

FAMILY MINISTRY THE LUTHERAN WAY

BY

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ABSTRACT

How do churches minister to families? This question has been asked by churches since ancient times. Families face new challenges in every generation. While our tools have remained the same, the power of God's Word and the assurance of his promises, our implementation of those tools may look different in a modern context. This paper looked at what people in many contexts are doing for families through the church. New ideas about forms of ministry are being explored. The Lutheran Church also has a heritage of family ministry that informs and guides family ministry done by Lutheran churches today. WELS Pastors have explored new ideas and new ways of applying Scriptural principles of family ministry too. Research done for this paper consists of interviews conducted with WELS pastors who have shown an interest in family ministry by taking Donn Dobberstein's course on family ministry in the Summer Quarter at WLS in 2019. As part of the course, they developed family ministry plans. The goal of the interviews was to find out how the plans were implemented, what was successful or not successful based on the judgement of the pastors, and what other pastors can learn from their experience. Because the most effective family ministry happens in Christian homes through parents speaking God's Word to their children, a pastor can impact families most effectively by training and equipping parents to talk with their children about God's Word.

INTRODUCTION

The institution of marriage and family is under attack. But has this ever not been the case? The very first family was torn apart by murder. The patriarchs' families suffered strife of all kinds, culminating in Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery. King David, the man after the Lord's own heart, had his first marriage broken up when he fled from Saul, Michal his wife given to another man. When he became king, many of the problems in the kingdom came from his sons. King Henry VIII broke from Rome to get divorced. American royalty struggles the same way. Just last year two of the most prominent family men in America, Tom Brady and Kanye West went through divorces. How many people go through such things and worse every day without being famous?

What we see in culture influences our thinking. Culture influences how we see marriage and has more of an impact than people care to admit. The patriarchs engaged in polygamy so common to men of their standing at the time. What influence does the cultural sea in which we swim have on our thinking? The shifting tides of culture are bringing people far from the Biblical view of what makes a family. Common cultural trends of our day include LGBT agendas, abortion, a casual view of sex, negative portrayals of parenthood, etc. It's in this environment our churches exist right now. They are made up of families living in the same hostile environment Christians have faced for generations. What role do our churches play in the lives of families? How do churches and families face up against the cultural attacks on God's institution of the family? Scripture tells us about the role parents play in the lives of their children, such as what Paul writes to fathers in Ephesians, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring

them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4 NIV).” Scripture speaks also about the role churches play in relating to families. Many of the same principles that apply to the church certainly apply to what the church does for families. Jesus sent out Peter and the other disciples with the command to “Feed my lambs (John 21:15)”. Paul instructed the Ephesian elders, saying, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God...” (Acts 20:28 NIV).

Current concerns about the well-being of families are nothing new. Throughout history Christian leaders have shown a concern for family ministry. Revivalist preacher Jonathon Edwards, in America’s first awakening in the 1800s, was concerned about family life. He suggested that fathers have "more advantage in his little community to promote religion than ministers have in the congregation."¹ The first meeting of the Wisconsin Synod had this to say on the purpose of the preachers in their congregations: “It was resolved each preacher who is a member of our organization take an interest in working especially with the youth as well as conducting day schools, Bible study classes, mission classes, etc.”² We recognize these as expected activities in our churches, and we have taken to heart especially the conducting of day schools. The document goes on, “The final matter brought up for discussion was about the neglect of home devotions by many families, and accordingly, it was brought to the attention of the pastors present that they work with all diligence to have home and family altars established in our congregations.”³

1. Timothy Paul Jones and John David Trentham, *Practical Family Ministry*, First edition. (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2015).

2. 1850 Proceedings, *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, vol 9:1-2. 5

3. 1850 Proceedings, *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, vol 9:1-2. 5

Not much has changed in these last 175 years. We still have a concern about the neglect of home devotions and the establishment of “family altars” among the families of our congregations. The founders of WELS were interested in family ministry. The current and future generations of WELS pastors are concerned about family ministry. While the problems families face may appear new and unprecedented, they have the same source that all our problems have: sin. God has given us the same weapon he gave our forefathers for the fight: the Sword of the Spirit wielded through his Word and Sacraments. Every generation has faced cultural attacks. Our only question is how to respond. This paper’s thesis is that Lutheran family ministry means that pastors train parents to minister to their own families with God’s Word.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS FAMILY MINISTRY?

What comes to mind when someone says, “family ministry”? Is it the youth group outings? Is it Lutheran Pioneers? The Lutheran Elementary School or Sunday School? These are the bread and butter of family ministry in WELS churches. These programs show a concern for the spiritual well-being of the children of the congregation. How much of a role do parents play in these programs? Is it too easy for parents to give up their role as spiritual nurturers in favor of leaving it to the professionals?

Is there another way? This paper contends that there is. Other forms of family ministry may fit better in your church. This paper is looking at family ministry as a way of the church discipling the families that make up the church, parent and child together. This paper will examine other ideas about family ministry, not to find the “right” model, but to understand what others have done and apply what best fits in each context. This paper is not specifically about helping families in trouble or in non-traditional situations such as divorce, step-families, or others that are becoming more common. Neither is it excluding these families. Family ministry is not about making families the way that they “should” be. Family ministry is about strengthening the understanding and commitment of parents to “Train up a child in the way he should go,” (Prov 22:6 ESV). It is about families growing together and “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15 NIV). This paper will show that what happens at home affects the spiritual life of children and families far more than what happens at church. After a brief discussion narrowing the focus of family ministry in the following paragraphs, we will look at what the broader Christian world

is saying about family ministry, including the Scriptural basis for family ministry. Then follows a look at the historical Lutheran distinctives which gives Lutheran churches a particular “flavor” in family ministry. Finally, this researcher conducted interviews with six WELS pastors who created new ministry plans for family ministry in recent years to see what has worked and what has not worked. The “why” of family ministry may be universal, but the “how” is contextually dependent, which is demonstrated in the variety of approaches taken by the pastors who were interviewed.

The Purpose of Family Ministry

When considering models, strategies, and plans for family ministry, a clear purpose for whatever a church does must be established. One temptation in this area is to make the purpose of family ministry solving the problems that modern families face. In Charles Sell’s important work *Family Ministry*, Sell describes issues he sees in families today. What issues? He explains how to train families to have healthier family lives through the working of the church. Listen to his definition of Family Ministry: “Family Ministry involves communicating to people of all ages, in as many ways as possible, the biblical and practical truths related to family living.”⁴ Notice the focus on practical living: “to meet the needs of modern people, the church will, in some instances, need to train people for the so-called instrumental duties of family life.”⁵

4. Charles M. Sell, *Family Ministry*, 2nd edition. (Zondervan Academic, 1995). 137

5. Sell, *Family Ministry*, 130

Sell gives the illustration of a pastor who developed a mentoring program for fathers who left their families, “After first supporting their rehabilitation from alcohol, drugs, crime, or other problems, the mentors try to help them spiritually. They move on to family issues, assisting them in dealing with their fears and inadequacies of being husbands and fathers. The goal is to eventually get them back into their homes and teach them family living skills.”⁶ This desire for better outcomes in behavior and family life is admirable. However, is there a more fundamental purpose for which the church is called by Christ? David Reuter writes in his book *Teaching the Faith at Home* from a confessional Lutheran point of view. He suggests that moral formation has been over-focused on, “Responding to the parental cry for help, pastors, DCEs⁷, and youth leaders have spent too much time focusing on shaping the moral behaviors of the teens in their ministries rather than passing along the true substance of the Christian faith.”⁸ Our motivation for family ministry is to give the solid food of the Gospel (Heb 5:14) to the best of our ability. Might there be wisdom in guarding against a strictly practical and pragmatic purpose for family ministry at the expense of its main purpose? Moral formation of children is important, and so is helping families practically. Jesus forgave people’s sins, then he healed their diseases.

This paper’s primary focus is on spiritual issues, working with the belief that from spiritual growth in God’s Word, moral formation and healthier relationships spring. Other resources give warnings about the motivation for family ministry as well. Discussing some people’s misguided views on family ministry, Bryan Nelson writes, “Their focus on family

6. Sell, *Family Ministry*, 131

7. Acronym: Director of Christian Education

8. David Reuter, *Teaching the Faith at Home: What Does It Mean? How Is This Done?* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2015). 55

ministry is a pragmatic reaction rooted in a desire for numbers with no standard by which to judge the results other than an increasing number of warm bodies.”⁹ Timothy Paul Jones’ definition of family ministry strikes closer to the mark: “[Family ministry is] the process of intentionally and persistently coordinating a congregation’s proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives.”¹⁰ This is closer to the purpose of family ministry that Lutheran churches must focus on, which can be seen as an extension and application of the mission of the church in general, which is to proclaim the Gospel and administer the Sacraments for the salvation of souls.

Lutheran family ministry equips parents with the tools they need to carry out their God-given calling to bring their children to receive grace through Word and Sacrament, with the prayerful hope that their children maintain a life-long desire to receive the grace of Christ in Word and Sacrament. It equips parents to model the importance of Christ in their own lives, recognizing that children are influenced more by the example and practice of their parents than by what they are taught in any church or school program.

9. Bryan Nelson and Timothy Paul Jones, “The Problem and the Promise of Family Ministry,” *The Journal of Family Ministry* 1.1 (2010): 36–43. 36

10. Randy Stinson et al., *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical, and Practical Perspective*, 53809th edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2011). 15

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Scriptural Principles

Scripture speaks directly to the issue of family ministry. One of the main portions of Scripture that speaks is Deuteronomy 6:4ff, referred to as the “Shema.” Those who write about family ministry take many applications from these passages.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (NIV)

Moses models family ministry for the Israelites. He addresses the Israelites, particularly the heads of the households of Israel. Randy Stinson in *Trained in the Fear of God* understands the Shema to specifically address the fathers, whom Moses instructs:

Notice that Deuteronomy 6:7 not only calls each individual father to repeat the words to his sons, but it also calls him to 'talk about them.' At the very least this would seem to imply that, once the words were restated, the father told his sons what these words meant. Explaining what the words meant seems to have been designed to open up discussions of *why* the words said what they did.¹¹

Parents talking with their children about God is important. God wants them to do it. Research will be shown later in this paper which says that talking to children about faith greatly impacts their faith. Primary spiritual instruction of the Israelite children takes place in the home through

11. Randy Stinson et al., *Trained in the Fear of God*, 37.

fathers explaining what God has done for them. For the Israelites, the focus of family ministry is teaching. Deuteronomy 6 and Lutheran historical practice shows that the focus of family ministry for Lutherans must be training in the Scriptures which “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3:15).”

Reggie Joiner, author of *Think Orange*, sees Deuteronomy 6 as emphasizing the importance of the faith of the parents. He writes, “Moses is implying that before I can ask who my children are becoming, I have to examine who *I* am becoming. As church leaders, it would fundamentally change the way we look at our ministries if we really believed the greatest thing that could happen in the heart of a child would be what happened in the heart of a parent.”¹² A church does better to instruct parents so that they can instruct children in the faith. Moses describes one aspect of the natural relationship that parents have with their children, which is a relationship between training and instruction. Churches do many things for children, but the effort may pay off better working with parents rather than directly with children. What would churches find if they assess how much time they invest in parents vs the amount of time they invest in children?

In 2019, Pastor William Monday presented on Deuteronomy 6’s focus on family discipleship to the Fox River Valley Pastor’s Conference, “The biblical mandate for family discipleship as found in the Shema, therefore, grants authority to fathers to be primary and mothers to be helpers to the fathers to carry out the discipling of children in the Lord.”¹³ This

12. Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide...*, New edition. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2009). 62

13. William Monday, “The Shema, A Study of Family Discipleship” (Prepared for the Fox River Valley Pastor’s Conference, St. Paul’s Green Bay, WI, September 24, 2019). 5.

applies to the programs and efforts that churches carry out regularly. He asks some penetrating questions about practices in WELS churches based on this idea:

How many of our youth ministry programs are offered without intentional focus on equipping fathers or mothers? Can you name any systematic ongoing approaches that you have in your own congregation besides a parenting Bible study here or there or even a semi-parent led confirmation offering? When we promote our LES, are we offering as the prime feature of our schools a systematic way of encouraging, equipping, and training fathers and mothers to spiritually raise their children? Could it be that our present approach to discipling youth is, by and large, a usurpation of the authority which belongs to the father of every household? How do we honor the audience God has in mind in Moses' inspired words by holding them up to do the work which they alone are designed to do?¹⁴

Are parents alone really designed to disciple their children? Pastor Monday's argument that this address is aimed primarily at the heads of households comes from verse 7 when Moses says, "Impress them on *your children*..."¹⁵, and in verse 20, "In the future, *when your son asks you*...", and from Deuteronomy 1:9-18 when Moses reminds them that he had established leaders from them under himself. This last point seems to be the weakest in the argument, but in the immediate, context Moses is addressing those who will be talking to children, namely parents. So do LES's subvert the authority of parents? Pastor Monday overstates his point here. Deuteronomy 6 gives us an example of family discipleship, but let us also remember that we are not in the Sinaitic Covenant anymore. Also, consider the context in which these words were spoken. Moses speaks to the Israelites as God's representative. Moses has been engaging in the discipleship of the whole nation as their pastor. He says, "Hear, O *Israel*,..." Family discipleship has a corporate component in the body of believers as well. Pastor Moses tells the people of his

14. William Monday, "The Shema, A Study of Family Discipleship", 6.

15. William Monday, "The Shema, A Study of Family Discipleship", 4.

congregation to teach the children about what Jesus did for them. Pastor Monday takes a hard line in favor of religious training and discipleship being placed into the hands of fathers, which is an admirable desire. His perspective is valuable so that we think carefully about why we have schools, catechism classes, Sunday schools, and so on. But the answer is not to get rid of them. These parts of ministry are quite valuable. They are some of the ways we have chosen to let the little children come to Jesus (Mark 10:14) in church life. But, they are not the goal of church ministry in themselves. A middle ground between total reliance on institutions and total destruction of those institutions must exist, and one goal of this paper is to begin to explore that middle ground.

Verse 9 is the basis for the Jewish practice of the *Mesusah*, a box with pieces of scripture inside to be hung on doorframes. Pastor Marvin Otterstatter applies verse 9 to modern day Christians. He writes, “For us the Ixthus could take the place of the Mesusah and yet there is something far more important than identifying our homes as buildings in which Christians live. Surely it is far more important that the Word of God be a normal and natural part of the daily activity within the home, something which is used, appreciated and enjoyed by the parents, something which is not imposed upon, but shared with the children.”¹⁶

The importance of parents can be overstated: “Ministry was never meant to happen without the context of family. Each time a ministry is formed and it is not operating from a family framework with the mission to empower and enrich family life, it will not be successful as God himself is family-‘orientated’ God is ministry, and his ministry is relational, unitive,

16. Marvin Otterstatter, *Exegesis of Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:6-9*, WLS Essay File. 8

creative, redemptive and curative – and characterized by love.”¹⁷ Lutheran family ministry does not rely on the form or the framework, but on the power of God’s Word and the Sacraments. We do not trust our own ideas but Christ working through us by the Means of Grace.

The Apostle Paul engages in family life education throughout his epistles. He tells families what they will do together. Ephesians 5-6 tell us about how the family lives together in Christ. Most significant for this paper is Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (NIV).” He has given instructions to husbands and wives, then children. Now he gives instructions to the parents. This is an instruction given to New Testament believers, like us, that specifically tells fathers to train their children in the Lord. First, Paul gives a negative command, “do not exasperate...” Pastor Marvin Otterstatter, in an essay on Christian education in the home, writes, on this word, “Fathers, and mothers too, are warned to think about their actions, to think about what effect their deeds and misdeeds will have upon the spiritual and religious values of their children.”¹⁸ He gives some examples of how parents might damage children,

A study of the word *παροργίζω* rather convinced me that parents “goad their children into resentment” either by an example which is inconsistent with their confession or by being permissive when it comes to the sins of their children.... Parents would also “goad their children to resentment” of God and his way by being too lenient or by exerting no or little influence upon them. The example which quickly comes to mind is that of the high priest Eli, who by a lack of discipline, correction and admonition “provoked” his son “to wrath.”¹⁹

17. Philippa Strong, “Effective Youth Ministry: Embracing a Family-Oriented Approach,” *In Die Skriflig* 48.1 (2014): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i1.1715>. 3.

18. Marvin Otterstatter, *Exegesis of Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:6-9*, 4

19. Marvin Otterstatter, *Exegesis of Ephesians 6:4 and Deuteronomy 6:6-9*, 4

Consider the broader context of the book of Ephesians. Paul gives instructions from a Pastor to a church. Moses and Paul work together in the families of believers with parents to train children; pastors and teachers in our synod work “to equip his people for works of service (Eph 4:12, NIV).”

Importance of Parents

The Scriptures tell us that parents play an important role in the spiritual upbringing of their children. While this is enough for us to consider parents important, research has also shown how important parents are for spiritual upbringing. *Handing Down the Faith* is a book of research on how people hand down their faith to their children. The focus of the research is not only on Christianity, but their research highlights the impact parents make on their children. The book’s authors write,

The best general predictor of what any American is like religiously... is what their parents were like religiously when they were growing up. Parents do not, of course, control or determine the religious lives of their children; and many households produce children whose religious lives vary wildly. But a large body of accumulated research consistently shows that, when viewing Americans as a whole, the influence of parents in religiousness trumps every other influence, however much parents and children may assume otherwise.²⁰

They also make some observations about the way that parents and culture view the impact of parents:

Parental religious investment and involvement is in almost all cases the necessary and sometimes sufficient condition for children's religious investment and involvement.

20. Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2021). 3

This parental primacy in religious transmission is significant because, even though most parents do realize it when they think about it, their crucial role often runs in the background of their often busy lives; it is not a conscious, daily, strategic matter... Widespread cultural scripts also consistently say that the influence of parents over their children recedes starting with the onset of puberty, while the influence of peers, music, and social media takes over. Other common and influential cultural scripts operate to disempower parents by telling them that they are not qualified to care for their children in many ways, so they should turn their children over to experts. Further, the perceptions of at least some (frustrated) staff at religious congregations is that more than a few parents assume that others besides themselves (the staff) are responsible for forming their children religiously (in Sunday school, youth group, confirmation, CCD, etc.)"²¹

Parents, children, and the culture may not even realize the impact parents have on children.

Parents maintain their influence throughout the lives of their children. The researchers who wrote *Handing Down the Faith* don't share the convictions of Lutherans on the power of the means of grace. We know that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the creation of faith. We can also look at what we see in the world. They looked at the numbers. These numbers describe what we can observe about how faith is handed down to children. According to this research, one of the most powerful ways to hand down faith is to have meaningful conversations with children about our faith. They write, "In fact, parents talking is *even more strongly* associated with religious importance than either increased parents' importance of faith or more frequent religious service attendance, both of which we already know to be major influences."²² What implications does that statement have for the focus of family ministry? Is a ministry program successful because it has good attendance? Is a Sunday School program working if many children are dropped off by their parents, who then go home and not to Bible Study? This statement suggests that it is not.

21. Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 69-70.

22. Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 53.

They also outline the distinction between the type of conversations parents have compared to the way that institutional instruction talks to children. They write,

Parents talking with children about religious matters also helps relate religion to the rest of life. Religion in modern, liberal societies tends to be differentiated off as one personal or private sphere or sector. Religion can easily come to feel like a discreet compartment, easily disconnected from other areas of life that seem to really matter: school, sports, friends, romance, sex, jobs, money, music, movies, digital media, and so on.... Parents not talking about religion other than during scheduled 'religious times' reinforces that compartmentalization. But when parents discuss religion with children during the week, it decompartmentalizes and desegregates religion. And the more naturally and regularly religion is talked about, the more normally it becomes a significant part of the world of the conversation participants.²³

Notice how they describe the attitude of “modern, liberal societies.” They are talking about mainstream American culture. This cultural attitude will influence the attitudes of parents and children. The result is religious life put into a box of time on Sunday morning. Taking Jesus out of that box and putting him into every part of life is one goal of family ministry. Parents are with children during more of those boxes of time than anyone from the institution, whether teachers or pastors. Elementary school, Sunday school and Sunday morning Bible studies lend themselves well to being put into the “religion” box. Do families need something more? They do. Christian households speak the words of life to each other. Most parents have the desire to do so in their homes.²⁴

Parents may need training and equipping to be able to incorporate their faith in their own lives and their children’s lives. They may also need to be made aware of cultural trends working against them so that they start the fight against them. The goal of this paper is not to replace the

23. Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 84.

24. “Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child’s Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness,” *Barna Group*, 2003.

activities in the box, but to see those activities as complementary to the activities going on at home.

One metaphor about the training that parents naturally give to their children is that parents teach their children a language.

Religious beliefs and practices are not only embodied but also linguistically constituted and meaningful. Language and related symbols are central to religion, and they must be learned. Yet religious language is not mainstream American's first language; it is a second language at best. [footnote: American culture's first language is one of liberal individualism and mass-consumer capitalism.] So learning to believe and practice a religion requires essentially learning a second language, and that always requires practice talking, even when one is surrounded by native speakers. So when parents regularly talk with children about religious matters in ordinary conversational settings, that provides children with exactly the kind of sustained practice in learning the second language that is necessary for religion to be sensible and possibly interesting."²⁵

Are parents fluent in Christianity? Are they comfortable speaking casually about God? Or are they halting and uncertain when they speak about faith? Many are the latter. What can the church do? How can the church leverage the influence of parents and give them the confidence to discuss their faith in everyday contexts with their children? Keep this idea in mind as we discuss application possibilities. A church focused on family ministry will want to explore how to train parents to talk to their children about faith in a way that is natural. It doesn't seem that most people's first language is Lutheranism, or even better, Scriptural language.

How can they learn better? Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book about the Psalms compares the way God speaks to us in the Psalter to fathers teaching their children to speak:

Children learn to speak because their father speaks to them. The child learns the speech of the father. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us... We ought to speak to God and he wants to hear us, not in the confused speech of our heart, but in the clear and pure speech which God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ... If

25. Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 71.

we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer.²⁶

Parents teach their children how to speak everyday language, and they teach them to speak to their God in prayer. Psalms are a simple way for parents to learn the language of their Heavenly Father better, first that they may benefit, and then pass that benefit to their children. Psalms are a good starting point for those who are uncomfortable in God’s language, and from that confidence in speaking about Jesus will grow.

Home devotions are another powerful way to teach children to speak “Christianese” in their lives. Historically the Lutheran church has understood the importance of home devotions. Recall the words of the founding document of WELS that spoke about establishing home altars and promoting family devotions. Family devotions may serve as a vector for Scriptural language training in the home. Research released in 2003 by the Barna group found that “a majority of parents do not spend any time during a typical week discussing religious matters or studying religious materials with their children.”²⁷ They also found that a minority of people had ever received training or even heard from their pastor about teaching their children at home, only 19% of those whom they surveyed.²⁸ A simple step a pastor could take is to reach out to families to encourage home devotions and discussions in homes. He can ask parents how equipped they feel to talk with their children. No one can know what is going on in homes until someone asks them.

26. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Walter Brueggemann, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, 1st Edition. (Broadleaf Books, 2022). 12

27. “Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child’s Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness,” *Barna Group*, n.d., <https://www.barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childs-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/>.

28. “Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child’s Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness,” *Barna Group*, n.d., <https://www.barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childs-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/>.

He could provide families with a reading plan, perhaps starting with a psalm or two, and as families mature together the readings could expand.

Knowing that parents talking to their children is so impactful puts our church programs into perspective as well. Where does a church get the most “bang for their buck”? It may not be in programs for children but in adult Bible study. To teach their children the Bible as a first language they’ll need to practice it themselves as well. Parents need to be reading the Bible. One practice churches could consider is public Bible reading, when the people from church get together and read the Bible out loud. Would people be comfortable reading and not having any expectation of being in a Bible study? This does not replace regular Bible study, but it could be a way to get more people reading the Bible regularly. Would this also get people fired up to be reading in their own homes? On the other hand, some people might find this too cheesy and uncomfortable. The point is to consider the options and explore new ideas. This is something that would cost no money and require little effort, and if it doesn’t work out there is no harm done.

Consistency is important to children, and they will pick up on distinctions between what parents say and what they do at church and at home. Mark Holmen writes on this point,

I refer to it as a different version of a drug problem. On Sunday mornings, many of these 19- to 29-year-olds were "drug" to church where they were put into church programs, but when they went home, there was no faith talk, prayer, Bible reading or any other form of Christian living. So for them, Christianity was just something where you act, dress, and behave one way at church and then go home and act, dress and behave completely different...As a result, many of these 18- to 29-year-olds are walking away from Christianity, looking for "real" spirituality.²⁹

29. Mark Holmen and George Barna, *Church+Home: The Proven Formula For Building Lifelong Faith*, Illustrated edition. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2015). 29.

Everyday discussions that parents have with their children about applying the Bible to their lives show children that their parents' behavior is also influenced by their faith in Jesus. Children need to see that faith is not a show that they put on for the public.

Parents spend more time than any other individual with their children during their growing years. Phil Bell writes in *Team Up!*, "Parents are with their kids substantially more than you and I and therefore have a greater overall potential to influence their children's faith journey."³⁰ Mark DeVries relates a personal anecdote from someone who had gone through the youth ministry program at his church, "He said, 'You guys were great, but honestly, I think if you had never been around, I would still be in the same place spiritually that I am today. My parents had a huge impact on my relationship with Christ.'"³¹

Part of the impetus for choosing this topic of research comes from my experience with my parents. I attribute to the influence of my father, also my pastor as a child, my desire to become a pastor. I was more influenced by what we did at home than by catechism class. I can barely recall anything from the formal catechism class, but I haven't forgotten listening to devotions, talking about the Bible and questions about church. Most important in my mind is the daily example of a man of faith. The same is true of my mom, who somehow brought five children to church by herself every week. The influence of my parents was more than any teacher or pastor could ever be, even when my pastor was my dad.

30. Phil Bell, *Team Up!: The Family Ministry Playbook for Partnering With Parents* (Loveland, Colorado: Group Publishing, 2015). 20.

31. Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry : Reaching the Been-There, Done-That Generation* (Downers Grove, Il: Intervarsity Pr, 1994). 77.

Reggie Joiner does the math for us on the potential of investing in the parents' time with their children. He writes, "You have 40 hours in a given year to spend with students. Parents have three thousand hours. What would happen if you reduced the amount of time and resources you were spending on the forty hours down to 80 percent? And what if you took that extra 20 percent and invested it into the three thousand hours? The potential of having a more excellent student ministry is fifteen times greater."³²

However, not all parents spend this much time with their parents. Ben Freudenberg in *Family Friendly Church* writes,

As *The Time Bind* points out, so many kids in our culture don't get what they want most--their parents' time. In place of that precious resource, kids often get a hollow substitute--money or stuff.... I've spent twenty-five years listening to the core concerns of teenagers, and I believe if parents understood this one truth, many of the negative behaviors kids exhibit would dwindle.³³

Many other influences also compete for the attention of children: television, social media, digital media, as well as school and extracurriculars. One recent study on the impact of digital media on young people found in their survey that young people spent an average of 10.4 hours using digital media.³⁴ Mark Devries also writes, "'Next to sleeping, the teenagers that we work with will spend more time watching television than pursuing any other activity. Is it any wonder that approximately three-fourths of the teenagers surveyed in the Search Institute study indicated that

32. Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange*, 92.

33. Ben F. Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Second Printing edition. (Loveland, Colo: Group Publishing Inc, 2009). 39.

34. Jean Twenge et al., "Teens and Tech: What Difference Does Family Structure Make?" *Institute for Family Studies*. 4.

they thought church was boring?"³⁵ Apply this idea to smartphones, which could replace TV in Mark DeVries' quote today.³⁶ How many parents are averaging ten hours spent with their tweens and teens? Parents spend more time than pastors or other church leaders, but they may have less influence, based on time spent with them, than their smartphones. This truth does not negate the importance of considering the major influence that parents' time has on children, but it is worth considering. What relationship do people have with their devices?

Busyness culture

A problem churches will face in implementing any kind of family ministry program, especially anything that is based in the home, is the family having the time to set aside. A prevailing cultural mode for Americans is busyness. Success is measured in productivity and work hours. The schedules of every member of the family are filled up. Young children and teens have school, sports and other extracurricular activities. Parents have busy lives at work. Complaints like this suffuse the literature: "Our people are just so busy today; they don't have time to attend our event."³⁷ The people in church are busy. Phil Bell describes one potential group of parents you might have in your church as the "helicopter parents": "If there's a way these parents could be seen as disengaged, it's in the way they prioritize their children's faith. They're so busy making sure their children don't miss out on opportunities to advance socially,

35. Mark DeVries, *Family Based Youth Ministry*, 153.

36. Just the other day I pulled out my non-smart flip phone at Catechism class and one of the kids said, "Don't you have a regular phone?" Smartphones are the norm, and most young people use them.

37. Rob Rienow, *Church + Home*, 46.

academically, or in any other way the parents see as important that their child's spiritual life can fall to the wayside."³⁸ Churches need to work with the reality of busyness in their families. One way is to help by doing less. Bryan Howard Honnet writes, "The goal is not to add one more thing to the checklist of the Christian family."³⁹ Reggie Joiner writes something similar, "Maybe the most strategic and effective thing you could do for your families is to *stop* doing something. Doing more for the family may mean that you actually do *fewer* programs for kids."⁴⁰ If a Pastor is getting excited about new ideas, maybe even ideas from this paper, he may be tempted to start a bunch of new programs because that is often how things are done at the church. Consider carefully what impact new items on a calendar may do to the schedules of people at church.

However, another way of looking at this busyness issue is to see it as abnormal. Hear Mark Holmen's perspective: "We shouldn't simply write off declining attendance and participation as "normal" or because "kids today are so busy." It's not normal! It's a symptom of the problem we face, and it needs to be addressed."⁴¹ The culture says being busy is good; what if the pastor said to his families, it's OK to do less? A church concerned with family ministry may not only refuse to overburden the families with excessive events, it may also assure families that they don't need to be so busy all the time.

One challenge is that often children become busy because of school events. Many of the children in WELS churches also attend WELS grade schools. The schools have homework,

38. Phil Bell, *Team Up!*, 37.

39. Bryan Howard Honnet, *Practical Family Ministry*, 20

40. Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange*, 97.

⁴¹ Mark Holmen, *Church + Home*, 39-40.

sports and extracurriculars. The family ministry model that is concerned about schedules must include the ministry happening at the school. Be sure that the school is not the cause of parents abdicating their role as spiritual educators for their children. One way that a school could do that is by taking up so much of the family's time. Does Lutheran elementary school need to be just like public schools? Perhaps they should be quite different from the public schools. If the main purpose of Lutheran education is to bring up children in the Lord, let's remember that teachers and parents are working together, not just parents and not just teachers. This differing purpose could lead to a very different type of school. Can school take up less time for families? Can we have "family days" for parents to spend time with their children? This idea may be no more than a dream considering the parents' schedules may not allow this to happen on normal school days, but imagine the possibilities if culture could be shifted toward valuing family time more. For Americans, school is something that happens away from home with the professionals. Christian education could be counter-cultural in that parents take direct responsibility for the instruction of children. Lutheran elementary schools and high schools benefit many children. They must not be abused by families or abuse families by burdening them with a crazy schedule.

People often choose busyness for themselves. The church and the school can only do so much against it. A wise course of action may seek to not fill up people's schedules with school and church activities, but people will fill up their schedules anyway. This is fighting a cultural battle, and the cultural forces in favor of busyness are strong, whether people even realize it or not. As much as one would like to believe that if only people heard a message that said, "You don't have to be so busy!" they would change their ways, that is likely not going to be the case.

Role of the Pastor's Family

The pastor sets the tone of family ministry starting at home. Pastors and other called workers so often have families too, but how much chance do they get to disciple their children? Paul speaks to the importance of the family life of pastors. He writes to Timothy, “[The overseer] must manage his own household competently and have his children under control with all dignity. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God’s church?) (1 Tim 3:4-5 CSB).” Some of the authors of the books and articles in this paper are pastors themselves and have had their own experiences and struggles in their families. For example, Ben Freudenberg was motivated to work on *Family Friendly Church* by his family experience. He was experiencing burnout in his ministry and family life. One problem he identifies is the church’s schedule: “The question is, how family family-friendly is the typical church worker's schedule? It depends on who's controlling the schedule-- you or the church. And do most church workers feel as though they even have the option? Likely, you don't.”⁴² It is important to set a good example for the church. If the pastor himself can’t find the time to have family devotions, why would anyone in the church?

A pastor’s practice at home could also give him the ability to teach and model instruction and spiritual development at home for the people in church. Phil Bell puts it this way: “The way we invest in our own families is the most attractive reason for parents to follow our leadership.”⁴³ A WELS pastor wants his clear presentation of Law and Gospel to be the most compelling

⁴² Ben Freudenberg, *Family Friendly Church*, 45.

⁴³ Phil Bell, *Team Up!*, 25.

reason for our people to follow us, but what Bell is driving at is the reality that what a pastor *does* can speak even louder than what he *says*.

A pastor's family will set an example, whether good or bad, in the church. If the pastor is never at home to be the spiritual head of his home, the fathers in the church will pick up on that.⁴⁴ We are again fighting against strong "cultural scripts" (to borrow a phrase from *Handing Down the Faith*) that tell people to value themselves based on how much work they do, especially men. Pastoral culture in WELS sometimes says to sacrifice family for the ministry. Would anyone encourage lay fathers to sacrifice their families for their jobs though? Pastors can be lazy, yes, but it is also possible to create an idol out of their ministry. Ask a retired pastor some time, "Do you wish you had spent more time at the office or more time at home?" They will not say they wish they had spent more time at the office. A pastor is a father to the church and must begin his fatherly work in his home if he expects to be a father to the rest of the members at church.

⁴⁴ See 1 Timothy 3:4-5 as referenced above.

CHAPTER 2: LUTHERAN DISTINCTIVES

Lutherans may be tempted to protest at the idea of a Lutheran model of family ministry. After all, we are Lutherans because we believe what the Bible says. Therefore, we ought to be searching for a Biblical model for family ministry. It is true that that we base our confession on Scripture. We base doctrine on what Scripture says. When we speak of models for family ministry though, we are talking about strategic planning. The structures of ministry we put into place are often adiaphora. We believe what we believe because the Bible teaches it. Often, we do what we do because we are Lutheran. In the area of family ministry, our distinct Lutheran heritage can be a great blessing to us.

Means of Grace Focus

Many of the resources writing about family ministry come from a Baptist or Evangelical theological background. One reason for this is simply that there are just so many of them in America. Family ministry is a big trend right now in Evangelicalism, much like small groups, “emergent church”, and other trends have been. On the topic of family ministry, some of the weaknesses of the Evangelical theology of conversion become apparent. Steve Wright writes in *Practical Family Ministry*, “we must be careful to avoid affirming a child's profession of faith without calling them to repentance.”⁴⁵ Without a belief in the power of the means of grace,

⁴⁵ Timothy Paul Jones and John David Trentham, *Practical Family Ministry*, 34

conversion even of your children is left in doubt. Clear teaching on the means of grace is something distinctively Lutheran. We teach God’s Word because it is “the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16 NIV)”. The benefit of this clear focus is that we can encourage parents that when they employ the means of grace in their home, most commonly in Bible readings and home devotions, they are effective to strengthen the faith of their family. We don’t need any special tricks or methods to convince kids to believe in Jesus, just God’s Word.

Catechesis

Another distinctive we have as Lutherans is a very clear confession and body of doctrine that we teach. Not all church bodies can claim the same. Reggie Joiner captures a difficulty some churches have when he discusses Bible teaching in his experience: “Another problem is that few churches know exactly what they are trying to get kids to 'catch.' when you start asking specific questions about what they are trying to transfer to their kids, it's vague. We know it's in the Bible and it has to do with God, but beyond that it gets fuzzy.”⁴⁶ We don't have this problem in the Lutheran church. We know what we want our kids to know. We have a strong tradition of catechesis. This is a strength we can leverage. The very existence of Luther’s Small Catechism is based on family ministry principles. Luther makes the purpose of such a Catechism clear in his Large Catechism: “[The catechism] contains what every Christian should know.... For this reason young people should be thoroughly taught the parts of the catechism (that is, instruction for children) and diligently drilled in their practice. *Therefore, it is the duty of every head of a*

⁴⁶ Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange*, 62.

*household at least once a week to examine the children and servants one after the other and ascertain what they know or have learned of it, and, if they do not know it, to keep them faithfully at it” (LC Preface, III-IV, emphasis mine).*⁴⁷

Luther wanted parents to talk about faith with their children. These heads of household were not just thrown out into the cold. The purpose of the Large Catechism was to train them. Luther also considers regular church attendance part of the training that children must receive.⁴⁸ To consign catechetical training to the school hours only, as if it were just another subject in school, is to subvert the purpose of Luther’s Catechism. Understand well: Luther loved schools. He has a whole sermon on keeping children in school in which he bemoans his German people tearing their children away from education.⁴⁹ Luther firmly believed that the church must “teach parents their responsibility to instill in their children the fear of God, to teach and let them learn the Word of God,” as the instructions to the visitors of parish pastors says.⁵⁰ Daniel Reuter sums the issue up well, “Catechesis is thus a team effort in which the church and family must play their part.”⁵¹ A great part of that teaching comes also from their parents.

47. Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. 383

48. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*. 385.

49. Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 46, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–).

50. Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 46, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–). 281.

51. Daniel Reuter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 33.

Worship

Lutheran worship principles fit well into family ministry principles. Should worship be adapted or changed for purposes of family ministry? For example, in *Trained in the Fear of God* the authors write, “The worship celebration in a family-integrated congregation, for example, might look a lot like the intergenerational worship in a family-equipping church.”⁵² They discuss how to make changes to worship. Intergenerational worship means that everyone is worshipping together at the same time, rather than divided into “Adult service”, and “children’s service.” Lutheran worship by its nature is intergenerational. All ages come together around word and Sacrament. Some of the reforms that Luther made concerning worship help foster intergenerational, family-friendly worship, such as encouraging participation in worship by writing a vernacular liturgy and hymns for congregational singing. Lutheran heritage in worship helps families to be unified with each other, with their forefathers and with the body of Christ. Johnold Strey writes on the importance of continuity in worship, “Ancient songs, historic customs, and even the pastor’s throwback vestments imitate the faith of those who have gone before us and remind us that we are a part of the church that spans back to centuries before our time. Believers who preceded us confessed the same faith we confess.”⁵³ At worship the family is bonded together and bonded with other believers: “Christians also have a common bond that unites them. Our common bond is not music, sports, or drama. Our common bond is our faith in

52. Randy Stinson et al., *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical, and Practical Perspective*, 9th edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2011). 22.

53. Johnold J. Strey, *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts* (Northwestern Publishing House, 2021). 52

Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴ Continuity with the past and unity with other believers keep Christians, including Christian families, grounded in an atomized world.

Another principle of Lutheran worship that is distinctive is the participation of the people. We see Luther’s concern for the participation of the people in his writing of the German Mass, rather than the Latin mass.⁵⁵ One reason for the participation of the people is the teaching of the priesthood of all believers, as Peter writes, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9).” Even young children are included in the priesthood of all believers through their baptism.

A temptation some might face is to radically shift worship in some way to be more family-friendly. Something like “children’s church” or having Sunday school during the sermon comes to mind. Rather, think of the Lutheran worship service as a way that the church and parents come together to disciple children. For parents with young children, this may require discipline. Sitting still is not easy for many children, and parents can easily be overwhelmed. However, the long-term benefits of children sitting in worship with their parents, the benefits of seeing their parents practice their faith by listening to God’s Word, watching them receive the Sacrament, and singing hymns with their parents are worth the potential of a little wailing from children.

There are ways that a pastor can work with families who have difficulties with their children. The service length can be examined. Can the pastor say what he needs to say in fifteen

54. Johnold J. Strey, *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*, 53

55. Johnold J. Strey, *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*, 49

minutes instead of twenty minutes? Is there any unnecessary “bulk” in the service, such as too many hymn verses, long explanations, or other things that can be removed or altered? Many young parents may be overwhelmed because they don’t have relatives who live nearby to help them with their children in church. Can friendly older members sit near them and help them? Perhaps even an official program could be started to pair up experienced parents with new parents, giving older women a chance to “teach what is good (Titus 2:3)” and giving the benefit of experience to younger women, and for older men to mentor young fathers. This has the potential to upgrade the family friendliness of the service, especially for single parents or even the pastor’s wife!

A clear focus on means of grace ministry and the tools we have been handed down in the Small Catechism and Lutheran worship are powerful Lutheran distinctives we can use in family ministry. No Lutheran church exists without these distinctives. Yes, we also hold to the Lutheran confessions, but we don’t have two-year courses in the Lutheran confessions to become a communicant member. Lutheran identity is distinguished from American Christian identity by the experience of catechetical training. Some WELS churches have strong youth groups and some WELS churches have large elementary schools, but every WELS church is doing catechism and preaching and teaching the Gospel in Word and Sacrament as the means of grace and the basis for our hope of forgiveness of sins in Christ. If all catechetical training takes place at school or at church, and none at home, we have lost sight of the gift that our Lutheran heritage has given us. If anything said in this paper sounds anti-school, anti-catechism, or anti-institution, understand that it is said to reclaim the heritage of family ministry in Lutheranism. Seeing catechism as family ministry among Lutherans is nothing new the WELS. A quick search on the Seminary Essay file will find several papers and articles saying similar things. For example,

Pastor Dale Shulz delivered a paper titled “Our Instruction and Confirmation Practices – Is it time for a Change?”. He points out the historical practice of using the catechism for devotional purposes in the home.⁵⁶ Another WELS Pastor wrote in a paper to a Teacher’s conference, “I also believe that we should de-emphasize the rite of confirmation as some sort of graduation experience and emphasize more the importance of the use of the means of grace, the reading, study and hearing of the Word of God and the regular and frequent reception of the Lord’s Supper.”⁵⁷ As in all things we have a great deal of freedom, but we acknowledge the wisdom of our forefathers in Lutheranism and Christianity by holding on to these principles as we consider best how to serve the families in our churches with the Gospel.

56. Dale R. Schulz, *Our Instruction and Confirmation Practices – Is It Time for a Change?* [Delivered to the Pastor – Teacher Conference, Winnebago Lutheran Academy, April 19, 1982]. 7

57. James E. Werner, “Confirmation: Is Eighth Grade the Right Age?” [The Central Wisconsin Teachers’ Conference Western Wisconsin District, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church - Ixonia, WI February 26, 1987]. 6

CHAPTER 3: IMPLEMENTING FAMILY MINISTRY MODELS IN WELS CHURCHES

Methodology

The goal of this research was to see how pastors currently active in WELS congregations have implemented family ministry ideas in their ministry. I have included interviews with six pastors. The pastors were chosen because they had taken a course offered during the Summer Quarter 2020 at WLS taught by Donn Dobberstein, the director for Discipleship at WELS, on Family Ministry. The final project of this course was to create a plan to update one of their current areas of ministry based on what they had discussed in the course. I was given access to these final projects. Since the class was in 2020, they have now had time to attempt to implement their plan in their congregation. Each Pastor has a different type of context as well, from very small churches to very large multi-site ministry contexts. The interview intended to find out what challenges and successes they had in their attempt to change an aspect of ministry to better involve, equip, or train parents with children. The questions for the interviews are in Appendix A.

Interviews

The pastors interviewed each focused on different areas, so they are grouped topically into three categories: Catechism and confirmation classes, Sunday school, and youth groups.

Catechism as part of family ministry

Two pastors specifically talked about Catechism implementation in their family ministry program: Pastor Ben Workentine at St. Mark's in Green Bay and Pastor Tim Patoka at Grace in Tucson. St. Mark's and Grace are both large multi-site congregations. Pastor Workentine puts nearly all the responsibility for Catechetical instruction in the home. He meets with the parents once a month to prepare them for teaching by previewing the lessons and answering their questions. He has gradually moved their catechetical practice in this direction for about a decade. A recent addition to this program is small groups. They not only meet with the Pastor; they also meet with each other to work through the material they will be teaching their children. This serves as another layer of support for the parents. One advantage of this method is that it mitigates the perception of "graduation" once confirmation is completed, especially in connection with receiving the Lord's Supper. Rather than a mass ceremony at the end of instruction, parents bring their children to be examined after the unit on the Lord's Supper when they think they are ready. Pastor Workentine talks directly to the student with the parents to make sure they understand everything. If the student gets stuck, he goes to ask the parents about it. Sometimes he may judge that the student isn't ready, and they keep instructing at home.

Pastor Workentine says that one challenge in implementing this method of Catechism was some resistance by some members of the congregation. Some parents won't see teaching their children as their job. Parents have said things like this to him: "This is what we pay you to do at school. Why are you making me do it now."⁵⁸ Not everyone is going to be automatically on

58. Personal Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine

board. Remember also that he has been working on adjusting catechism teaching for many years. These kinds of changes take time. Another pushback he described was the parents' belief that they were incapable of teaching their children. Anyone who has grown up WELS and gone through catechism instruction themselves is more than capable of teaching any child about the Bible. This is what Pastor Workentine works to explain to the parents in his congregation. WELS Lutherans know their doctrine. That is a major way that our institutions and catechetical systems have benefited us. It is an efficient means of transmitting lots of information. Now parents need to be shown that they can put their faith into action by teaching their children.

Pastor Workentine frames his motivation for doing catechism in this way carefully like this: Parents form the worldview of children. He sees the function of a pastor as someone downloading information into the students, while the parents shape how the child thinks through their interactions and discussions in everyday life. He says,

The advantage that mom and dad have is hey, we got a call from a teacher today that you lied about something that happened on the playground. Now I can apply the 8th Commandment to this situation, like we have a living, breathing example of why the 8th Commandment is so important. It's not a contrived, 'what if this happens', it is active, we're running into it, right? You know you hey, we found we were looking through your phone and we found some pictures that you shouldn't be looking at. Now we can talk 6th Commandment, and not this hypothetical scenario. This is actually how the 6th Commandment fits.⁵⁹

Since the parents are also actively involved in instruction daily, they are ready for the kinds of everyday issues children will face for the rest of their lives. They learn about God's will for their lives from their parents in the 10 Commandments. They learn how to confess their faith to the

59. Personal interview with Pastor Workentine

world from their parents in the Creed. They learn how to appreciate the blessings received in their baptism and the Lord's Supper from their parents. They learn that Christianity is not about passing a test by having the right information but about what Christ has done for them in their lives and realemternity. Pastor Workentine considers what they are doing at St. Mark's a culmination of almost a hundred years of calls for change in Catechism practice in WELS, but that doesn't mean they are doing the "right" thing. He told me,

We have been crying out for a change in the catechism system for 150 years. There are papers going back to 1870 saying the way we teach catechism and our system of teaching. Catechism really hasn't changed since then. People saying we gotta change, look at it's failing, ... But now we're trying to experiment, and we get to iterate. I mean I've got 87 kids that are in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade as students at Saint Mark Ministries. So, I get to iterate at a speed and in quantity that very few other churches can. Let's try this. Let's experiment with it. Let's tweak it for next school year. Every year we're tweaking something."⁶⁰

This method of catechetical instruction holds on to the heritage of Lutheran catechetical instruction going back to Luther by making the parents primarily responsible and not having the church take their place. Yet it is not merely going back 500 years, but looking forward and asking, "How can we hold on to this heritage in a world that looks so much different than Luther's world?"

Pastor Patoka at Grace in Tucson is similar in some ways to St. Mark's in DuPere, with a large, multi-site congregation, and both have a high percentage of new converts compared to "life-long Lutherans." Pastor Patoka has youth and family ministry as part of his specific call at Grace. One distinction about Grace is that Pastor Patoka considers their ministry in Tucson a destination church. He contrasts this situation with a community church, which is located in a

60. Personal interview with Pastor Workentine

residential area. They have a location in the downtown area where people don't live; people are commuting every week for church. They are often driving up to half an hour. This means people are not as willing to come for events in the evening on weekdays. Pastor Patoka has focused on doing a lot on Sunday mornings for that reason. He conducts Catechism class on Sunday morning during the Bible Study hour. Although they have a school where many of the children of the church attend, all Catechism instruction is on Sunday morning. The public school, home school, and Lutheran elementary school kids are all in the same class. This is one way to disconnect from the "graduation" perception attached to confirmation class. Perhaps one could say that they "graduate" into adult Bible study after confirmation, but that is a good thing! The school still has Bible classes in school, it is just not attached to confirmation. One reason for doing Confirmation class on Sunday is that there are other churches in the area whose members send their kids to the school. Grace did not want to infringe on those pastors' instruction of their members' children. Pastor Patoka has not radically changed what people expect from catechism instruction in WELS churches. However, he still actively seeks to engage parents with him in the instruction. As part of the homework, he gets parents on board. He says,

I tell the parents go with go over this with your child review the lesson, read the Biblical account. If you are musical, sing the hymn verse..... And that's a way of me purposely involving the parents into it. Making use of the catechism that we have and to teach the kids, but the catechism is not a book that goes on your shelf, and you forget about, and you get confirmed. But it's a part of your devotional life or a resource to come back to you and when they get to be in high school and they realize they don't remember what they learned, hopefully they can use their catechism to brush up on it, or to do that devotional take again that they were forced to do in my class that I signed up.⁶¹

61. Personal interview with Pastor Patoka

Someone might hear Pastor Workentine’s method and think, “Wow, that seems impossible.” But Pastor Patoka shows us that a focus on family ministry does not always mean radical change. It can mean simply being intentional about the way we talk about faith with children and parents. Grace’s Sunday School ministry also reinforces the family ministry principle of parental involvement by having parents with their children in Sunday school. Pastor Patoka supplements what he does in Catechism with visits at home with the parents: “An example of family ministry is my summer visitation where I purposefully visit while the kids are around, but my focus is to communicate to the parents that I care enough about them to physically come to their home, make time for them in my schedule, and am here on their side to help them raise their child in God's good way.”⁶² Both Pastor Workentine and Pastor Patoka have taken the principle of parental involvement in the instruction of children and applied it in a way they think is appropriate for their context.

Pastor Nathanael Brenner

Pastor Nathanael Brenner had a unique situation in his church. He says,

“When I first got here, all the families had kids who were in high school or college or maybe late grade school. So, we had a really big teen group. But there weren't any kids younger than that. Since that time, it's completely flipped, like all those kids have gone off to college. They're basically gone. Maybe a couple teens. And now we have like 7 to 10 kids under the age of 6.”⁶³

62. E-mail correspondence with Pastor Patoka

63. Personal interview with Pastor Brenner

Pastor Brenner used this situation to get creative with Sunday school. Because they had few children, and hardly any older than kindergarten age, there aren't enough children to have a typical Sunday School class. He does have a family with two girls, one in 7th grade and one in 4th grade, and they both help with the younger kids. This is a great example of working with what you have. Rather than thinking of these kids missing out on Sunday school, think of the experience they are getting in sharing their faith. These kids also get a chance to be involved with the ministry of the church in a meaningful way. Smaller churches have some advantages in getting young people intimately involved with ministry. Pastor Brenner is aware of these advantages, as he writes in his final project document for Pastor Dobberstein's class, "Since we are a smaller congregation (worship 40 on a Sunday), we can work together more one-on-one and develop good relationships."⁶⁴ Family ministry is not about the size of programs but about the attitude one takes to them which sees parents and the church as partners.

Pastor Brenner's plan puts the discipleship of whole families into the hands of families. From his final project document for Pastor Dobberstein's class, he writes, "Young couples/parents will receive a *mentor* family to encourage them—this could be the assigned elder to that family or another middle-aged family. Mentor family would develop a relationship with them and invite them over to their house a few times a year. Mentor family could model family devotion after supper time and share with them their personal devotional life."⁶⁵ He also outlines a schedule of SMART Goals for Christian Parenting with resources for every stage of life families go through.

64. Final Project Brenner

65. See Appendix B

Pastor Brenner could not tell me how this plan was received by his congregation because he admitted that he had not yet followed through. One difficulty was that COVID threw off many plans for ministry in his congregation. His plan shows one way that a church can work with parents. A pastor can set up families to work together in discipling children and leverage the experience of older families to give younger families the confidence they need. Check out Appendix C for more details as well. Luther's Catechism features prominently in his plan, which shows how it can be used outside of a classroom setting. Pastor Brenner is continuing to work on his plan. It may take many years, but even incremental change is positive. Asking for change is difficult, even if the person you are asking is yourself.

One aspect of Pastor Brenner's plan that is especially enticing is a plan for family mentorship. Christian mentorship is generally not thought of as a WELS strong suit, and a lot of work can be done in this area. A common complaint of young parents in my generation is thinking they have not been equipped for parenting. Many don't feel they have been taught what they need to know by their parents, and spiritual matters are no exception. A sad reality about our society is that many of these younger parents don't live geographically near their parents, and that is not even counting those who are emotionally estranged from their parents. Their church could be a place where young parents receive something they feel like they missed out on growing up, which is instruction for parenting, received from fellow believers.

Pastor Seth Dorn

Pastor Seth Dorn in Beaver Dam has a different difficulty from Pastor Brenner. He has many children on the books, but little involvement in church activities. He planned to revive the

Pioneers program at the church. This had once been a thriving group but has now dwindled over the years. Using the familiarity of the name of the group in the local context, he would create a group for the whole family rather than just a youth group. He writes in his final project plan, “This group would also be open to the entire family no matter what the ages of the kid might be. We will not be making it age specific. The goal is to have the entire attend all at once, although maybe not doing the same activity. This way it becomes a whole family affair.”⁶⁶ He intends to avoid the “drop-off” mentality in this group. Rather it would become an opportunity for families to come together in the context of church and encourage each other.

Pastor Dorn wrote about the potential difficulties with creating this ministry, “Families will not make this a priority. So many things fight for attention with families that this might take a backseat.”⁶⁷ This paper has already discussed the time and attention issue that so many families face. Pastor Dorn told me this problem became a big roadblock, especially with the leadership of the group. He says, “So I would say I had about a handful of maybe five families that were really interested to get it going on the ground level.... Couple of those families. They got new jobs and then they had to work overtime. And so they just didn't have the time you put into it like they thought. And we did try a few things in the beginning and other families just didn't show up.”⁶⁸

Getting strong buy-in from families is key to making any kind of program that is family-dependent off the ground well. He also ran into an unexpected issue: “In our congregation we have a very high divorce rate.... So, I think that was a bigger roadblock than what we

66. Personal Interview with Pastor Dorn

67. Final Project Dorn

68. Personal Interview with Pastor Dorn

anticipated. Whether kids were at, you know, another parent's house on the weekends, 'we had a plan'.... A single person didn't feel comfortable coming to it."⁶⁹ A pastor can only do so much. The parents and the people involved must have some commitment to what the church is doing.

Pastor Seth Willitz

Pastor Seth Willitz worked on a more fundamental issue in his church. He had the goal of changing the attitude into an attitude that took on their responsibility as primary disciplers of their children, rather than the church. Pastor Willitz got rid of Sunday School and Bible Study altogether and took time to train families how to do family devotions at home by doing a home-style family devotion during that time on Sunday morning. He wrote devotions every week for them to read and discuss at home as well. One might expect pushback on totally changing Sunday School, but in his situation, the Sunday School was hardly functioning already because of a lack of willing teachers. So, he took that opportunity to try something new. It will be a lot easier to kill a program that is already dying. A weakness of this plan is that it is not necessarily sustainable for a long time. He had great early buy-in and excitement, but complacency took hold. It also put a lot of the burden on him to keep writing the home devotions as well. However, this seems like a great idea to try for a month or 6 weeks so that people can learn how to interact with their families about the Bible. If parents think they aren't capable of worshipping at home, or they think it will be uncomfortable, they can get over that attitude by practicing it together with the Pastor and with other families in the church.

69. Personal Interview with Pastor Dorn

We have recently been blessed with new resources in the new hymnal. The Daily Office is something that fathers could easily use with their families in the home. This gives them something to use as a guide for home devotions and worship. Telling someone, “You should have home devotions” might just be too overwhelming. Telling someone, “Try reading the Matins service in the hymnal after dinner,” seems a lot more accessible. Another idea about home worship is to reframe the issue from something like “home devotion” to simply suggesting that families read the Bible together at home. They might end up being the same thing, but a father might be intimidated at the prospect of a home devotion. A family Bible reading sounds easy. Just like parents might read their children stories of all kinds, they can read about Jesus right out of the Bible and maybe say a psalm or two together as well. This style of home devotion also does not rely on the pastor putting something out each week and gives the parents the responsibility to do it in their homes.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

There has never been a “golden age” of family ministry. The solution is not found in simply going back to the way things were. The answer is not found in change for the sake of change either. This paper has shown that the gifts for family ministry we have received from our forefathers in the Lutheran church should be combined with what we can learn in the present by experience and study to progress to the future of ministry.

Scripture demonstrates to us that family ministry takes place at home and in the church. Parents are supported by the church to equip them in the role that God has created for them. A church could err by overemphasizing one to the detriment of the other.

The interviews in this paper show Pastors who are looking into the future, but are still rooted in the past. They use the same tools that the church has always employed, Word and Sacraments in ways that deal with the situation Lutheran heritage should not be disdained as something to be embarrassed about but embraced as a gift. New methods of catechesis honor our history without becoming stuck. Many possibilities exist for a church to intentionally work together with parents and children. No one right answer, no one-size-fits-all program, will ever be found that will solve every problem a church has.

Current research helps pastors as well. Realizing that the highest correlation for children keeping the faith of their parents is in everyday faith conversations may reframe the way that we think about success in ministry. If the Sunday School has big numbers, but the parents drop off and pick up the kids, a pastor might have to ask how successful the Sunday School really is.

Ministry always involves families, because people always are in families, or at least have been affected by their family relationships at some point in the past. Lutheran Family ministry is based on principles from Scripture which tell us that families are where young people are formed in faith, and the church's role is to work together so that this faith formation occurs through the proclamation of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Parents are responsible but not alone; they are supported by pastors, teachers, and other families in the discipleship of their children.

The only way to truly fail at family ministry is to think it requires no effort on the part of the church and the parents. Something can always be improved and worked on. Change can happen in your church. Easy solutions are not the best solutions. This paper does not provide all the answers. The prayerful hope of this paper has been to inspire churches and pastors to look for answers that fit their own context, inspired by observational research and a few good examples.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What is the background of your church families?

What level of success have you seen with the goal you have set?

What challenges have you seen that you expected? That you did not expect? Are there any challenges that you expected that did not come up?

Is there anything you would do differently based on your experience?

If you had to pick, what term would you use to describe the model you are trying to implement in your church?

What book on family ministry (such as one of the ones for the Summer Quarter class) did you find most helpful and would recommend for other pastors?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. My name is Sam Helwig, a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I am conducting this study as part of my senior thesis project (TH3300) on the topic of Family Ministry. This project is in partial fulfillment of my MDiv degree. You have been invited to participate in this research because I believe that you can provide valuable information on the topic. I will be asking you questions about how you have implemented family ministry in your church. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes.

Your involvement in this research will be shared in the following ways:
Acknowledgment in the paper itself.

If you agree to the audio recording of the interview, the recording will be deleted after the research project is completed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all questions. You may fully withdraw from the interview at any time and information that you provided will not be reported in the research.

“By signing this consent form, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information, and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study under the conditions described.”

Name : _____ Date: _____

“I furthermore agree to the audio recording of this interview, and understand that the recording will be deleted upon completion of the research project.” _____ (initials)

APPENDIX C: PASTOR NATHANAEL BRENNER'S FINAL PROJECT

“Plan Procreation”

A discipleship plan for married parents(s) pre-children and parent(s) with kids up to 5-years old
Holy Scripture Lutheran Church – Fort Wayne, IN

Specific Ministry Situation

Since our church currently does not have kids between the ages 4 and 15, the plan is to focus on the families with children under 5, but also couples that do not have kids yet. As of 2020, we have a handful of couples who have been recently married—some have babies already, some likely will be having some in the next couple years. Since we are a smaller congregation (worship 40 on a Sunday), we can work together more one-on-one and develop good relationships.

Mentorship of Parents

Purpose

Since the children spend 90% of their time with their parents and 10% with their pastor/church family, it is the church's job to walk with the parents on leading their children in the Lord. The church's responsibility is to encourage and mentor parents in each stage of their child's life. The ultimate purpose for the church is transforming how families live out their faith at home *so they can hug their kids in heaven!*

Plan

We plan to do this by relaying the goals of “SMART Goals for Christian Parenting” to parents even before their first child is born.

Young couple/parents will receive a *mentor* family to encourage them—this could be the assigned elder to that family or another middle-aged family. Mentor family would develop a relationship with them and invite them over to their house a few times a year. Mentor family could model family devotion after supper time and share with them their personal devotional life. (So our plan really is all around discipleship, because in order to be a good mentor family, the mentor family would already need a good devotional life. During every-member visits, pastor will lead a family devotion to demonstrate and encourage all our families to lead their own family devotions. This way older couples/families will be prepared to mentor younger families.)

Pastor will visit church families every July/August to discuss where each of their children is at in

the plan and encourage parent(s) to follow plan. Every parent comes with their own fears and are uncomfortable to open their Bibles. What their parent(s) did or did not do influences them greatly. The goal is to encourage them to develop their own family culture centered on the Word of God. Pastor will plan to meet with each parent individually to address their specific fears and help them grow more comfortable. He will plan to use the chart below as more of an outline for encouragement. He will continue to check in with them at church. When the couple is blessed with a child, he will encourage them on the next step.

SMART Goals for Christian Parenting⁷⁰

AGES	GOALS	RESOURCES
<p>New Family Starts; prior to birth of first child</p>	<p>Newly-weds are given a simple Catechism (if don't already have one) for devotional use as well as a list of resources to get into the habit of a regular devotional life even before children enter into the picture.</p> <p>The pastor, elders, and/or a mentor family can check in or even invite the newly-weds over for dinner and devotion to help model this behavior.</p>	<p>Luther's Catechism (NIV, EHV, or ESV)</p> <p>WELS App (daily devotions and other resources)</p> <p>WELS Family Devotions</p> <p>Time of Grace (devotions and other resources)</p> <p>Couple's Devotions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quiet Times for Couples • Growing Together in Christ (NPH) • 52 Ways to Connect as a Couple
<p>Conception, preparing for the new child</p>	<p>Review Baptism and its importance with young parents so that baptizing the newborn becomes a natural priority.</p>	<p>Baptism: For You and Your Baby (NPH)</p>

⁷⁰ Pastor Nick Haasch, *SMART Goals for Christian Parenting*. Facebook: Seelsorger Group. (Ages + Goals section) Downloaded October 2018

	<p>This is when to share SMART goals/timeline with parents.</p>	<p>Baptism: My Adoption into God's Family (NPH)</p> <p>Discipleship Parenting Foundations</p>
<p>Birth of first child (0-1 year)</p>	<p>Help parents find a good story Bible.</p> <p>Encourage reading short 30 second stories to their child, letting the child interact with the book and getting used to being read to.</p> <p>Pray a meal and nighttime prayers with the baby. These habits will become the natural setting for the child to grow into.</p> <p>Regular worship attendance may be difficult with changing diapers and nursing, but parents are to be encouraged, not scolded. This sets a trend for the child as the child grows up. Worship is important even if the parents feel like they aren't getting anything out of it. (This may also be a good time for the pastor, elder, mentoring family to specifically tend to the spiritual care of frazzled parents. Mentor family could sit with new parents.)</p>	<p>Cradle Roll Programs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong Roots for Tender Shoots (NPH) • Growing in Christ (CPH) <p>Beginners Bible—Timeless Children's Stories (Zondervan)</p> <p>God's Own Child I</p> <p>Gladly Say It (CPH)</p>

<p>1-2 years</p>	<p>Continue reading out of the children’s story Bible. According to the child’s ability, ask simple questions (point to picture and ask what it is – point to Jesus or to a cross)</p>	<p>Catechesis Books</p>
<p>2-3 years</p>	<p>Continue to read to and with children from a good story Bible. Ask simple questions. (Who is this? What is this?)</p> <p>Say meal time prayers and night time prayers together, prompting the child to fill in unspoken words. It may take longer, but the child is learning to say the prayers himself.</p> <p>This is also a good time to work on the Lord’s Prayer at home, now that a regular prayer life has been established. The child should recognize the Lord’s Prayer from regular church attendance.</p> <p>This is also the time to use the five, ten, fifteen minutes before worship begins to introduce the child to the hymnal, letting them hold one</p>	<p>My First Hymnal (CPH)</p> <p>My Frist Hymnal 3 CD-set (CPH)</p> <p>Check out new WELS Hymnal when it comes out in 2021</p>

	<p>themselves; point out the notes, how they go up and down. Point out the word “amen” as a sight word.</p> <p>Point to the crosses in the sanctuary and the other symbols. Parents could easily make an “I spy” quiet game out of this, allowing the child to look around and take in the sights and symbols of the sanctuary.</p>	
<p>3-5 years</p>	<p>The child will begin preschool and kindergarten during this stage. As the child develops reading skills, parents can continue to point out sight words in the hymnals (familiar words such as “amen”, “Jesus”, etc) The same can be done with the home Story Bible.</p> <p>Now may be an appropriate time to ‘upgrade’ to another Bible that has longer readings. (CPH’s The Story Bible has beautiful artwork, 1 ½ page lessons with keywords, questions, activities and prayers provided.)</p>	<p>The Story Bible (CPH)</p> <p>The Big Picture</p> <p>Interactive Bible Storybook</p> <p>(B&H Kids)</p>

	<p>Continue to pray with child, allowing the child to also say the prayers on their own. The same type of exercise used to teach the prayers (regular, repeated use, allowing the child to fill in the blanks) can be used to start teaching the Apostles Creed and the Ten Commandments.</p>	
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Church Activities

These church activities are intentionally meant to bring young parents together for fellowship and mutual encouragement.

Saturday/Sunday Morning Roundup

Once a month have parents with little kids get together for family Bible study hour on a Saturday morning. Pastor will lead adults; pastor's wife will lead kids. A couple teen babysitters could watch the kids for parents first. Pastor & wife will teach Bible story to adults with the purpose teaching the kids in the next hour. Pastor and wife can model that. The format could vary between a simple Bible story from *Christ Light* or even develop a Mornings with Mommy lesson themed around the Bible story that hits many different senses. This could happen on Saturday or Sunday

Mornings with Mommy

Our Mornings with Mommy group is meant to create another opportunity of fellowship for moms/dads and their kids where spiritual conversations and encouragement can happen. This is also an opportunity for evangelism when non-member parents and their kids participate and are around members who are living their faith

