Nearly a generation ago, in 1993, Gene Roehlkepartain and Search Institute published *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*. It was a ground-breaking book at the time, filled with research-based conclusions and insights for how Christian faith should be transmitted to the next generation. The book essentially reports out the findings of what Search Institute called *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*.

I was working in family ministry at the time (and a parent of two young sons), so I immediately gravitated to chapter eleven “Nurturing Faith in Families.” What I read in that chapter has had a great influence on both my professional life as a teacher/trainer in family ministry, and on my personal family life as a father. This was the first time I had come face-to-face with solid research that provided a glimpse of what parents and families ought to do to nurture lasting faith in their children. I was particularly drawn to the text that offered these findings:

Family religious experience has more influence on young people’s faith than does Christian education, which also has a strong relationship to faith maturity. . . .

Furthermore, the study found the three following elements have the greatest impact on young people’s faith maturity:

- Talking with mother or father about faith;
- Participating in family devotions, prayer, or Bible reading;
- Being involved in family service projects.

The more young people experience these family activities, the more likely they are to develop a mature faith. Unfortunately, relatively few families do each of these things.

I quickly incorporated these three activities—family faith conversation, family ritual & prayer, family outreach & service—into my teaching and training points, as well as at home with my own family. I still believe these activities are crucial for family faith development today, although, as you see further down, there are at least three additional activities that are also crucial.

Yet, the mistake I made in my teaching, training, and living was to reduce the rich research to simplistic, formulaic steps. *If you do these things, your child will launch into young adulthood with faith and religious practice in tow.* Of course it’s not that simple, or that easy. What I missed, or glossed over, are two essential factors that must accompany the practices: 1) the authentic, genuine nature of faith expression on the part of parents and grandparents, and 2) the quality of the overall relationship between parent (or grandparent) and child. These factors make all the difference.
These factors will be explored further in this book, but for now let me just point out that by the time children are eight, nine, or ten they know if faith and religious practice in the family is truly meaningful to their parents and/or grandparents or if it’s done just for the “sake of the children.” If children perceive that it’s only for their sake, that’s when they begin to check out.

To put my missive in a theological context, I failed to allow room for domesticity in the equation. I needed put more faith and trust in the “profound and ordinary moments of daily life—mealtimes, workdays, vacations, expressions of love and intimacy . . . all the threads from which you can weave a pattern of holiness.” Any family that reflects the character of a “domestic church” must go beyond grace at meals and allow the active and gracious presence of God to permeate their basic household activities.

The research has continued to show us what families ought to do to grow in faith. Since 1993 and the ground-breaking insights from The Teaching Church, there have been numerous studies about faith transmission and faith maturity. In my reading of these studies, and in my collaborative work with ministry colleagues from a host of denominations, I have landed on six key categories of practice that families ought to do to grow in faith. To the three mentioned above:

1. Talk about faith by sharing insights, doubts, questions, and wonderments
2. Pray together in ways that are comfortable and comforting
3. Reach out in service and support of others

add these three:

4. Ritualize important family moments and honor milestone experiences
5. Share Bible stories in ways that connect to the family story
6. Learn about one’s faith in ways that are interesting and relevant

With no desire to reduce these to simplistic formulaic steps, and with full recognition that the complexities of family living in the twenty-first century have a great impact on how these are expressed, I still believe these practices lie at the core of family faith transmission. And our listening to parents and families bears that out.

**Who We Listened To**

In November 2015 we surveyed 926 parents and grandparents from across the United States. We followed up our survey with four online live group interviews with parents of children, parents of teenagers, parents of young adults, and grandparents.

74% indicated that they are active members of a Christian church community. This high percentage of church affiliation was not a surprise to us because we surveyed people who are connected to our various projects in ministry and faith development. While not representative of the American population as a whole, true; still we wanted to survey parents and grandparents who were likely to be active in sharing faith at home. When we put out the survey to our lists, we were amazed and pleased with the instant and voluminous response. People of faith clearly wanted to share about their family faith practices.
Here’s the breakdown in terms of their parenting role(s):

- 35% - parenting children (birth – 12)
- 30% - parenting adolescents (13-19)
- 43% - parent of young adult or adult
- 30% - grandparent

(Survey responders could indicate multiple roles, which is why the percentage total is greater than 100.)

The survey contained four questions.

1. Please select up to 10 practices from the list below that you consider the most important family practices for helping children and teens grow in faith.

2. Thinking about yourself as a parent of children or teenagers today (or when you were a parent of children or teens), please rate how often you engage (or engaged) in the following family practices in a typical month.

3. Are there other faith practices that your family engages in (or engaged in) that were not listed above?

4. What are the two or three biggest challenges your family faces (or faced) in trying to live these faith practices?

Family/Home Faith Practices

In our survey, respondents chose from a list of 27 faith practices. They were asked to select the practices that they engage in, and indicate how frequently they do it.

There were four practices that rose to the top, practiced by 71 – 79% of responders.

- 79%  Praying as a family
- 77%  Participating in Sunday worship as a family
- 76%  Eating together as a family
- 71%  Celebrating rituals and holidays at home

Not only were these four activities practiced by a large majority of responders, the reported frequency of practice is also quite high. Here is the percentage of those who engage in the practice at least once a week or more.

- 80%  Praying as a family
- 80%  Participating in Sunday worship as a family
- 91%  Eating together as a family
- 74%  Celebrating rituals and holidays at home
These four practices set themselves apart from the rest. The next highest items were practiced by 51 – 58% of responders.

- 58% Serving people in need as a family (23% once a week or more)
- 55% Having family conversations (77% once a week or more)
- 51% Taking time to grow in your own faith as a parent (74% once a week or more)

At the other end of the spectrum, these three items were practiced the least, by only 8 – 11% of responders, and with corresponding low frequency.

- 8% Watching videos, movies, or TV shows with religious content or themes (55% rarely or never)
- 10% Encouraging teens to read the Bible alone or with their peers (62% rarely or never)
- 11% Inviting friends of your teenager to join in family faith practices (going to church, serving others, celebrating holidays)(48% rarely or never)

Survey responders were not restricted to the twenty-seven faith practices that we identified. They were invited to write in practices and activities that they engage in that were not included in the original list. As you might imagine, there was a wide range of practices described. Here is a list of practices that were mentioned by multiple responders:

- Small groups
- Learn about other faith practices
- Bedtime devotions
- Serving others and social justice activities
- Mission trips
- Praying with social media
- Encourage questions
- Nature
- Symbols, icons, and sacramentals
- Relationships outside of home—extended family and others
- Devotions and Bible reading
- Milestone moments
- Vacations, holidays, and other outings
- Reading books to/with children
- Music—listening and singing
- Learning about other faith practices and discussions
- Camp, family camp

The following direct quotes from the survey responders that put a bit of human touch to these added practices.

*Taking time for prayer at bedtime has been an incredible gift with my grandchildren. I don’t believe they do it at home, but their eagerness when they are with me to do so leads me to believe it has been a very important aspect/experience for them. A true blessing.*
When they were little, we practiced a weekly Family Home Evening Devotions that I developed, based on the Mormon weekly devotions, but with a Lutheran twist. I wrote the stories and developed my own lesson plans. My kids loved it!

We regularly tried to reach out to those in need with our labor, our time, our finances . . . making sure to involve all three of our children. Even the simple service of going to a care center and singing Christmas carols, or playing card games, or just visiting. Baking “treats” for a shut in or mowing their lawn.

Nightly sharing of highs and lows, family prayer and blessing each other. Each morning being sent with a prayer and blessing.

Celebrating baptism birthdays and key life events, having special one on one time with godparents and other significant mentors and adults. Using art as a way to express faith.

I encourage my children to be open and ask questions. When I grew up it was hush-hush to ask anything about religion. I always make sure that my children know it’s an open book and that they can ask any questions. Sometimes they get sick of me talking about what’s right and what isn’t.

I ask the following question daily: “Where did you see or experience God in your day today?” This has been a great way to discover many things about our kids’ interactions and challenges in their day.

Family nights with the focus on fun projects that illustrated a spiritual principle. Vacation Bible Schools each summer, sometimes several of them! Lenten and Advent activities at home as a family, and encouraging individual responses. Reading books with each child that illustrated good moral and spiritual practices and principles. Camping together, with campfire talks about choices, moral dilemmas, etc.

Challenges and Struggles

We know that life in the twenty-first century is crazy-busy for most families. Regardless of age or stage, today’s family is bombarded with external pressures and expectations from the likes of school, work, community, and of course church. These external pressures increase the internal anxiety that can permeate the family on a chronic basis, reducing their functionality and relational harmony.

Among the 900 plus responders to our survey, one of the key reasons why they engage in faith practice as a family and in the home is because it helps them lower that internal anxiety, find ways to prioritize the myriad external expectations, and simply function better as a family.

Yet, their responses to the question: **What are the two or three biggest challenges your family faces (or faced) in trying to live these faith practices?** are quite revealing. Among the hundreds of comments shared, here is a list of items shared by multiple responders:

- Busy
- Outside pressures
- Leave after confirmation
- Finding time together
• Finding quiet time
• Finding a good church
• Lousy sermons
• Bad church experiences
• Husband/Dad not a church goer
• Awkward - hard to talk about
• Lack of enthusiasm from kids
• Judgment from extended family
• Lack of intentional routine/habit/pattern
• Teens pulling away, questioning religion
• Parent fatigue

Far and away, the factor expressed most was “busy.” While expressed in a host of different ways, many responders indicated that the demands on their time from external pressures hinder their ability to engage in faith and religious practice. Here are just a few quotes.

Even though we are not over scheduled with extra curricular activities, with two parents working and the homework load, time together is hard to come by.

Balancing the opportunities that are always presenting themselves. Finding time in our schedule.

Time flies by- we are so busy living moment to moment we forget to do the slow things.

Schedules. Mealtimes and bedtimes are compromised by differing work, sports, church, and meeting schedules.

Another factor mentioned often had to do with their lack of satisfying relationship with their congregation or parish. While the majority of our responders (74%) are actively affiliated with a congregation, many expressed a desire for their church to be more supportive of family life, engaged better with their children and teens, and offer more relevant assistance to them in their role as parents and grandparents. Here are a few of those quotes.

Unfortunately, our church worship service that we attend coincides with Sunday school. Therefore, we do not have the opportunity to worship together as a family very often. . . . It is upsetting to see that attendance declines on these family worship days. I believe we are doing a huge disservice to our families. In addition, we, also, see a huge decline in attendance once we confirm our ninth grade students in November.

Finding a church community with good worship and a strong education/youth program. Most of the churches by us are small and dying out. They are always trying the newest “gimmick” to bring people in.

Church worship (rituals and music) boring our children. Homilies that don’t connect with real family life.

My children struggle to engage in Sunday School because they find (have found) it boring. I’m working with a group within the church now to change our Sunday School program, but I worry that my son will “check out” of faith formation.
As a correlation to this lack of effective partnership between family and congregation, consider this recent study of Roman Catholic families. In 2015 the Center for Applied Research (CARA) and Holy Cross Family Ministries interviewed just over 1000 self-identified Catholic parents about their faith and religious practice at home, as well as their relationship with and participation in the Catholic Church. While focused solely on Catholics, we believe these findings are indicative of faith and religious practice across the mainline Protestant denominational spectrum as well. A few key pertinent findings:

While most Catholic parents consider Mass attendance and reception of sacraments “very important”, most do not have their children enrolled in parish- or school-based religious education (i.e. Sunday School). In response to the question, *Do any of your children currently attend . . .?* percentage of those responding “yes”:

- 8% Catholic elementary or middle school
- 3% Catholic high school
- 21% Parish-based religious education program
- 5% Youth ministry program
- 68% None of the above

The study found that Millennial Generation parents are less than half as likely as Post-Vatican II generation parents (i.e. Generation X and Millennial) to have a child enrolled in parish-based religious education.

It is our sense that this lack of engagement with the congregation among families today is a sign that the partnership between the home and church is strained, even among those who are committed to and active in their congregation. We wonder if this is a result of many churches continuing to implement faith formation efforts based on outdated assumptions that do not reflect the realities of twenty-first century families. We wonder if this is a result of perpetuating a one-size-fits-all approach to congregational faith formation in a culture that expects and demands customization and personalization.

We do see promising results in some congregations that are attempting to . . .

- provide a myriad of digitally-enabled options for all ages and stage,
- focus as much or more energy on adults as they do children and youth,
- offer well-designed intergenerational programs where *everyone* learns and grows (not just children), and
- do all this in a way that integrates faith formation with the other key ministries of the congregation, especially worship.
Analysis

There is clearly a convergence between the activities practiced by our responders and the six categories of practice identified from the research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Responders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk</td>
<td>Eating together as a family</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having family conversations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pray</td>
<td>Pray as a family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serve</td>
<td>Serving people in need as a family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ritualize</td>
<td>Celebrating rituals and holidays</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>Participate in Sunday worship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learn</td>
<td>Grow in faith as a parent</td>
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Let’s explore this a bit further.

As mentioned, the research led us to identify six categories of faith-forming activities that we believe are conducive to faith transmission at home and in the family: talk, pray, ritualize, serve, Bible, or learn. This is what the research reveals as what they ought to do to grow in faith at home. But what are they willing to do?

In March 2012 Vibrant Faith launched a new content rich web site for families called Vibrant Faith @Home (www.vibrantfaithathome.org). From the start, the goal of this website has been to support families who are intentional about their faith and religious practice as they raise the next generation of committed Christians. The site is populated with more than 600 simple, but provocative faith-forming activities, all intended for use at home by families and households of all ages and stages. Each activity falls into one of the six categories described above: talk, pray, ritualize, serve, Bible, or learn.

The analytics of user activity on the site tell us a host of things about how the site is used, what activities are popular, and what activities are under-utilized. For example, the pie chart below shows the percentage of use according to the six categories of activities.
The spread across all six categories is relatively even. People at home are willing to engage in any of the six categories as long as the particular activity engages their interest and meets their needs.

Another interesting insight from the chart that shows how the top 30 activities—the 30 most used activities—break out in terms of audience group.

It is probably no surprise that activities for young families comprise just over half of the top 30. Yet the other audience are not inactive.

So, the analytics are beginning show us a few things about what families are actually willing to do. From my twice-yearly analysis of the top 30 activities. I have developed the following list of characteristics of a faith-forming activity that they will actually use at home. When a faith-forming activity contains some of these characteristics it is more likely to be used rather than discarded.

1. **K I S S . . . Keep It Simple & Short.** The activity must be easily and quickly understood, and should last no more than ten minutes.

2. **Give It Legs.** The activity can be designed to do a short bit everyday for a week, or month, or season.

3. **If They Build It . . . They'll Use It.** The activity has a creative component that is developmentally appropriate and not too complicated.

4. **Season/Event Connected.** It must effectively harness existing energy and enthusiasm for the season or event in the home.

5. **Family Moment Connected.** The activity is designed to integrate with key family pressure moments such as meal time, bed time, car time, leave-taking, homecoming, etc.
6. **Life Stage Connected.** The activity is more than developmentally appropriate, it responds directly to a felt developmental need and helps them manage a developmental change.

7. **Learn Something New.** The activity offers religious information that is compelling, honors learning styles, connects to family living, and connects to deeper issues of life, death, deep meaning.

8. **Model in Gathered Setting.** The activities are more likely to be done at home when modeled and practiced in an intergenerational gathered setting.

9. **Depth.** Whether for head, heart, or hands, the activity takes users to a deeper level of growth.

10. **Hits Home.** The activity is more than just relevant, it touches heart and soul with just the right thing at the right moment.

No matter how busy and stressed they are, if families perceive that certain faith practices can help them function better and grow closer as a family, they are quite willing to give them a try.

**Conclusion**

So what are we to make of this data? Four factors seem to emerge. Each is briefly described here followed by a couple quotes from survey responders.

1. **Intention**
   Growing in faith as a family requires a purposeful desire to tap the presence of the Spirit among them. Someone at home—usually parent or grandparent—must take the initiative to invite the family into faith-forming practice. It’s a risk, of course, and it leaves that person vulnerable to rejection. Can you picture the eleven-year-old rolling his eyes at the mention of a faith ritual at the Thanksgiving table? Perseverance beyond initial reluctance is crucial.

   *When they were little, we practiced a weekly Family Home Evening Devotions that I developed, based on the Mormon weekly devotions, but with a Lutheran twist. I wrote the stories and developed my own lesson plans. My kids loved it!*

   *Very important for us: Reading devotional books daily together as parent and child and also doing artwork together as parent and child, often with spiritual or meditative themes.*

2. **Routine Becomes Ritual**
   Over time, expressions of faith practice can become an expected part of the routine of daily, weekly, and seasonal family life. The initiative on the part of one person spreads to others and permeates into the fabric of family and household living. Without question, and sometimes even without thinking, the family just moves into faith practice. Meal prayers are a common example, but the same could be said for bedtime and morning time routines, as well as family discussions, and for some even family acts of mercy or works of justice.
We bless the kids as they go out the door by placing the sign of the cross on their forehead. Sharing highs and lows each day.

I ask the following question daily: “Where did you see or experience God in your day today?” This has been a great way to discover many things about our kids interactions and challenges in their day.

3. Do What Works
Families find expressions and activities that work for them, and do them in manner and with a frequency that suits them. This manner and frequency will be unique to each household, and it will surely shift and change over time. When they experience better harmony, deeper peace, more honest communication, and conflict resolution by engaging in faith practices they will continue to do them. These practices have real meaning and impact in their lives. And as the family grows and changes and moves into new stages, their faith expressions need to evolve and mature as well.

We like to tell Bible stories to the kids in our own words. We talk through events in their lives through a scriptural lens, relating things at school to the Gospels, etc.

Now that they are in college, I send our kids weekly letters, encouraging them, sharing how God is working in my husband’s and my life and the challenges I am facing and what God is teaching me. I think it’s important that once they are adults, to continue to encourage them in faith.

We blessed each other regularly. Mostly parents to children but occasionally the boys saw a parent in need and did the blessing albeit very informal.

4. Connect with Others
Families realize that they cannot go it alone. Their faith practice drives them to connect with others. They are part of something bigger than themselves and so they want to connect with others on a similar journey. Most are connected to a local parish or congregation. Many also participate in some form of a faith-sharing group or Bible study. Families—parents and grandparents in particular—need others to lean on for support, trade ideas, and share their experiences.

Family Pizza night at our home once a month - whole families from church and friends come along. Kids muck around inside and outside and parents share wonderful stories around the kitchen bench and dinner table. We have a 90 second seasonal ‘message’ i.e. All Saints - light candles in remembrance and then all say Grace together. Numbers fluctuate from 20 - 40. Hugely special and accessible for non-church families as introduction to faith practices.

We also try to teach our children about the faith life of other Christians as well as non-Christian faiths. They have been to services at many other places besides our Catholic church.

To close I want to share a rather profound statement we received from one parent reflecting on the challenge of faith transmission, and the need for partnership between the church of the home and the church of the congregation.
The one aspect that concerns me the most is the decline in religious transmission from one generation to the next. In order to reach generations where the church may seem irrelevant, the “church” has to be very intentional about reaching out to the generations in relevant ways. I think this is especially difficult in churches . . . with many people who are in the older generations and are comfortable with “their church” and less willing to adapt to cultural changes and younger generations.

I used to sit with either set of grandparents in worship on Sunday morning. I learned the stories of faith with both my grandparents and parents. We prayed together. We went to church every Sunday. My own kids don’t have that. We live in a different state from my own family and a different community from my in-laws.

In my mind, it emphasizes the needs for ministry that reaches across the generations. To provide opportunities for families with children to be in relationship with older adults in the faith community, regardless of where their biological grandparents live.

Foot Notes

iii Some of these studies include:
iv In our survey, respondents chose from a list of 27 faith practices. They were asked to select the practices that they engage in, and indicate how frequently they do it. Here is the list:
   • Praying as a family (meal time, bedtime)
   • Praying as a family during times of struggle or crisis
   • Encouraging teens to pray alone or with peers
   • Reading the Bible as a family
   • Encouraging teens to read the Bible alone or with their peers
   • Celebrating rituals and holidays at home
   • Serving people in need as a family
   • Serving people in need as individuals (parents, teens)
   • Eating together as a family
   • Having family conversations
   • Watching videos, movies, or TV shows with religious content or themes
   • Talking about faith as a family
   • Encouraging teens to talk about their doubts and questions about faith
   • Talking about faith and your religious tradition with your children and teens
   • Asking your teenager’s perspectives on faith, religion, social issues, etc.
• Providing moral instruction
• Demonstrating a warm and affirming parenting approach
• Taking time to growing in your own faith as a parent
• Engaging in positive communication with children and teens
• Encouraging children and teens to pursue their talents and interests
• Spending one-on-one time with children and teens
• Participating in Sunday Worship as a family
• Inviting friends of your teenage to join in family practices (going to church, serving others, celebrating holidays)
• Celebrating the church year seasons at church (e.g., Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter)
• Celebrating rituals and sacraments at church as a family
• Participating in church life activities as a family
• Encouraging and supporting your teenager to participate in church activities with peers

v Ibid.
vi Ibid.