

Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families

- Diana Garland (2003)

Child-rearing shapes the faith of parents

- Children are highly influential participants in the faith of adults – parents report that the birth and raising of children profoundly influences their sense of meaning and purpose. (xiv)
- *“Children shape the faith of parents just as parents shape the faith of children.”* As adults wrestle with the responsibilities of parenting, they find themselves growing spiritually e.g. seeking out a faith community for the sake of children, making decisions about the behaviour and faith they want to model. Their lifestyles and behavior change. (101)
- *“Parents deliberately model what they want their children to learn and in so doing perhaps commit themselves to faith practices they would not do otherwise.”* (162)

God works through imperfect, very human families

- The Biblical “family” narrative is the story of God’s workings in the lives of very human, imperfect families ... and God does the same today. *“Hidden in both times of crisis as well as our ordinary daily living, God is at work, if we can but open our eyes and ears.”* (25)

Jesus on family and relationships

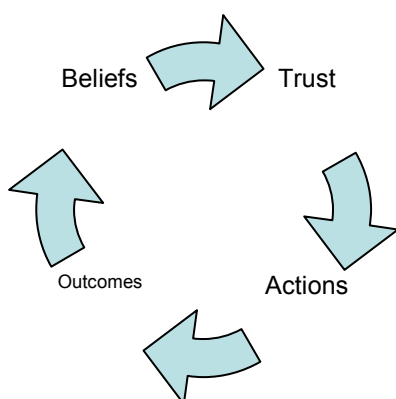
- Jesus’ own lineage, family relationships and teachings challenge the limiting of family relationships to marriage and blood kinship. When we follow Jesus, God provides a new family among the faithful. For followers of Jesus, family means choosing- choosing to follow Jesus and choosing to be family for one another. (33)
- *“Jesus transformed the basic defining factor of family for believers from biology to adoption. ... The work of the church ... is to be sure that all in the community of faith find themselves wrapped up in family bonds, that all are adopted. ... We must be born again (John 3:3 NIV), and this second birth also means a new family.”* (48)

Discipleship and families

- Jesus teaches that discipleship costs everything – even our families come second. Nevertheless, Jesus makes it clear that obedience to God is virtually the only justification for not providing care for the family. (46)

The spiral of developing faith

- Garland describes a “spiral” of developing faith (93):



“The spiral of belief, trust, action, and its outcomes continues, ever changing through our shared experiences of both the joys and the tragedies of life.” (104)

- *“Faith and faithful living is not cognitive knowledge; it is lived. We learn the knowledge and values and skills of Christian living, including family life, by a combination of hearing, conversing, and experiencing.”* (219)

Faith, experience and meaning

- Families that are most resilient in the face of crisis of catastrophe have a shared set of beliefs and values that provide them with a common understanding of what their experience means and what they can do in response. (108)
- Even experiences that to others may seem like senseless chaos or unexplainable suffering may, in the frame of family beliefs and trust, have meaning and deepen the “*melodies of faith*”. (112)

Faith practices in family life

- Garland highlights 12 FAITH PRACTICES that can find expression in and through family life (129-130):
 1. Worshipping God together.
 2. Telling and reading the Christian story to one another.
 3. Sharing with one another our interpretations of the Bible.
 4. Having patience with one another’s shortcomings, and encouraging one another.
 5. Praying together and by ourselves.
 6. Serving others as a means of serving God.
 7. Giving generously.
 8. Welcoming others into our homes and to our tables.
 9. Listening and talking attentively and empathetically.
 10. Seeking to identify and resist the systems and powers that harm people, that weaken human communities, and that destroy God’s creation.
 11. Working with others to create relationships, communities and social systems that in are in accord with God’s will.
 12. Confessing our sins to one another, forgiving, and restoring our relationships with one another.
- Value and power of faith practices:
 - Faith practices are “*those activities that individuals and families engage in because they help us to know God and make us aware of God’s presence in our lives. Practices also give us ways to participate in what we perceive God is doing in our world and calling us to do. Faith practices can open a family to an awareness of God’s presence in its midst in the daily round of routines and activities and pressures.*” (127)
 - Faith practices are “*God’s way of making our souls strong and flexible, more receptive to God’s presence and God’s work with us and through us. They are God’s means of grace, through which God can bless us.*” (127)
 - While itself is a gift of God, and not something that we can of ourselves create or develop, faith practices “*tune our ears and hearts to hear and feel what we might otherwise miss.*”
 - “*We engage in these practices because we need to do them, because they make us aware both of God’s presence and of God’s transcendence, and because they are what we are called to do as Christians.*” (128)
- Faith practices are not add-on activities but are “*woven throughout out time together and apart*”. But they don’t come naturally – they are learned. (130)
- “*Because the church has emphasized faith practices as individual activities, church leaders have not given much guidance to help families make these practices an integral part of family life.*” (131)

Family rituals

- Family rituals organize life in ways so that the meaning of shared experiences comes through. “*Rituals are the dance steps that the family knows, the rhythms we count on to mark our days with pattern. Doing things the same way communicates to family members that they belong. ... Family rituals are the rhythms, the musical rules of family life.*” (59)
- Family rituals can be very simple and yet at the same time very powerful. They help hold families together in the challenges of life together. (61).
- Faith and devotion to God is “*sung in the small acts of faithfulness and devotion*” that are part of ordinary family activities. (64)

- Garland lists a number of “ordinary” family rituals that can be of great importance in family life as bearers of meaning and vehicles of connection. (58-75)
 1. Watching Television – Together
 2. Watching Children Play – Together
 3. Involvement in Outside Activities – Together
 4. Eating Meals – Together
 5. Praying Together.
- Importance of eating together:
 - Quote from a teenager – *“The dinner table is one place where you find out what’s going on.”* (67)
 - Throughout the Bible, eating a meal together has special significance. Much more happens than physical hunger being satisfied. Intimacy develops between people who share food together. (70)
 - Family dinners are the time when family members share not only conversation and information, but also air disagreements – conflict is a significant and inevitable aspect of family life. (71)
 - If families don’t eat together regularly, they don’t pray together either. (72)
 - *“Over and over families described the significance of sitting at the table for meals together as the place where Bible study and faith conversations takes place, if they happen at all. When this place and time together disappear from family life, so does the opportunity for sharing not only the Christian story with one another but impromptu conversation about life and faith as well.”* (134)

Family faith conversation

- *“Families often wrestle with faith issues in the corners and along the way of their days as part of the daily conversation. Faith conversations are not limited to designated family devotional and prayer time; they happen along the path, day after day, and we sort out the meaning of our lives as we go.”*(102)
- Conversation about faith and other matters of importance often come when we are on our way somewhere else, not when we plan for them. (115)
- *“Opportunities to share our experiences and ponderings about life and faith are woven into the fabric of family life.”* (137)

Families and service

- Service involvement has been shown through research to be a key factor in nurturing young people’s growth in faith – even more powerful than Sunday school, Bible study or worship participation. (147)
- *“Caring is not innate but learned, and it is first learned in family life. Parents model for their children, both in their family relationships and in relationships with others in the community, the kindness that youths then emulate in the world around them.”* (147)
- The small acts of kindness of daily family have particular significance, as they show that caring is not terribly difficult or exceptional but can be a natural part of life. (148)

How family life contributes to spiritual growth

- Family life can teach us profound lessons about the love and faithfulness of God:
 - Experiences of unconditional love help family members understand experientially what God is like. (84) These model the *no-matter-what* love of God.” (86)
 - Through love given and received, *“God folds us into parental arms of love.”* (85)
 - In navigating tough times we experience the reality of God’s grace and care – *“God’s grace sustains us as we stumble through life together, making mistakes, losing our tempers, becoming weary and sloppy in our relationships with one another. ... Families teach us that God truly does work a process of miracles in our lives.”* (85)
 - Family life teaches us about the power of redemptive sacrifice – *“We learn through the experiences of family life the truth of Jesus’ promise that those who sacrifice their lives will truly find life.”* (85)

- Families provide a context for persons, both children and adults, to learn to trust or mistrust. As we learn to trust one another, we learn to trust God. (95)
 - The responsibilities of parent drive adults to look to and trust God for guidance. (96)
 - In family life we “confront the most fundamental issues of life and death and faith. We learn faith here, and we are shattered here, and we struggle – whether together or in isolation – to make sense of it all here.” (100)
 - Not only are families places where beliefs and trust are shaped – they are places where we act on our faith, day in and day out. Beliefs and trust take on living action in the crucible of family life. (100)
- Family life provides a crucible for both children and adults to learn faith. Family experience test, shape and deepen our faith. (92) Quote from a stepmother: *“Real issues of living a Christian life are more difficult in an intimate relationship with your family than they are with anybody else. ... A lot of people are looking for very simplistic guidance instead of having to suffer the pain of wrestling with things. The family represents a working path to get there.”* (92-93)

Family life as “holy ground”

- Garland posits family life as “holy ground”, a context in which we experience and see God at work: *“Whether little moments or big, moments of joy or of deep disappointment or despair, family life provides a window from our own experience into heaven, a glimpse of what God is like.”* (185)
- Garland asks “what makes a place or a time home?” She suggests it is “all the mundane caregiving and sharing and squabbling and loving that takes place that tells us who we are and who we belong to, surrounded by those sounds and smells and sights that are often just on the edge of our consciousness, yet reminding us when we encounter them again of home.” For faith families, a “sacred melody” is somehow being played “in the conversation and noisiness and quiet moments of our days.” (228)

The value and importance of cross-generational faith-based relationships

- Garland emphasises the importance of cross-generational relationships in the faith formation of children and youth: *“Children certainly need strong, supportive peer groups, but they also need cross-generational friendships, and so do their parents. Parents need the support of people who will hold their children, bless their children, and see their gifts and promise. Parents today already have to rely on lots of paid substitutes – babysitters and day care teachers. These people are important in children’s lives, but children need “aunting and uncling and grandparenting” as well as parenting. They need to be spoiled by adults who think they are special, not just another member of the day care group or the soccer team they coach.”* (212)
- *“Both children and adults learn best about God’s love by being loved by God’s people, about being a child of God by belonging in a faith family embedded in a community of faith, about worship by worshipping in a gathered community, about ministry by serving in partnership with others. There are times, of course, that age-graded, specialized groups work best for accomplishing particular objectives. But these peer-group experiences need to be balanced by groups that bring together persons of different ages and life situations, and above all, that allows families to participate in congregational life together. ... Age-graded programming is limited in what it can do to help disciple Christians for faithful living in families”* (219).
- *“Perhaps the most significant family ministries of a congregation are those regular programs – church suppers, Bible study, worship, ministry – reconceptualised for family rather than individual participation.”* (225)

A case for family-based Christian education

- Garland makes a case for family-based Christian education – it gives families “opportunity and language and encouragement to discuss their faith and their ministry in the sacred space of the congregation; such conversation might never take place at home because they don’t know how to get it started. The structured, sanctioned opportunity provided by a church program can be a powerful catalyst for family conversation.” (220)

Key questions for families to discuss

- Key questions for families to discuss together: (226)
 - What does faith mean in your family?
 - How does your family try to live its faith?
 - When have you felt God close to your family?
 - When have you wondered where God is?
 - What Bible story or teaching do you think of when you think of your family?