when practiced regularly in the home. In its *Early Adolescent Study,* Search Institute divided the adolescents into two groups, separating those whose parents are seen by their adolescents as practicing family-strengthening techniques, Group A, from those whose parents rated low on these qualities, Group B. When the

adolescents were asked to respond to character statements, more from Group A reflected the characteristics of committed youth than from Group B (see fig. 7).

Figure 7

Adolescents' Responses to Character Statements:
Group A Versus Group B

Characteristic	Item	Group A	Group B
Demonstrating moral responsibility	"I do a lot of things I hope my parents never find out about."	26%	38%
Accepting responsibility in a congregation	"My church or synagogue is very important to me.	52%	36%
Demonstrating unprejudiced and loving lives	"I am kind to other people."	83%	67%
Reflecting self-esteem	"On the whole, I like myself."	71%	58%
Accepting authority and being personally responsible	"My parents almost always trust me."	72%	52%
Having a hopeful and positive attitude	"When things get tough, I keep trying."	68%	53%
Engaging in mission and service	"I help others often."	43%	28%

The comparison of these two groups indicates the power of parental harmony, effective communication, wise parental control, and parental nurturing. As more homes reflect these essentials, more adolescents exhibit the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth. It is important to note that had *none* of the parents in Group B practiced at least some of the techniques under discussion, the contrasts would have been even greater.[46]

Self-Evaluation by Congregation

To determine how they contribute to the strength of family relationships, congregational leaders can ask themselves these questions:

1. Are we doing anything to enhance all-important parental harmony?
   - Do we make personal contacts by telephone or in person?
   - Do we provide opportunities for reflection?
   - Do we provide support groups for people experiencing a crisis?
   - Do we provide family training seminars to help families deal with crises?
2. Does our ministry encourage better communication between parents and between parents and children?
   - Do we openly address that communication drops in the home as children approach adolescence?
   - Do we help adolescents discuss issues with their parents?
   - Do we encourage communication between parents and children when children are infants?
   - Do we help parents learn to listen to each other and to their children?
3. Are the parents in our congregation aware that their styles of discipline shape their children's personality, character, and response to the Gospel?
   - Can parents distinguish between an autocratic, permissive, and democratic style of discipline? Do they know the first two have negative effects?
   - Do parents provide their adolescents with clear, firmly established rules and boundaries?
   - Do we encourage a flexible stance blended with good judgment?
   - Do parents need help understanding the power of a Gospel-oriented approach?
4. Do we stress the importance of families' demonstrating love and affection for one another?
   - Have we encouraged emotional bonding, emphasizing that it is one of the strongest predictors of adolescent well-being?
   - Do parents realize that they tend to demonstrate less affection as their children grow older?
   - Do we emphasize that the quality of family relationships is critical to adolescents' response to the Gospel?
   - Do we emphasize that close family relationships foster the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth?

Chapter 3

Fostering Close Relationships with God
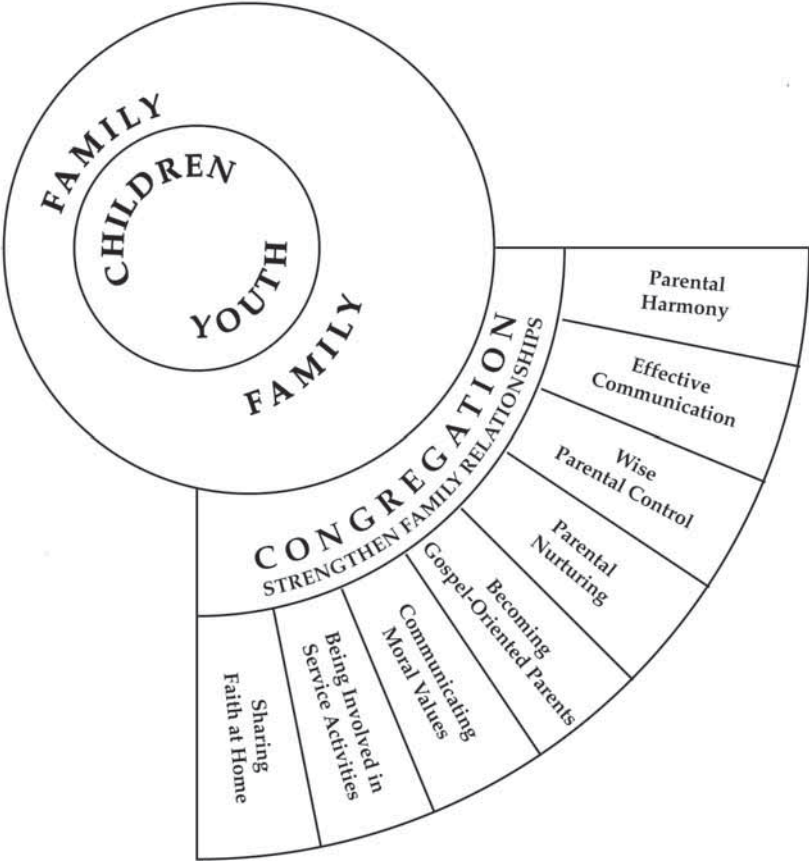
The question still before us is this: How can we increase the probability that the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth and a life of witness and service become realities in our youth?

The previous chapter focused on one side of the coin and gave us an answer: namely by engendering close family relationships. This chapter, focusing on the other side of the coin, gives us another answer: namely by engendering close relationships with God.

When the congregation and the home are partners in nurturing faith and when there are both close family relationships and close relationships with God, the probability of the Ten Characteristics of Committed Youth, repeated below, becoming a reality are greatest.

1. Trusting in a personal Christ
2. Understanding grace and living in grace
3. Communing with God regularly
4. Demonstrating moral responsibility
5. Accepting responsibility in a congregation
6. Demonstrating unprejudiced and loving lives
7. Accepting authority and being personally responsible
8. Having a hopeful and positive attitude
9. Participating in the rituals of a Christian community
10. Engaging in mission and service

Faith and God

Faith: A Need for Intentional Nurture

Our culture, in contrast to former generations, no longer supports and encourages religious faith. Rather, it undermines it. Steven Carter, in his best-selling book *The Culture of Disbelief,* shows how religion is no longer given public recognition but rather is being trivialized. For an increasing number of people in our society, a religious faith is something to oppose. For example, a school board in Hillsborough, New Jersey, decided that too many students persisted in saying, "Saint Valentine's Day," so they renamed the occasion, "Special Person Day." They also rechristened Christmas as "December season" and banned classroom presents because they viewed the giving of gifts to be a "religious activity."[1]

Ellen T. Charry, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, insists that intentional Christian nurture is a necessity today. In her article "Raising Christian Children in a Pagan Culture," she observes that the church is the only institution that can rescue children from the deforming emphasis our culture places on money, sex, and power. She underscores the point that the most important ministry of the contemporary Church (and we add, of the family) is the intentional formation of young Christians.[2]

In 1996 a Family Ministries Initiative carried out by the Methodist Church in Minnesota used both focus groups and written surveys to interview parents. When asked what challenges or difficulties their families face, an overwhelming number of parents responded with "time stress." This response was given twice as many times as other stress factors such as economic pressure, mental and physical illness, social and political pressure, or family structure. When asked how the church helps with their strengths or challenges, an overwhelming number of parents answered "by being a network of people who care." Its welcome, support, intergenerational activities, small groups, sense of community, and relationships all provide a source of strength and identity. When asked how the church could better help their family, most parents responded with "Provide learning and support opportunities on matters of faith and spirituality. Help us teach faith at home to make God relevant."

When family ministry consultant Peggy Johaningsmeir summarized what the 247 parents who participated in focus groups said, she ended with these words: "We ask the church to help us integrate our faith values into our daily lives and to support and hold us accountable in our growth as disciples of Jesus Christ."[3]

One of the major roles of a congregation in faith formation is to strengthen families to grow in faith and nurture faith in the children. Even though they may not realize it, parents are very important in the shaping of faith in their teenage children.

> The importance of faith for teenagers fairly closely tracks the importance of faith for their parents. Parents for whom religious faith is quite important are thus likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is quite important, while parents whose faith is not important to them are likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is also not important.[4]

Faith: A New National Interest

Though the culture undervalues it, religious faith is returning as a public interest. For example, a number of major newspapers now include a Faith and Values section in their weekend editions. In 1996 *Time* magazine featured an article on faith and healing that acknowledged a growing body of scientific evidence that shows how faith and spirituality can improve physical health.

Also in 1996 the newsletter for the American Psychological Association carried the article, "Psychologists' Faith in Religion Begins to Grow." The article begins by stating that psychologists since Freud have generally regarded religious belief and practice as signs of weakness or even pathology. This outlook is changing now, as studies show that people who see God as a partner who loves them enjoy greater positive mental health outcomes.[5]

For many years, beginning in 1994, CBS featured a highly popular drama called *Touched by an Angel* during prime time on Sunday nights. This hour-long drama proved that a series about faith in God can attract a wide following.[6]

The high attendance figures for Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* demonstrated that there is a lot of interest in faith and the Church. Books like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* quickly became best-sellers and triggered more films about the Church and faith. In the midst of a culture that has moved away from being founded in the Christian faith to more pluralistic expressions of faith, there is an interest to know more about the stories of faith.

Faith: A Close Relationship with God

How might a parent answer a child who asks for a definition or description of a living faith? The question is not an easy one to answer because faith is both complex and dynamic. Faith touches all dimensions of human life—the affective, cognitive, volitional, and behavioral. Martin Luther called faith "a living, active, busy, mighty thing."[7] In other words, a vibrant faith permeates every facet of our existence, manifesting itself in what we trust, value, and do.

Faith can be defined as something that involves three interrelated aspects: