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Ministry for the Sippy-Cup Set

by Dawn Rundman

Birth to three ministry, too often neglected by ELCA congregations, is a vital way to support young families in faith building — and helps congregations fulfill their own baptismal promises.

We've all seen a traditional Lutheran baptism:

- Baby wearing the gown from three generations.
- Parents beaming despite lack of sleep the night before.
- Grandparents watching with teary eyes.
- Godparents, who drove in from out of town, holding their godchild with pride.
- Congregation reading the bulletin, learning the name of this new member.
- Pastor reading the words of baptism from page 227 (or 121, if they're still in the green book).
- Splash! Splash! Splash!
- Baby may wail or look with wide-eyed wonder or fuss a little or snore through the whole thing.
- Three splashes of water. God's word. We've just welcomed this little squirming person into the family of God.
- The family snaps pictures around the font with all different configurations of people holding Baby.
- The pastor gives the parents the candle and the certificate.
- Everyone goes out to brunch.

And then, for most of these babies....



Nothing. No programming, no ministry, no staff person dedicated to early faith formation, no "Here's how to live out your baptism" tips, no parent classes, no Sunday school, no small groups, no playgroups, no Bible storytelling time, no prayer chains, no baptismal birthday celebrations. Only when the child turns three does the church formally welcome these children back into the congregation via Sunday school.

Great Opportunity

What is going on here? Our church boldly welcomes babies into God's family. We proclaim the newly baptized baby to be a "fellow...worker with us in the kingdom of God" (*LBW* 125). We welcome the child "into the body of Christ and into the mission we share" (*ELW* 231). But an outsider looking at this practice of infant baptism might call us hypocritical. Initiation with great fanfare, and then no follow-through. In effect, we've said, "Welcome to the club, kid. See you in three years."

The dearth of ministry for infants and toddlers and their families in the ELCA is a matter of concern, to say the least. We fail to equip parents to be the first priests for their children. We provide little support for those somewhat-hesitant parents who know their child is supposed to be baptized (maybe for the "fire insurance," maybe because the grandparents nag them into submission) but then don't attend church again until Christmas or Easter. We pass up the countless opportunities to begin faith formation at birth (or earlier) during the period of development when the human brain is most capable of being molded; when neural connections are forming at explosive rates; when development of language, emotions, cognitive skills, social behavior, and physical growth occur at rates that will never again occur in human development.

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In short, if we want to make something stick (such as faith), why wouldn't we be viewing the first three years of life as the most remarkable opportunity to introduce children to the amazing love of God through stories, songs, parental support, fellowship, artwork, rituals, prayers, and other means of faith formation.

But our motivation is not just because targeting this age group for ministry is strategic or developmentally advantageous. Birth to three ministry offers every congregation the opportunity to live out Jesus' command to welcome a child. Birth to three ministry helps the congregation fulfill the promise it made to that newly baptized baby. And birth to three ministry taps into many people's gifts, sometimes in unexpected ways.

Where to Start

Here are some ideas for opening up possibilities of birth to three ministry in your congregation:

Connect with parents of young children. What do they need? Their responses may range from food and child care during events like Bible study to playgroups, Sunday school, or marriage retreats. Parenting young children can drain parents' energy, compromise their physical health, and challenge their marriage. The church is one of the few contexts that can provide such a range of support to parents.

Tap into resources in your congregation. Chances are you have at least one member who is an early childhood educator or day-care provider. How could you involve her or him? Get to know what kinds of programs and early childhood education opportunities are available in your community. Do parents like playgroups? Ongoing parent classes? Periodic workshops or lectures on topics of interest? Connect those who have the gifts of child care and parent education with the parents who need them.

Seek resources that support early faith formation. Resources such as Milestone Ministry (The Youth and Family Institute), Faith Stepping Stones (Faith Inkubators), and Splash! (Augsburg Fortress) all include content specific for the birth to three period. You don't have to start from scratch — many ideas and resources are already available.

Plan your response to frustrated members. During worship, babies cry, toddlers move, and preschoolers talk. For those who seek a worship experience that is quiet and contemplative or who expect children to be seen and not heard, the presence of young children in weekly worship can be disruptive. A pastor's frequent, public welcome of infants and toddlers into the full life of the community is crucial for the success of birth to three ministry in your congregation.

Get ready for babies and toddlers doing ministry. The joyous squeals of an infant. The hug of a toddler. The manger scene drawn by a three-year-old. The gifts of hospitality, of wonder, of questioning, of joy. Children have marvelous gifts to offer our congregations if we are open to receiving them. We have much to learn from these young children if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven like them.

Get ready to grow. You're probably aware of congregations that are defying the trends of shrinking congregational size and lowered worship attendance. If you explore the reasons behind their growing membership, when don't you hear, "We have a lot of young families"? When you open up your congregation to authentically welcome all followers of Jesus, young and old, parents of young children will notice. Parents of young children will join. Parents of young children will tell their friends, their neighbors, and the other moms in their playgroup. Parents have a keen sense of when their kids are welcomed by a place. (Just ask any parent if she or he would return to a restaurant without a high chair or kids' menu.) And their children know when they belong — no wonder "me too" is often one of the first phrases toddlers learn.

Opening your doors to the sippy-cup set may feel like a risk. You may need to move out of your comfort zone into a place where you'll have to talk about diaper-changing stations and nursing areas. But the rewards of welcoming such little ones can be vast. Blessings to you in your ministry with infants, toddlers, and their families!

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