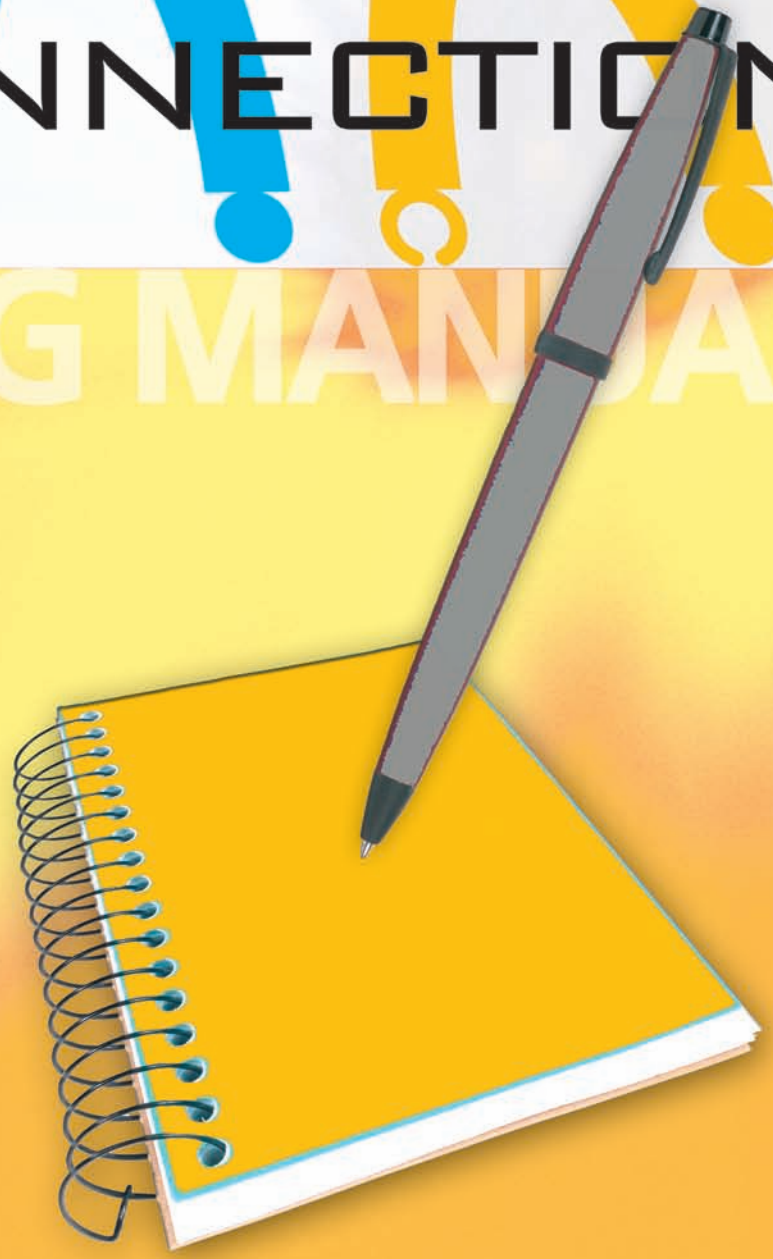




CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES



TRAINING MANUAL



# Connecting With Families

A workshop for Sunday school coordinators and teachers

## Focus

This workshop offers ideas and strategies for supporting parents and caregivers in their role as the primary faith nurturers in the lives of kids.

## Time

1 hour and 15 minutes

## Room Setup

To create a welcoming atmosphere, play kids' worship music as teachers arrive, and consider serving refreshments while people gather. For seating arrangements consider using round tables and chairs. Set up a computer and PowerPoint projector (or overhead projector and transparencies) in a place where the slides will be visible from every table. Project slide 1 on the screen as people are arriving.

If your meeting space is large enough, set up four extra tables, one in each corner of the room, for use during step 3. Before the workshop begins, prepare the materials for each station in step 3, arranging them on the extra tables. If space is a concern, store the materials for each station in separate containers, then bring them out before step 3.

## 1 What's Up?

### Who Are the Parents in Your Pew?

#### Goal

To encourage teachers to understand and support parents and caregivers by highlighting some of the challenges families face as they participate in faith formation programs.

#### Time

10-12 minutes

#### Materials

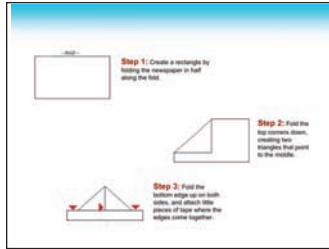
- Copies of the workshop agenda from Handout 1, page \*\*, one per person
- Computer and PowerPoint projector or overhead projector
- "Connecting with Families" PowerPoint slides or transparencies printed from the PowerPoint slides
- Sheets of newspaper, one per person
- Markers or crayons, one per person
- Tape, one small roll per table

#### Preparation

- Project the first slide/transparency
- Set on each table a stack of newspaper pages, a roll of tape, and enough markers or crayons for each person.



Greet everyone as they arrive, passing out agendas as people take their seats. When it's time to begin, welcome the group and open in prayer. Thank everyone for coming and let them know that the goal of this workshop is to think about ways to love families and support the passing on of faith from one generation to the next. Briefly run through the agenda.



Have everyone make a paper hat out of newspaper, referring to slide two for directions. Ask them to write words or phrases on their hats that represent the many roles that parents or caregivers play in their homes.

**Tip**

If you are leading this workshop with your own teachers or ministry staff, consider asking three families in your congregation to put together a short family bio and allow you to use their photos and stories for this workshop. It will make the workshop more personal.

Allow a few minutes for people to finish, and then have everyone share his or her name (if the group is not already acquainted) and one of the roles written on his or her hat.

Share these thoughts: **Some of us are parents and know what it's like to wear many hats: to be provider and chauffeur, math tutor and tear wiper, disciplinarian and boogie-man buster. But our most important role is being our children's primary teacher and faith role model.**

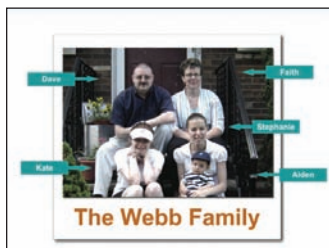


Parents like George and Marie Marcelin pour their hearts into the lives of their kids.

This photo was taken on their family vacation in Canada . It shows George and Marie with their daughters Jennifer and Mildred; their grandson, Pierre Junior (the son of George and Marie's only son, Pierre); their niece Patricia; and their nephew Ralph.

George is an engineer. Marie is a full-time college student, the director of the Hope for Kids after school program, and the church custodian. She also cooks great meals for the family.

The two Marcelin daughters have grown up in the church and are in college. One lives at home and one stays on campus. Both work part time and volunteer in children and youth ministries throughout the year. Ralph, Patricia, and Junior often visit and stay with the Marcelins on weekends. Junior frequently stays during the week as well, and everyone in the house takes an active role in looking after him, taking him to school, as well as to church and Sunday school. He's there most Sundays and often sits during worship with his Aunt Mildred, whom he calls "Mimi."



The Webb household is always buzzing with activity, especially with the latest addition, little Aiden, born eight months ago. Dave is a computer specialist who works full time and manages the church website. Faith works part time as a medical assistant, manages the household, and attends a Moms & Kids Bible study. Kate is a computer-savvy teenager who daily battles the symptoms of a neurological disorder called Chiari that puts pressure on her brain and spine. Faith and Dave spend many hours each month with her in physical therapy or doctor's visits and tests. Stephanie's life has changed a great deal over the last year. With the help of her parents, Stephanie balances being a working mom and a student. Aiden sits on her lap during worship nearly every Sunday with Aunt Kate, Grandma, and Grandpa next to him in the pew.



Giovanni and Dawn Cardona share one car and work separate shifts so that one of them can always be with the kids. Dawn is a middle school teacher. Weekdays start early as the family piles into the car for the long commute to drop Dawn off at work and Zachary off at school (he has just completed his first year of Pre-K). Gio takes Gabriella back home to make her lunch and to clean, do laundry, and pay the bills. He and Gabby pick up mom again at work at 3:30p.m., and then it's straight to work for Gio at Whole Foods Market. Dawn says Gio is "the best husband and most devoted father that anyone could ever ask for." Working in the vitamin department isn't his dream job, but when Zachary came along, he left school so that they wouldn't have to put him in daycare. Gio used to spend his one weeknight off at the church men's group, but he gave that up to go with Zachary to a father and son ministry.

When Dawn and the kid gets home from dropping Gio off, Dawn has enough time to cook dinner and get the kids showered and in pajamas before loading them back into the car to pick up Daddy at 10:30p.m. Zach and Gabby usually fall asleep on the ride. The routine begins again in the morning. On weekdays Dawn also squeezes in library time, kids' choir, and the "Movers and Shakers" kids' club at church. Saturdays are easier because Gio works from 8-4, and sometimes Grandma watches Gabby while Zachary has T-ball. Dawn uses Saturday afternoon to prepare for Sunday school—she teaches the middle school class each week. Saturday nights and Sundays are very precious to the Cardonas—it's the only time they're all together as a family.

These are only three families, all from the same little church in New Jersey. Of course, there are many other families of all shapes and sizes who balance the joys and trials of everyday life and somehow make it to church most Sunday mornings.

In Dawn's words, "With all that we do, none of this would be possible without God's strength and guidance in our daily walk with him. We do our best to make sure that he comes first in our lives. We are challenged to remind each other that all we do is for God's glory, not our own. So I take no credit for being able to manage our hectic lifestyle. It is through God alone that we are able to wake up each morning ready to take on another busy, fulfilling day."



This is the most important classroom Gabby and Zachary will ever know. So how can we support and encourage families like the Cardonas as they talk about life and faith in their kitchen or in their car? How can our Sunday school time have a meaningful connection to family time?



How can we help make the worship and teaching that happens at church connect with what is happening on the other days of Junior's week?

# 2 Guess What!

## Fanning the Flame in Families

### Goal

To provide practical ideas for supporting family faith nurture.

### Time

25 minutes

### Materials

- A photograph of a kid doing something at church with a Post-it note that says "Ask me what I'm doing and why" (optional)
- A folder with a family name written on it: "The Baker Family," decorated with markers, crayons, stickers . . . etc. by a child (optional)
- A Sunday school project or artwork done by a child (optional)
- Pencils or pens for each person (as needed)
- Newsprint or a dry erase board and markers
- One copy per person of the following:
  - Handout 2: Building Healthy Families, page \*\*
  - Handout 3: Top Ten Faith-Forming Features of *Guess What!* page \*\*
  - *Guess What!* family magazine, Volume 1, Number 2 **OR** sample copies of the Volume 1, Number 1 magazine from the *Kid Connection* website ([www.KidConnectionOnline.org](http://www.KidConnectionOnline.org), click on "samples")
  - Handout 4: Memorable Liturgy, page \*\*
  - Handout 5: Marking Milestones, page \*\*
  - The catalog "FaithLife in the Home: A Resource and Gift Guide for Passing on the Faith Milestone by Milestone" (optional, available for free through the Youth & Family Institute, [www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org](http://www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org))
  - Handout 6: Linking the Advent Wreath to Our Faith Stories, page \*\*

### Preparation

- Organize the handouts in stacks so they'll be easy to locate and pass out when the time comes (using a variety of paper colors may be helpful).
- Read the *Guess What!* family magazine so you are familiar with its layout and content.
- Hang the Sunday school artwork or project at kids'-eye-level somewhere in the room.

Begin this step by saying,



**The families we just met are not unique—families are BUSY, and just getting the whole family in church on a weekly basis is impossible for many families. . . . That's why our job is so important . . . we need to faithwalk with parents so they'll faithwalk with kids. We need to do that in manageable amounts of time, giving them practical stuff they can actually DO and that fits into their lives. That's what this portion of the workshop is all about. We're going to look at some ideas and best practices that have worked for other churches and think about what might best serve the families at our church(es).**

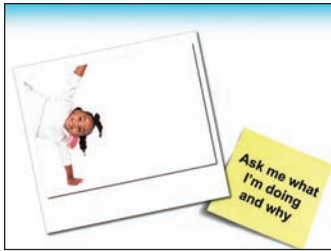


It's hard for parents to find time for a Sunday school sign-up and overview meeting, but what if those registration and introduction details were part of a Sunday school kick-off planned as a fun family event? It could include lively activities like an obstacle course, relay race, or the classic bobbing for apples. Families could be the teams for each activity. Consider the different ages, skills, and abilities of the families in the church to plan activities everyone will enjoy.

A family game night at church could serve the same purpose at any time during the year. The entire Sunday school teaching team could attend in order to build relationships with kids and parents.



Parents are always wondering what's going on in Sunday school . . . and kids are often famous for shrugging when they're asked questions that are too general. Give parents specific questions to ask by putting a note in the bulletin, in a quick email, or on a Post-it note stuck to their kids. An open-ended question that relates to the theme of the month or the story of the day could set parents up to share their own faith stories and experiences.



Sharing pictures is a great way to connect. Take pictures of the things kids do at church, then send the pictures home with a Post-it note that says, "Ask me what I'm doing and why." Display or pass around an example if you've prepared one.

Family folders are another idea for transporting information and projects back and forth from home to church. Kids and parents could decorate family folders at a Sunday school kick-off event. Display or pass around an example if you've prepared one.



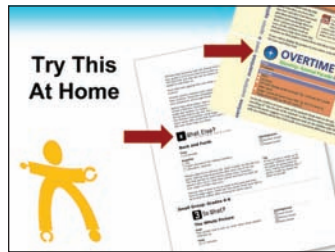
Some parents may enjoy occasionally joining Sunday school as a greeter, storyteller, song leader, or participant to get a feel for what happens each Sunday. One church using *Kid Connection* this fall is planning to include all ages in the large group Bible story and worship time that happens at the beginning of Sunday school. Then kids will be dismissed to their small group time and the adults to their own Sunday school classrooms.

It is especially important for parents of children with special needs to be invited and involved in the class. We need to ask these parents or caregivers to sit in on class time and discuss with us afterwards which parts might be a challenge for their son or daughter and how we might make the class time most rewarding for them.



A church in California planned a Building Healthy Families campaign. With some creativity, the family pastor expanded a *Walk With Me* summer unit to include all ages by offering an adult class that studied the same stories the kids were learning.

Pass out Handout 2: Building Healthy Families



If your church is using *Kid Connection* or *Walk With Me*, mention making the “What Else?” step from *KC*, or the “Overtime” step from *Walk With Me* a take-home activity. Older kids can be encouraged to try the extra activities at home if a teacher explains the activity before kids head out the door. With younger kids, explain the activity to parents as they come to pick them up.



Say, **Let’s take a few minutes to look at how *Kid Connection’s Guess What!* family magazine is designed to support family faith nurture. The family magazine is designed to help families connect with the Sunday school lessons, with each other, and with the Lord.**

Read through or paraphrase Handout 3: *Guess What!* Top Ten Family Features as you share the next slides.

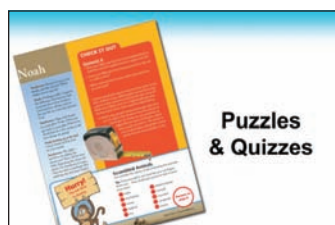
Hand out copies of *Guess What!* Volume 1, Number 2. Say, **This issue accompanies Unit 2 of the first year of *KC*. The lessons in this unit highlight that God is a loving and merciful God who gave the world a second chance by sparing Noah’s family. It also emphasizes that we have a God we can trust, who provides for us and keeps his promises just as he did for Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac—even when the circumstances seemed impossible.**



Read a few of the jokes.



Draw attention to the “That’s Impossible!” experiment, mentioning that these words come from the story of Isaac’s birth: nothing is impossible for God!



These quizzes are fun for kids, and they draw them back to the stories.

**Tip**

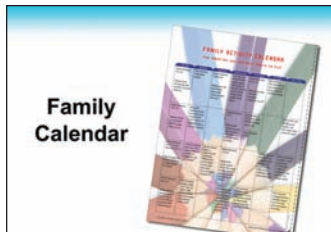
The following slides highlight a specific resource designed for use with the *Kid Connection* curriculum. The *Guess What!* family magazine ties directly to what kids are learning during Sunday school. If your church is using *KC*, it’s important for the teachers to see how this magazine builds a bridge between Sunday school and family time. If you are using a different curriculum, this magazine may still be a great resource to help families share their faith with kids.

**Tip**

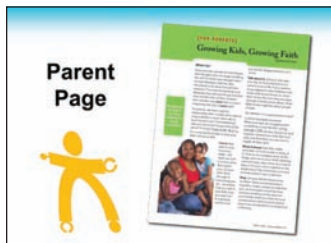
If you are using copies of the sample *Guess What!* magazine printed from the Internet, give your leaders an overview of the stories in Unit 1, and direct your group to pages that have examples of each category mentioned on the slides that follow (“Jokes” or “Recipes & Crafts” . . . etc.). Though the slides won’t match the pictures from the sample magazine, they’ll provide an overview as you point out specifics.



Emphasize that each Bible story is revisited in the family magazine. Kids review the story at home in a fun way with parents and siblings. Some kids may be using these stories to share the Bible with parents who aren't believers.



Mention how quick and easy these activities are—perfect for on-the-go parents.

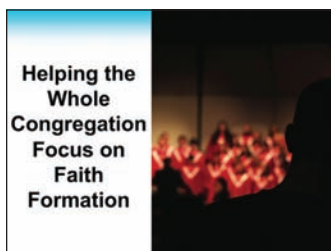


This page is a parent-to-parent message.

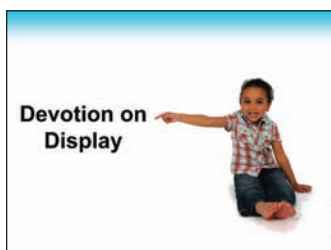


Mention that we'll be trying out one of these family worship times in a few minutes.

Pause to ask participants which of the ideas in the family magazine sound helpful, and which ones they'd like to try. Ask them for their ideas for connecting Sunday school time with family time, and list ideas on a whiteboard or newsprint as leaders share.

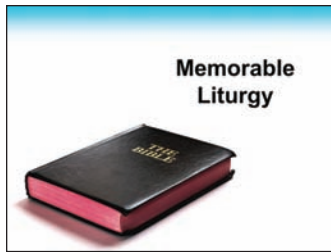


Say, **We've talked about ways to connect Sunday school with home, but we also need to think of ways to connect Sunday school with the morning worship service, when many families worship together.**



**We could help kids feel connected to the rest of the congregation and to the worship service by bringing their work out of the classroom and into the sanctuary.** Mention that hanging their projects, photos, or art on the walls in the hallway or sanctuary (at kid-level so they can appreciate it!) is also a great way to let the church body know how the kids are growing. If you have artwork on display, point it out.



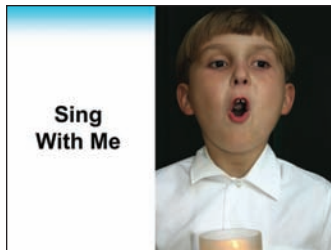


Say, **Sunday school Bible memory verses could be incorporated into the morning worship service in meaningful ways through the liturgy, or by having the whole congregation focus on Scripture memory along with the kids.**

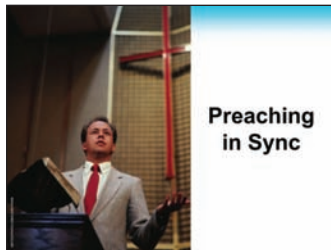
Pass out Handout 4: Memorable Liturgy. Split the groups into trios and assign each of the groups one of these tasks (more than one group may be working on the same task):

- Write a prayer of confession based on this verse.
- Write a litany for worship based on this verse.
- Write a call to worship based on this verse.

Give the groups about five minutes to complete this task, then call everyone back together to hear what they have written.



**Sunday school often includes new songs for each quarter. What if we partner with the worship team and teach them one or two of the Sunday school songs and motions to use each month during worship with the whole congregation?**

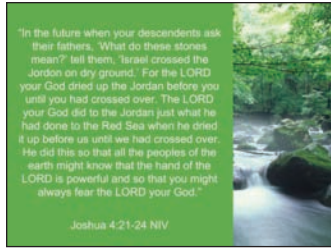


**One church in Grand Rapids, Michigan is preaching a sermon series that follows the *Kid Connection* Sunday school scope and sequence. Imagine the impact on kids when they hear the same names and stories in the sermon on Sunday that they are learning about in Sunday school! Imagine the impact on families when everyone in the household is focusing on the same theme for the month!**



**Marking milestones is a biblical concept that is becoming a cherished part of worship in many congregations. Milestones are the pivotal moments in life that bring us into deeper intimacy with God and into a greater dependence on his grace. The Israelites experienced such a moment as God led them through the Jordan River under the leadership of Joshua. When the people had come to the other side, each tribe of Israel was to gather a stone from the river.**

Split the group into trios and ask them to identify important milestones of faith and life—give them baptism and the first day of school as two examples, and remind them to think of life's big moments that are filled with joy or sorrow. Allow three to five minutes for them to form a list, then gather back together and have the groups call out their milestones as you list them on the board or newsprint.



Say, **Like stones from the river Jordan, faith milestones give us an opportunity to celebrate God’s work, remember his faithfulness, and pass on faith from one generation to the next by sharing our stories and our memories.**

Have the groups gather again and determine how the congregation might celebrate each of these milestones, either in the home or during the worship service, with a memento and a blessing that creates a memory to be cherished and encourages further faith growth. Give them the example of a children’s worship lullaby CD

given to the family on baptism day, or a children’s hymnal given when a child enters the worship service from nursery or children’s worship.

Pass out Handout 5: Marking Milestones for the groups to read through as they come up with their own ideas. Allow the groups five minutes to come up with ideas, and another five minutes for every trio to share with the whole group.



Say, **Along with celebrating milestones, we could also encourage our congregation(s) to share their faith stories through testimony times during worship. Children and adults need to see a vibrant, living faith among their friends and family that points to the promises of God coming true still today.**

Pass out Handout 6: Linking the Advent Wreath to Our Faith Stories. Read one portion of the Advent ceremony, highlighting how testimony is worked into the liturgy.

Say, **Times of testimony celebrate the faith God is forming in each of us, and they help make talking about our faith a natural part of life both at church and in the home.**

## **3** So What?

### **Faith Formation at Home**

#### **Goal**

To practice a family worship activity and learn how to model it for families.

#### **Time**

15 minutes

#### **Materials**

- One copy of Handout 7: God Is Like a Fort to Us, page \*\*
- One copy of Handout 8: Symphony of Praise, page \*\*
- A CD player with a CD that contains music with many instruments
- A bed sheet
- A flashlight
- Some chairs
- A blessing bowl and mat (from the Youth and Family Institute catalog) with instructions
- FaithTalk cards (from the Youth & Family Institute catalog) with instructions

#### **Preparation**

- Read the two handouts and the instructions for the blessing bowl and FaithTalk cards. Be prepared to answer questions if the groups are unsure of what to do at the four stations.
- Set up four stations in the four corners or your room (or in different rooms if space allows)

Station 1: Family Worship. A radio and chairs or open space for seating, and a copy of Handout 7: God Is Like a Fort to Us

Station 2: Family Worship. A bed sheet, a few chairs to create a fort, a flashlight, and a copy of Handout 8: Symphony of Praise

Station 3: Family Faith Talk. FaithTalk cards and chairs to sit on

Station 4: Family Faith Talk. A blessing bowl and chairs to sit on

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Now that we've thought about some general ideas, we're going to try some faith nurturing activities using the *Guess What!* magazine, Family Faith Talk Cards, and a Blessing Bowl.

Encourage your group to split into trios. Briefly describe the activity at each station and encourage the group to choose one person to lead the group in the discussions. Let the group know that they can approach these experiences as adults, rather than pretending to be children. They'll notice how times of sharing can minister to the hearts of parents as well as kids.

Let the group know that they'll have 12 minutes to try as many of the stations as they have time for.

Call everyone back together and ask them what they experienced. Can they see families in the church using these ideas? Might a family worship night be helpful for modeling faith-talk for parents?

#### Tip

Many parents are eager to pass on their faith to their kids, but they feel overwhelmed by the task. They are looking for ideas, resources, and models that will work in their household. Consider inviting families to this section of the workshop to introduce them to resources and practices that may help.

## 4 Do What?

### Family Impact

#### Goal

To highlight the value of the faith nurture that takes place in the home.

#### Time

10 minutes

#### Materials

- Parent's Reward* DVD from [www.sermonspice.org](http://www.sermonspice.org) (optional)
- A TV and DVD player or projector and screen
- Handout 9: Faith and Family Resources, page \*\*, one per person

#### Preparation

- Cue the DVD

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As you come to the close of your workshop, encourage the teachers by saying, **The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of parents and kids in our congregation(s). As parents nurture the faith of their kids, our job is to be their cheerleaders. To offer prayer, support, encouragement, and partnership in this huge responsibility. As we talk with busy moms, dads, grandparents, and caregivers, we can remind them that our God is faithful, and all their efforts are worthwhile.**

Show the DVD.

End the workshop with a time of large or small group prayer for kids and families in your church(es).

Distribute Handout 9: Faith and Family Resources as people leave.

## **WORKSHOP AGENDA**

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### **What's Up?**

#### **Who Are the Parents in Your Pew?**

**Notes:**

Meet three busy families:

The Marcelins

The Webbs

The Cardonas

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### **Guess What?**

#### **Fanning the Flame in Families**

**Notes:**

Practical ideas for supporting family faith nurture

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### **So What?**

#### **Faith Formation at Home**

**Notes:**

Experience family faith-talk and worship

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### **Do What?**

#### **Family Impact**

**Notes:**

Faith-walking with families makes a difference!

Prayer for families

## **Building Healthy Families**

### **Best Practices: One church's plan for connecting with families**

This spring we decided that the focus of our Easter outreach would be families, and that we would work hard to get families connected to some kind of program right after Easter. We did this because we, like many churches, welcome many CEOs (Christmas and Easter Only) into our worship services on Easter. So here's a step-by-step walk-through of the "Building Healthy Families" campaign we kicked off on Easter Sunday:

#### **Rob Biagi Family Concert**

We invited a professional children's/family music artist into our church the Sunday following Easter. We promoted the concert for months and gave free tickets to non-member families and children who attended our Easter Egg Hunt and Mini Carnival the day before Easter, our Easter Sunday services, and our other children's ministries (Story Hour, Tutoring, GEMS, Cadets, etc). The concert was the big kick-off for our "Building Healthy Families" campaign.

#### **Sunday Morning Sermon Series**

For the six weeks following Easter, our sermons on Sunday mornings focused on basic family values from the Word of God, such as keeping our promises, unconditional love, intentionally directing hearts toward God, forgiveness and grace, and more.

#### **Sunday Evening "Family Connections"**

For three weeks on Sunday nights, we brought in professionals to talk with small groups about various family issues. The six classes for adults, all led by therapists or professionals in their fields, included:

- Positive Parenting for Life
- Dealing with Crisis or Loss in a Family
- Step-Families that Stick Together
- How Addiction Affects a Family
- Discover the Joy of Financial Freedom
- God's Plan for Family (Spanish Language)

During this same three weeks, we offered a class for junior high students called "When Life Isn't Fair" (taught by a psychologist, dealing with issues like cutting); a class for high schoolers called "Making the Most of the Family You're Stuck With"; and for our K-5th graders we used Faith Alive's "Safekeeping: Developing Abuse Awareness in Children" curriculum. The "Family Connections" plan included a light supper at 5:00, and classes from 6:00-7:15 p.m.

The goal of the "Building Healthy Families" campaign was to help equip parents for the task of raising children who love God. If we don't deal with the dysfunction in our families, we can't truly partner with parents in the huge task of disciplining children. We are an outreach-focused church in a transient society with a lot of families who don't have a solid biblical foundation. We're taking a basic approach to helping them build a Christian family from the ground up—planting seeds and hoping that we can help nurture them in the growth process!

## ***Guess What!* Top Ten Family Features**

**10. A magazine just for kids and parents—no need to censor, no advertising of gadgets.**

**9. Jokes. Jokes are the most fun when kids can share them with each other or their parents. It's something everyone can do.**

**8. Easy recipes and crafts with instructions for kids and an adult helper. Doing something together is a great opportunity for communication.**

**7. Puzzles and quizzes can be completed by kids, but it increases the joy for them to show off their knowledge to parents.**

**6. Four Bible story activities retell, quiz, or interact with the stories told each week of the month in Sunday school, giving parents a heads-up and kids a reminder.**

**5. Some of the story activities for older children encourage them to read to other family members. Some of the stories are written for young readers. Nothing makes an emerging reader feel greater than to read out loud for others.**

**4. Every issue has a monthly calendar containing quick fun questions and challenges that you can use anytime—when you're making or cleaning up dinner, riding in the car, feeding the dog, taking a walk.**

**3. Family Worship suggestions are interactive. Love is put into action, forgiveness is demonstrated, service is encouraged.**

**2. The parents' page addresses everyday situations that arise when raising a family. This section is friendly and conversational; reading one is like sitting down to coffee with a friend.**

**1. A fun, colorful design with a critter or kid on the cover that says: "Here's lookin' at you!"**

## **Memorable Liturgy**

### **Bringing Bible memory into worship**

This example uses the Scripture memory verses from Year 1, Unit 2 of the *Kid Connection* curriculum "God to World: I Still Love You"

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendents after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendents after you.

As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendents after you for the generations to come.

—Gen 17:7, 9 TNIV

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

—Gen. 17:7, 9 NRSV

**Write a prayer of confession based on these verses.**

**Write a litany for worship based on these verses.**

**Write a call to worship based on these verses.**

## **Celebrating Faith Milestones**

### **Best Practices: Milestone Ministry Ideas**

#### **Identifying Milestones**

Milestone ministries begin with churches identifying significant experiences in faith and life that should be celebrated or reflected upon and remembered. Examples include:

- Baptism
- Entering worship (from nursery)
- First day of Sunday school
- Learning to read
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation
- Profession of faith
- Getting a driver's license
- Graduating from college
- Marriage
- Becoming a parent
- The death of a grandparent
- Moving to a new home
- Completing a goal

#### **Marking Milestones Together**

When milestones have been identified, we can make plans to mark them in a meaningful way. Here are questions to consider when forming milestone traditions:

- What makes this event meaningful?
- Is this a milestone that should be marked in the home with family, or in the church with the body of Christ?
- How can we mark this milestone in a way that points to God's faithfulness, love, and provision during this time in life?
- What words of prayer, Scripture, and encouragement might accompany this milestone?

#### **Making Milestones Memorable and Personal**

A milestone gift nurtures growth and serves as a reminder of the important step of faith or life transition. The milestone-marking traditions and the small treasures that serve as mementos open up the opportunity for faith talk. "In the future, your children will ask, 'What do these stones mean to you? Then you can tell them . . ." Joshua 4:6. Some congregations give wooden faith chests to each child at baptism so that he or she can collect the milestones over the years. Others provide prayer partners and mentors during key milestones in life.

Gift ideas:

- A CD of worship music
- A storybook on the meaning of baptism



- A beginner's Bible
- A scrapbook full of ideas and parenting wisdom from friends and church members
- Notes from former Sunday school teachers, recalling one's faith journey
- A handmade prayer quilt
- A photo album of church memories
- A rhyme or poem written for the person
- A devotional book

Mentoring ideas:

- Older married couples mentoring those newly engaged
- A baptism class to help parents prepare for nurturing the faith of their child
- A prayer partner for students leaving for college

## Linking the Advent Wreath to Our Faith Stories

by Laura and Robert Keeley

Faith formation is an important part of a church's ministry. This is the first in a series of articles with suggestions for how to encourage faith nurture in your worship and in your congregation. One denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, is celebrating a year of focus on faith formation; for more information visit the website [www.walkon.org](http://www.walkon.org).

*The following readings have been adapted from those in Reformed Worship 57, pp. 3-13.*

Many congregations celebrate Advent by using an Advent wreath to help worshipers focus on the coming of the Messiah. Each Sunday someone lights another candle on the wreath and leads the congregation in an appropriate reading and prayer. On Christmas morning the Christ candle in the center of the circle is lit, signifying that the time of waiting is over.

This Advent candle ceremony provides a good opportunity to nurture faith in members of your congregation. For example, you may ask members of your church community to share stories showing how God is working in their lives during the lighting of the Advent candles.

Listening to each other's faith stories is an important aspect of faith formation. It gives us a chance to learn how to express thoughts and ideas that are not yet fully formed. As Tom Long writes in his book *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being*: "In church we are given words and ways of living that we would never dream of otherwise, not just church words and ways of living, but words and ways of living that shape our pilgrimage everyday and in every place" (Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 32).

For Advent this year, we chose the themes of Hope, Joy, Love, and Peace. In addition to the readings and prayers, we have included a time for a member of the congregation to give a testimony that relates to these themes. (Sample testimonies are included to show the types of stories you could use.) These testimonies can serve as a model for families or small groups so that during the week they can have a similar time of sharing.

The "Take It Home" section can be printed in the bulletin or handed to members as they leave the worship service. Encourage people to read it for mealtime devotions, before bed, or any other time their family or small group gathers. "Take It Home" includes a Bible reading that connects to that week's theme, as well as a time for sharing personal stories. Additional Bible readings are provided so members of the congregation can reflect on the theme throughout the week.

By linking the lighting of the Advent candle to faith stories from the Bible and from your congregation, the season of waiting for the coming of Jesus becomes more personal. Together we can share our faith walk with our friends, our fellow believers, and with the children who need to hear the stories of faith.

### First Week of Advent: Hope

#### Reading

Today we light the first Advent candle, the candle of hope. We look forward to the coming of Jesus, who is our hope now and forever. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3). In this hope we look forward to celebrating Jesus' birth on Christmas, and we look forward to Jesus' coming again.

#### Prayer

Dear God, as we light this candle, we pray that you will shine the light of your hope into our hearts and into our world. Amen.

### **Testimony**

Ask a member of your congregation to talk about a time when he or she faced a particularly difficult time but through God's grace was able to have hope.

Ann has been a church member all her life. She has a husband and two grown sons. Soon after her return from a two-week mission trip, her husband sat down with her and told her that he didn't love her anymore and wanted to move out. Ann was devastated. In the weeks since this happened she has experienced intense feelings of betrayal and loss. But she says she has also felt the real presence of God upholding her through this time. As she struggles with the hurt, she has hope because she knows that God is beside her.

### **Take It Home**

Read the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 15:1-6 and 21:1-3. This is a story of hope. God promises a son to Abraham and Sarah. Even though it took a long time for their son to be born, God kept his promise. Share a time when you have experienced God's hope, perhaps in a time of difficulty.

### **Additional Readings**

Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 21:4-9; Luke 2:25-32

## **Second Week of Advent: Joy**

### **Reading**

Today we light the candle of joy. In Luke 2:10 the angel told the shepherds, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord." Jesus' birth brings us great joy.

### **Prayer**

Dear God, give us joy in our hearts, now and forever. Help us to tell other people about this joy too. Amen.

### **Testimony**

Ask a member of your congregation to talk about the joy of knowing that he or she belongs to God. Some members will have a conversion story to tell; others will tell of being raised in the church and at some point claiming that faith as their own. (While "Damascus Road" stories are inspiring, don't overlook someone who has a less exciting story of coming to know the Lord. Using ordinary conversion stories will encourage members to share their stories at home.)

Brandon doesn't remember a time when he didn't love the Lord. When he was in high school he started thinking more about God and what it means to live for Jesus. Through spending time on retreats with friends and talking to youth leaders and other adults, Brandon came to realize that the faith that he grew up with was actually his faith too. As an adult, he continues to learn about God and he looks back with joy at the time in high school when his faith became real and personal.

### **Take It Home**

Read Acts 8:26-40, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Share the story of how you came to know Jesus as your Lord and Savior or of a time when you experienced great joy.

### **Additional Readings**

Acts 9:1-19; 1 Samuel 1:1-20; Luke 1:1-25

## Third Week of Advent: Love

### Reading

Today we light the candle of love. In 1 John 4:7 we read, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."

### Prayer

Dear God, we love you because we know that you loved us first. As we light this candle, help us love each other and tell others about the love of Jesus. Amen.

### Testimony

Ask a member of the congregation to talk about a time of experiencing the love of God through the ministry of other people.

Kristen is a young single adult who recently moved from her home to a new city, where she took up a position as a high school teacher. After attending a church for a few weeks, a young family asked her to sit with them for worship, and then asked her to come to their house for dinner. This happened every week. This simple act of ministry made a real difference in Kristen's life. She knew she would not have to sit in church alone, and she knew that she had a place in the church's fellowship. She felt Christ's love through the faith community.

### Take It Home

Read Genesis 33:1-17, the story of Jacob's return to Esau and the gracious spirit in which Esau received him. Share a time when the love of Christ was shown to you through the ministry of others.

### Additional Readings

Ruth 4:1-12; 1 Samuel 20; 2 Samuel 9

## Fourth Week of Advent: Peace

### Reading

Today we light the candle of peace. Only Jesus, who came to earth to be our Prince of Peace, can give us peace. In Philippians 4 Paul wrote, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

### Prayer

Dear God, help us to know how close you are to us all the time, and help us to show you and your peace to other people. Amen.

### Testimony

Ask a member of the congregation to talk about his or her desire for peace. Is there some place in the world, the city, or in life for which he or she especially longs for peace?

Frank, a police officer, spoke about his desire for peace in the church neighborhood. Last summer an increase of violence and unrest in the neighborhood raised the congregation's concern for the people who live in the area. Frank asked for prayers for the city and for the police officers as they try to keep the peace.

### Take It Home

Read John 14:15-27, the passage in which Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. Share your desire for peace in the world, whether a large conflict (such as the war in Iraq) or something much smaller (such as people in your workplace or at school who do not get along.)

### Additional Readings

Mark 4:35-41; 2 Chronicles 30:1-20

# Symphony of Praise

## Family Worship

*During this devotion you'll be listening to music. If your CD player is in a cozy place, consider staying there for the rest of the devotional.*

**Listen** to part of a song from the radio or a CD. As you listen, shout out the names of the different instruments you can hear. How many singing voices did you hear?

Psalms 148 is a prayer of praise in which all parts of creation come together to praise God. As you listen to this psalm, count how many created things are in this symphony of praise.

**Read** Psalm 148.

If your kids are young and have shorter attention spans, read one section of this passage.

- How many created things did you count?
- Why do you think every created thing wants to praise God?
- Are there any things for which you would like to praise God?

Like all the instruments in a song, all parts of creation work together to praise God in different ways. How many different ways can you praise God?

**Praise God** together right now using one of the ways you mentioned. Or use one of the following ideas:

- *Draw a picture.* Illustrate the passage or your family in praise.
- *Sing a song.* Choose a favorite song of praise to sing together.
- *Rewrite the psalm.* Include names of family members or other created things praising God.
- *Praise prayer.* Join hands and invite each person to praise God for something as you pray, gently squeezing the hand of the next person to signal their turn.

God, you are awesome! You made an amazing world, and today we want to praise you! We praise you for \_\_\_\_\_. We love you, Lord. Thanks for loving us. Amen.

# God Is Like a Fort to Us

## You'll need: a Bible and a fort

Before you begin your devotions today, ask a child to build a fort that your family can crawl into.

Crawl into the fort and get cozy. (If the fort is too small, sit outside it and take turns crawling inside to see what it's like.)

Begin by reminding everyone that wherever they are and wherever they go, God is always there with them. Open your Bible to Psalm 46 and read verses 1-3 and also verse 11.

## Connect the Bible passage to the lives of Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. Ask:

- Can you tell me about a scary time in the life of Noah?
- How did God help Noah in times of trouble?
- What about Abraham and Sarah—did they ever have to

trust God to take care of them? How did God help them?

## Connect the Bible passage to your lives.

Invite kids to share some of the scary things in their life—math class, darkness, thunderstorms, bullies, parents dying, etc. Share a time when you were scared! Remind kids that God is always there to help them in times of trouble, just as God helped Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. (If you have come through a difficult situation recently or in the past, talk together about the ways God helped.)

If you or your kids are struggling with a particular situation (divorce, moving, illness, financial difficulties, problems at school, etc.) take this opportunity to share how you feel and to remind each other that God is with you, just as God was with Noah, Abraham, and Sarah.

## Connect the Bible passage to your fort!

Talk about your fort together. Have each person say a word that describes the fort and a word that describes how they feel inside the fort.

Reread or ask someone else to read Psalm 46:11. Ask, "How do you think God is like a fort to us?"

## Connect with God:

Before you end in prayer, ask if there is anything you talked about that could be included in your prayer. Then pray together, using the following prayer or one of your own.

**Prayer:** God, thanks for being like a fort to us! When we are in our fort, we feel so safe and protected and cozy. We know that you protect us in the same way, and we feel safe and cozy just knowing you are with us everywhere. Lord, thank you for helping us when \_\_\_\_\_.

Help us not to worry about \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ We love you, God! Amen.

## TIP

Supply your kids with a bedsheet and some clothespins and ask them to go build a fort while you tidy up the kitchen after a meal—you'll enjoy the quiet time, and they'll have fun building together!

## Faith & Family Resources

*101 Great Games for Infants, Toddlers & Preschoolers: Active, Bible-based Fun for Christian Education* by Jolene L. Roehlkepartain, Abingdon Press 2004.

*Bible Message Make-N-Takes* by Susan L. Lingo, Standard Pub. 1998.

*The Blessing* by Gary Smalley & John Trent, T. Nelson 1986.

The Blessing Bowl, from the Youth & Family Institute

*Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* by Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Cathrine Stonehouse, & Linda Cannell, Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2005.

*Embracing Parents: How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families* by Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain, Abingdon Press 2004.

*Faith Begins at Home: The Family Makeover with Christ as the Center* by Mark Holmen, Regal Books 2006.

*Faith Talk Cards with Children* by Dick Hardel & Deb Stehlin from The Youth & Family Institute.

*Family Based Youth Ministry* by Mark DeVries, InterVarsity Press 2004 (revised).

*The Family-Friendly Church* by Ben Freudenburg with Rick Lawrence, Group 1998.

*Family-Friendly Ideas Your Church Can Do* by contributing writers Ben F. Freudenburg . . . et al. Editor, Bob Buller, Group 1998.

*Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* by Diana R. Garland, InterVarsity Press 1999.

*Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* by David W. Anderson, & Paul Hill, Augsburg Fortress 2003.

Guess What! family magazine. Part of the *Kid Connection* curriculum from Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2007

*Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* by Catherine Stonehouse, Baker Books 1998.

*Leaving Home with Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Our Youth* by Elizabeth F. Caldwell, Pilgrim Press 2002.

*Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children* by Elizabeth F. Caldwell, Pilgrim Press 2000.

*Nurturing Faith in Families: 425 Creative Ideas for Family Ministry* by Jolene L. Roehlkepartain, Abingdon Press 2002.

*Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship* by Robbie Castleman, InterVarsity Press 2002.

*Passing On the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* by Merton P. Strommen & Richard A. Harde, Saint Mary's Press 2000.

*Raising Children of Faith: HomeBuilders Parenting Series* by Dennis & Barbara Rainey, FamilyLife & Group 2003.

*Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives* by Karen Marie Yust, Jossey-Bass 2004.

*Right From the Start: A Parent's Guide to the Young Child's Faith Development* by Shirley K. Morgenthaler, Concordia Pub. House 2001.

*Together All God's People: Integrating Children and Youth into the Life of Your Church*, compiled by Karen Wilk for the Children and Youth Ministry Council, Faith Alive Christian Resources 2005.

*Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* by George Barna, Regal Books 2003.

*You Can Preach to Kids Too!* by Carolyn C. Brown, Abingdon Press, 2007

[www.calvin.edu/library/mrc](http://www.calvin.edu/library/mrc) The Hekman Library at Calvin College offers a collection of resources for ministry that align with the Reformed perspective.

[www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org](http://www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org) The Youth and Family Institute is a Lutheran organization that is dedicated to nurturing faith within families.