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THE GREAT OMISSION: Reclaiming the Role of the Home in the Life of the Church

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A group of active members in a once-thriving congregation gathered together for a presentation on the vital partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home. The people heard that those born between 1924 and 1944 represented the Silent (Booster) Generation, the most church-ed generation in United States history. They also heard that the Silent Generation gave birth to the Baby Boomers, what became the least church-ed generation in United States history at that time. It represented a downward trend that has continued through subsequent generations.

The pain on the faces of these congregational participants was evident. A significant reason for the problem was dawning on them: Sunday school, confirmation class, and youth programs were never enough to engage children and youth in the life of the Christian faith or life in the church. A sense of grief and regret came over a number of the adults. They had driven their children to congregational activities, but the faith life was often not modeled in their own homes. Many of their children had grown and were no longer part of the church. One gentleman said with resignation, "But we did what we were told to do, 'Get them to church.'"

Recent generations have been doing what congregational leaders have requested of them: "Get your kids to us, and we will raise them for you in the Christian faith." The problem is, it didn't work. That strategy and that understanding of what it means to pass on the faith to future generations and to be the church was incomplete.

Identifying the Great Omission

The church's ongoing reformation and renewal cannot be effective as long as the church pursues the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) while at the same time committing the Great Omission, the neglect of the role of the home in making disciples. The omission of the home as a vital partner with the public congregational life has hampered attempts to revive the outreach focus of the church in recent decades. Factoring in the home is not the only important ingredient to congregational renewal, it is simply the one consistently overlooked by teachers, authors and practitioners of congregational renewal proposals.

Luther wrote about, planned for, and lived with an understanding of the vital role of the home in the Christian life. He wrote, "Most certainly father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who acquaint them with the gospel."¹ Luther did not write the Small Catechism to harass teenagers in a classroom. He wrote it for the head of the household to be a tool for prayer and conversation in the home. He also lived what he taught. He stated, "Though I am a great doctor, I haven't yet progressed beyond the instruction of children in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. I still learn and pray these every day with my Hans and my little Lena."² Here Luther illustrates that Christian formation is a two-way street that nurtures and is nurtured by other generations.

¹ LW, 45:46

² LW, 54:9.

What Luther stated nearly five hundred years ago modern research has confirmed again and again and again. According to such research, parents are primary faith influences of the faith life of children and youth. And yet, in spite of all of this, the church still treats parents more like chauffeurs and time managers (get them to church on time) than apostles, bishops, and priests, those who make children acquainted with the gospel. Instead of speaking to culture, on the role of the home the church has reflected the larger culture that in the twentieth century exhibited “virulent anti-family sentiments.”³ This perspective has become so pervasive within society that church leaders are not even aware of the bias. Pastors and other congregational leaders in recent decades generally have not realized that the home is being ignored as a strategic factor in nurturing the Christian faith (besides being a chauffeur or chaperon).

How pervasive is this attitude? At the 2008 Festival of Homiletics Conference 2,000 clergy responded with an affirming laugh when a nationally known and respected church leader quipped, “I don’t think Jesus gave a rip about the family.” Interestingly, these attitudes tend to be justified on the basis of two or three pivotal New Testament passages (Matthew 10:34-39; Mark 3:34-35; and Luke 9:59-62) interpreted through the lens of the anti-family hermeneutic.

An understandable reaction to the Great Omission is the frustration felt by congregational leaders toward parents who don’t seem to care or be involved in the faith life of their children. However, what can we expect? Parents have been told in so many ways that they really don’t have anything to offer, and others can do a better job of raising their children in the Christian faith. Now that we have convinced them of this, the average parent in our congregations is intimidated and feels overwhelmed to take on the role of apostle, bishop, and priest in one’s own home. The church has years of work ahead to rectify the Great Omission, including a spirit of repentance for the omission and a major effort to encourage and equip parents to be faith mentors in their own homes.

A critical issue that cannot be fully addressed in this brief article is the complexity of understanding the family. The term home has been preferred here as a more inclusive term that seeks to avoid the 1950s model of Father Knows Best or Leave It to Beaver where family life includes a mom and a dad and multiple children and ends up neat and tidy at the end of each episode. There is no biblical term for family, as we tend to use the word in common parlance. The biblical concept of household is more inclusive and cross-generational and includes people who are not simply connected by birth, marriage, or adoption. The term home is preferred here as a way to include more people, including friends, mentors, grandparents, godparents, and others. Without ignoring the role of parents, this larger community of care is also vitally important to the faith life of the home.

As an example of the role of the home in faith formation, it is likely that one of the most prayed prayers in the ELCA today is, “Dear God, get my grandchildren to church.” For many grandparents it is a prayer filled with anguish. However, once grandparents realize that their home is church, too, they can have a whole new understanding of their impact in the lives of children and grandchildren. Some have come to recognize that the answer to their prayer may be through their own home. Wonderful accounts of grandparents influencing their children and grandchildren have occurred. The conversations, prayers, devotions, and a host of other faith practices (what TYFI calls the Four Keys of caring conversations, devotions, service, and rituals and traditions) with grandchildren have changed lives and brought children and grandchildren into the presence of the word of God in new and healing ways, ways that have even helped families reenter congregations after years of absence. Of course, no one insight or strategy works everywhere, but offering the means of grace through the church in the home does matter and does make a difference.

The Christian Home: The Fourth Expression of the Church

The ELCA currently maintains a threefold understanding of church: national, synodical, and congregational expressions. It is time to add a fourth expression of the church, the church in the home. Once the ELCA embraces the home where Christ is present in faith as church, then a broader understanding and approach to faith formation and evangelism can happen that will strengthen the witness of the church to children, youth, and adults near and far.

³ Brigitte Berger, “The Family as a Mediating Structure,” in *Democracy and Mediating Structures: A Theological Inquiry*, ed. Michael Novak (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1980). 145.