

## **Reframing Family Ministry in Light of How Christian Parents Really Think**

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Family ministry advocates within Conservative Protestant circles commonly assert that Christian parents are abdicating their responsibility as the primary disciplers of their children, that youth ministries and other age-specific ministry models are to blame for this parental neglect, and that these factors account for an increasing number of young adults leaving the church. The solution to these problems, they say, is to restructure church life to reflect a family ministry strategy designed to equip parents for their discipling role. In light of recent research on religious parenting, family ministry proponents need to revise both their understanding of the challenges they face and at least some of their proposed solutions. This new research shows that Christian parents see themselves, not their congregations, as primarily responsible for passing on the faith to their children. They neither expect nor seek much help from their congregations. These same parents hold firmly to a nearly universal set of American cultural beliefs about intergenerational faith transmission. Unfortunately, some of these convictions are likely to hinder the process of forming life-long disciples of Jesus in partnership with the church. These foundational beliefs about parenting are created and sustained by significant long-term changes in the place of religion in American life and in modern western conceptions of the self. Thus, congregational leaders who wish to equip parents for uniquely Christian parenting will need to address not just how parents think about their task but also the underlying cultural and structural factors sustaining those beliefs. Family ministry must be reframed in light of how Christian parents really think about their task and why they think that way.

## **How Family Ministry Advocates Frame Their Task**

There are two main groups of writers focusing on intergenerational faith transmission in the conservative Protestant world. One group uses the phrase “family ministry,” to describe their project while another group uses phrases like “intergenerational ministry” or “intergenerational Christian formation” (Allen & Santos, 2020; Kjesbo & Cha, 2020; Mermilliod, 2020). Both groups assert that churches should significantly revise their strategies and practices to enable intergenerational faith transmission. Both groups ground their projects in biblical theologies of family, church and faith formation. Both groups identify age segregation in churches as one cause of poor faith formation outcomes. Where the two groups differ is in their proposed solutions. Intergenerational ministry advocates want parents to be actively involved with their children at home, but they typically prioritize church-based environments in which believers of all ages who are not necessarily biologically related to each other engage in faith formation activities together (Allen, 2018; Allen & Ross, 2012; Allen & Santos, 2020). Without neglecting the “church family” and grandparents, family ministry strategists argue for the God-given central role of parents and so their strategies rely more heavily on parental motivation and competence. Both groups can benefit from the analysis of how religious parents think about their task as described later in this article, but family ministry leaders have even more at stake since by their own standards, their projects are not successful unless parents are engaged in quality faith formation with their children at home. For these reasons, this article will focus on authors who describe their projects as “family ministry” or who share with such authors the emphasis on equipping parents to lead faith formation at home.

Many of the leaders of the family ministry movement were drawn to the topic by concern about the young adults they saw leaving the church after high school graduation. They were also

frustrated with the level of youth discipleship and parental engagement they were able to achieve through the ministry models they had learned in seminary. They began to wonder if these were systemic problems that required new strategies and structures for youth discipleship. These personal ministry experiences shaped how they framed the challenges and opportunities of family ministry (Hunter, 2015; Joiner, 2009; Jones, ed. 2009; Shirley, 2018; Walker 2013).

Drawing on the Bible, social science research, and their own observations, family ministry authors assert that parents should have the primary role in shaping the religious lives of their children. But their observations of Christian parents and their frustrations with the spiritual progress children and adolescents are making cause family ministry leaders to wonder whether parents are fulfilling their God-given role. For example, Timothy Paul Jones says that “thousands of hours” of research have convinced him that “The overwhelming majority of Christian parents are not actively engaged in any sort of battle for their children’s souls.” (Jones, 2011, p. 25). Why aren’t parents more involved? The most common answer to that question among family ministry writers is that age segregated, specialized programs in churches encourage parents to delegate the spiritual formation of their offspring to the religious professionals (Jones, 2011). This results in the situation that Hunter summarizes as “the typical parents bring their kids to church to be taught Scripture” (Hunter, 2015, p. 16). Still, family ministry authors believe that Christian parents usually want to contribute to the spiritual growth of their children, but just don’t know how (Hunter 2015; Joiner, 2009; Jones, 2011). So family ministry leaders frame their challenge as “How can we motivate and equip parents to assume their God-given responsibility as the primary disciplers of their children?” The solutions proposed typically involve some combination of training parents for their role, implementing a church-wide family ministry strategy that eliminates or significantly restructures age specific

ministries, and creating curriculum materials that facilitate intergenerational faith conversations and rites of passage (Hunter, 2015; Joiner, 2009; Jones, ed. 2009; Kjesbo & Cha, 2020; Mermilliod, 2020; Shirley, 2018; Walker 2013).

Family Ministry authors typically articulate specific goals for intergenerational discipleship, with some awareness that parents may need to be redirected toward biblical goals for their parenting. For example, Michelle Anthony suggests that successful intergenerational discipleship would result in children who,

. . . would *know* and *hear* God's voice, discerning it from all others.  
*Desire* to obey Him when they heard His voice.  
And *obey* Him not in their own power, but in the power of the Holy Spirit  
(Anthony and Anthony, 2011, p. 185).

Ron Hunter defines the goal of Christian parenting this way: “*We must build within our kids the ability to make wise decisions unconsciously*” by helping them to internalize a Christian worldview that shapes their default responses to life (Hunter, 2015, p. 32). While descriptions of intergenerational discipleship goals vary, there is considerable consensus. Family ministry authors want churches and families to work together to form lifelong disciples of Jesus who are oriented toward kingdom living and sharing in the mission of the church. These disciples should not be living according to the beliefs and values of the world, but according to the biblical teaching about the Christian way of life.

Family ministry advocates assume that church strategies and structures are some of the primary obstacles to parental faith leadership and that changing those strategies and structures, as difficult as that can be, will successfully mobilize and equip parents. These authors often blame long term historical trends like the separation of work and family, age segregation in education and the cultural emphases on efficiency and professionalization for influencing the church away

from intergenerational faith formation (Stinson & Jones, 2011). Family ministry authors are well aware of a wide range of negative influences on Christian parents and children in the wider culture (Anthony & Anthony, 2011; Shirley, 2018; Stinson & Jones, 2011). For example, Chris Shirley notes the following challenges to Christian family life in contemporary society: “Defining Family,” “Upholding Marriage,” “Value of Children,” “Parental Responsibility” “Media and Digital Technology” “Materialism” and “Spiritual Leadership.” Of particular relevance to the research findings we will analyze in this article, Shirley notes that parents are sometimes simultaneously overinvolved in managing many elements of their children’s lives and underinvolved in their children’s spiritual lives (Shirley, 2018, p. 273-294).

Family ministry authors do see it as part of their task to help parents overcome various negative influences in society that undermine Christian parenting and childhood discipleship. They realize that these influences sometimes make it difficult to motivate and equip parents to fulfill their role. That is why family ministry authors typically insist that it will require a major revision of church strategy, not just minor adjustments in programming, to produce significant results (Hunter, 2015; Joiner, 2009; Jones, ed. 2009). Yet they remain confident that with the proper church-wide efforts, parents will change their thinking and behaviors regarding discipling their children. For example, Hunter says of parents “they will follow you almost anywhere if you teach them how to connect with their kids and give them the tools to win” (Hunter, 2015, p. 39). What has been missing until now was detailed information about the ways that cultural values are shaping the thinking of even the most religious parents in America. As it turns out, even the parents who are most committed to the faith and the church hold beliefs about faith transmission that may hinder family ministry efforts.

### **How Christian Parents Really Think about Passing on the Faith**

How do parents approach the task of transmitting their faith to their children? In their book *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (2020), Smith, Ritz and Rotolo report the results of their research intended to answer that question. They conducted 235 in depth interviews with a wide variety of the more religious parents in America. Although they did not have a nationally representative sample of all American parents, the researchers did not see this as a significant problem because they wanted to know what the more religious parents in America think. And so little previous research had attended to this question, that they felt justified in providing a solid beginning.

To their surprise, they found that their interview subjects all spoke in the same ways about their task. Although there are many differences between, for example, a white conservative Protestant and a Thai immigrant Buddhist, when asked about their beliefs regarding the meaning of life, how the world works, their hopes for their children and for their family life and how all of that applies to their religious parenting strategies, their answers are very similar. It was as if the parents in the study had been indoctrinated in a particular way of thinking about religious parenting. Some minor variations based on differences in their religious traditions did appear in the interviews, but these differences were rare and usually involved matters that the parents themselves regarded as secondary. The authors summarize the “cultural model” of intergenerational religious transmission this way:

Parents are responsible for preparing their children for the challenging journey of life, during which they will hopefully become their best possible selves and live happy, good lives. Religion provides crucial help for navigating life’s journey successfully, including moral guidance, emotional support, and a secure home base. So parents should equip their children with knowledge of their religion by routinely modeling its practices, values, and ethics, which children will then hopefully absorb and embrace for themselves (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 10-11).

The authors exhaustively document each phrase in this summary with numerous direct quotes from their interviews. They included this extensive documentation because they anticipated skepticism about the uniformity of belief they found among such a religiously and ethnically diverse sample of parents. The more religious parents in America really do share a set of foundational beliefs about their task.

This surprising uniformity pushed the authors to consider what might be going on here in terms of the sociology of culture. Drawing on the methodological work of Andrade and others who study the cognitive dimensions of culture, the authors discover that “most social groups embody fairly high levels of agreement about core cultural assumptions and beliefs” (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 216). And the simpler, more coherent, and similar a set of beliefs is among the members of a given social group, the fewer members of that group need to be interviewed. In some cases as few as 30 interview subjects might be needed to map what the authors call a “cultural model,” meaning the set of beliefs that shape group members’ thinking on a subject (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 217).

Through systematic analysis of the interview transcripts, the researchers created a faithful description in their own words of the recurring themes they heard in the interviews. They call this reconstruction an “analytical model” which attempts to faithfully represent the key beliefs they heard in the interviews. It is important to note that quotes taken from this “analytical model” are the researchers’ words, not necessarily direct quotes from parents, although in many cases researchers included key words and phrases that they heard a lot in their interviews. By “beliefs” Smith et. al mean “premises or presuppositions that people consciously or tacitly regard to be true.” (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 220). The researchers do not claim to have uncovered the inner workings of their interview subjects’ minds. And they are not claiming that

parents spend a lot of time carefully analyzing or choosing their beliefs about parenting. Nor does it matter to their research project whether parents were idealizing their parenting strategies, because the goal was to discover what parents *think* about the process of faith transmission. The researchers are also not claiming that parents always practice what they preach. Yet the researchers could tell that these parents did not conform to the stereotype of “dropping kids off for Sunday school and then going out to enjoy coffee.” Rather, almost all of the parents interviewed “seemed personally engaged in their children’s religious socialization” (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 265). And in the second book based on this study, Smith and Adamczyk (2021) use statistical analysis of national surveys and longitudinal data to provide important information about what parents are actually doing to pass on the faith and what those actions accomplish.

Through their interview analysis Smith et. al. convincingly show that parents have a shared set of assumptions about faith transmission. And the “beliefs” that make up the “cultural models” of religious parenting are not *post hoc*, that is, made up on the fly during the interview as an after the fact justification of behaviors that are really caused by other factors. Rather, these beliefs really do operate both consciously and unconsciously in parents’ minds and provide the cognitive tools that parents use when thinking about passing on the faith to their children (Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, 2020). These are the default assumptions that seem right or true to religious parents about their task of transmitting the faith.

The authors further analyzed their interview transcripts to find ten additional “cultural models” that support the way parents think about intergenerational faith transmission. These cultural models are: “Life’s Purpose,” “Life in the World,” “Religion’s Value,” “Religious Truth,” “The Nature of Children,” “The Task of Parenting,” “The Importance of Family



Solidarity,” “Why Parents Should Pass Religion on to Children,” “The Role of Religious Congregations,” and “How to Pass Religion to Children” (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020). Here again, the authors carefully documented each claim about what parents believe with numerous direct quotes from their interviews. Family ministry leaders would do well to read the 250 word summaries of what parents in the study believed regarding each of these ten topics. The easiest way to access these summaries is to read chapter 1 of the second book that came from this study, *Handing Down the Faith* (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021).

Many of the beliefs that religious parents hold are compatible with family ministry goals and strategies. The research findings clearly indicate that parents believe they are responsible for raising their children in the faith. They see religion as a good thing and appreciate help from their congregations in teaching the content of the faith to their children. They want their children to live good lives: happy, moral, helping others. They see religion as a resource for helping their children stay on the right path in life, overcome challenges, and become their best selves. They value religion as a source of family solidarity and hope their children will share the parents’ faith throughout their lives. Parents know they must model the faith for their children and want to avoid alienating them or provoking them to rebellion by being too heavy handed about religion (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020; Smith & Adamczyk, 2021). All of these elements of the American cultural model of religious parenting suggest that Christian parents will be amenable to the theologies and strategies proposed by family ministry leaders.

Yet there is also reason for concern in what religious parents believe about parenting. First, Christian parenting does not seem to be very theological. The parents in the study did not talk much about conversion, salvation, the afterlife or any specific theological beliefs or distinctive elements of their faith tradition. Even Conservative Protestants, who tended to talk a

bit more about such matters in the interviews, focused on the benefits of Christian faith for their children's lives in this world, not on eternity (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, p. 27). In contrast, all religious parents talked a lot about their primary goal of transmitting their "values" to their children:

Parents almost never spelled out the specific content of their values. But the idea suggested general concerns, standards, and principles that parents deemed vital to hold. Parents thought it absolutely crucial to pass on their values to their children, who they sincerely hoped would embrace and share them. Very rarely did parents speak as insistently about passing on the particular cultures, discourses and rituals of their religious traditions. Religion actually seemed to comprise a subset of their larger body of values. Indeed, it was common for parents to say that they would not mind too much of their children switched to a somewhat different religion or married someone of a dissimilar religion, as long as they all still shared the same "values." (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 270).

This emphasis on religion as a source of "values" was one of the most common beliefs expressed in the interviews, and "nobody ever doubted, questioned or contradicted it." Even more, as they talked about the value of religion, parents communicated the underlying idea that "helping people 'be good' essentially defines what religion *is*, what religion's basic purpose in life is about" (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 18).

On the positive side, parents in the study see religion as "a normal, valuable, meaningful and worthy part of life, at least in its general principles" and not to be treated with "skepticism or indifference." Yet they also see the central teachings of their religion as valuable "almost exclusively in ways having to do with this life now, not eternity or an afterlife" (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 18). In addition helping people have good values and see the "big picture" of life, parents value religion for providing feelings of "peace, comfort, protection and belonging" (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 18). They also see religion as valuable because it promotes good citizenship, strengthens society and provides family cohesion. Finally, it keeps

people on the right path in life, since we all tend to stray. There was little mention of the Gospel or the need for salvation in the interviews.

It must be remembered that the researchers' method included "not only taking at face value what people say on the 'surface' but also listening to and interpreting their discourse at a variety of levels and in different ways." (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 215). It could well be that Christian parents expressed implicit theology during the interviews that the researchers chose not to analyze with as much care as they did other elements of what parents said. And the theory of culture that the authors propose would suggest that parents who don't readily speak in the official language of theology may still have underlying theological beliefs that shape their thinking. It may also be that some parents downplayed the distinctiveness of their theological views in order to be courteous to the interviewer and to avoid appearing intolerant or arrogant. Although the interviewers did not explore this possible bias in their data, they did note that parents universally distanced themselves from "exclusivity, superiority and fanaticism" when it came to religious beliefs (Smith and Adamczyk, 2021, p. 20). Nevertheless, the fact that it would take some careful analytical work with the transcripts to find the parents' theological assumptions is itself significant.

Relatedly, Christian parents hold an instrumental view of religion and at times even of religious truth. How parents thought about religious truth varied the most of any of the elements of the "cultural models" that the researchers explored. Predictably, at least for those who have followed the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion over the past decade and a half, Conservative Protestants and Black Protestants expressed more confidence than did Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics that their religious traditions provided access to compelling truths that should be believed (Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). But

overall, across the spectrum of religious traditions, the “truth” that religion provides seems relatively generic in the minds of most parents (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 22). Parents think it is important that their children learn to “believe in something,” that is, that “there is a greater picture” such as “a God who is with us and answers prayers.” Children must also learn that “religion can help people live good lives in this world.” Beyond these basic insights, parents believe that “one can take from one’s own religious tradition the parts that make sense and work best, and leave the parts that don’t” because “nobody needs to accept or be subject to the whole package of a religious tradition” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 20).

Even parents who see their religious tradition as a legitimate source of truth tend to approach religious truths pragmatically. They assume the individual believer must decide which truths to believe and practice. Some parents did talk about matters related to salvation and the afterlife, or about the importance of prayer, the Bible, or other distinctive religious practices or doctrines, but these items did not constitute the heart of what parents hope to convey. Instead, parents value religion for its help in navigating the journey of life, being happy, having “good values” and becoming one’s “best self” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, pp. 14, 18). Thus parents articulated an instrumental and therapeutic view of religion (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 265). If parents see their faith as having inherent value, as being an “end in itself,” they did not communicate such beliefs in the interviews.

Many Christian parents do not prioritize creating lifelong disciples of Jesus who are devoted to countercultural kingdom living. Rather, they see religion as a resource to help their children become their “best selves” and navigate the challenges of life. Parents also think that sharing religious beliefs and practices can create family closeness now and in the future, which is one reason they hope their children will stay in the same religious tradition. On the other hand, if

other activities, such as youth sports, seem to produce family togetherness at the expense of going to church, many Christian parents are not too concerned (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 28). Thus for many religiously committed parents, religion is functioning as one resource among many in what some researchers have called the “intensive” or “concerted cultivation” parenting style. In this parenting style, parents expend considerable time, energy and money in curating life experiences for their children designed to help them become “successful” and “happy” in such a way that they can compete effectively for their share of limited economic and educational opportunities. And at least one recent study finds that even parents who lack the resources for “concerted cultivation” aspire to parent that way. Intensive parenting has become normative in the minds of American parents across the spectrum of economic and racial diversity (Pinsker, 2019). In this parenting style, the focus is on the child’s future prospects, and the various resources serve as somewhat interchangeable means toward that end. Meanwhile, Parents’ biggest fears are that their children take the wrong path in life, including rebelling against the faith. So parents tend to undersell their faith, for example focusing on setting an example and waiting for opportunities to talk about faith rather than initiating such conversations (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 274-275).

Parents’ high commitment to helping their children be successful and happy while also fearing that they will rebel against the faith may account for why some parents are more intentional and active in managing the non-religious parts of their children’s lives than they are in transmitting faith. Parents are happy to draw on religious resources if they contribute to their children’s happiness, living good lives and family closeness, but may struggle to persevere if faith activities seem to be at odds with or ineffective in promoting one of those primary parenting goals. Parents really do want to pass their faith on to their children, but for many, that desire is

constrained by other priorities. And even parents who make faith transmission their highest parenting priority find themselves in what researchers call the “force/choice” dilemma (Smith, Ritz and Rotolo, 2020, p. 274). Parents are well aware that they need to intentionally steer their children toward the faith, yet see faith as a personal choice that the child must make and are very worried that pushing too hard will have the opposite effect.

This reluctance to push faith too hard creates a significant gap between how parents think about faith transmission and the actual practices that have been proven effective. Research has consistently shown that parents who rate religion as of high importance to them personally, attend church, serve in church, engage in personal spiritual disciplines, and talk regularly with their children about faith are more likely to produce offspring who are strong in faith as young adults (Smith & Snell, 2009). The parents in the interviews believe they need to “practice their own personal religious faith, naturally” and serve as “role models” for their children. They also believe that parents should provide their children “religious practices to observe and try out, such as prayer, worship, and volunteering.” Parents realized they needed to answer faith questions if their children asked, and perhaps at times initiate such conversations. But overall, they did not see the need for regular, parent-initiated conversations about faith. Instead, if the modeling process worked right, “children will over time learn, absorb and embrace their own version of that faith, almost unconsciously” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 33).

In *Handing Down the Faith*, Smith and Adamczyk summarize factors that have been shown to be effective in intergenerational religious transmission and one of their most important findings is that regular faith conversations are crucial. Effective parents have “warm, affirming relations” with their children. Relatedly, parents and their children have the kinds of faith conversations that nurture the parent child relationship. These conversations involve children

asking questions about faith that relate to their daily lives, with parents doing a lot of listening. Parents try to help the children understand their faith's beliefs and practices. Family conversations about faith are "not rigid or highly controlled." On the other hand, when parents "talk too much, make demands without explanations, force unwanted conversations, and restrict discussions to topics that they control" then faith conversations are likely to be "ineffective or counterproductive." Overall, "too much or too little religious socialization" can be counterproductive (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 5-6). The most effective type of faith conversation for long term faith transmission "unaffectedly flows in and out of larger discussions" rather than beginning with "'Okay, children, now we are going to talk about religion'" (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 84). And such conversations also have the benefit of teaching children the everyday relevance of religion to all areas of life. Parents who are "intentional, consistent, and actively engaged but neither hands-off nor overbearing" seem to be the most effective. The role of fathers seems to be especially important, with the father's involvement and example being especially influential on children. Research also shows that two parent households in which both parents share the same faith tradition and families in which grandparents contribute positively to faith formation also find more success in intergenerational faith formation (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 5-6).

This list of factors can be interpreted to confirm parents' fear of being too heavy handed with faith conversations. But it seems that parents have over-reacted in the opposite direction. The parents' "cultural models" of religious transmission speak almost exclusively of modeling the faith. Smith and Adamczyk (2021) make use of the longitudinal data from the National Study of Youth and Religion to analyze how religious parenting impacts children. Confirming previous studies, they find that parental religiosity is the single most important predictor of faith

outcomes in children. In addition, “authoritative parenting,” in which both parental expectations and parent-child emotional closeness are high, has an independent effect in predicting stronger religion in young adult children compared to other parenting styles. Parents who are highly religious get an extra “boost” from the authoritative parenting style (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 218). Parents who have daily or weekly conversations with their children about faith significantly reduce the risk that their children will never attend religious services as young adults. In fact, this new research shows that parents talking regularly with their children about faith is even more strongly associated higher child religiosity ten years later than parents’ professed importance of faith or frequency of parental church attendance (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 53-54). The authors recommend that parents talk about faith with their children more often in everyday life, recognizing that in contemporary society, the language of faith is a foreign language that requires practice (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021 p. 71). Based on the interviews with parents, we can hypothesize that either parents do not know the “foreign language” of faith or are reluctant to practice speaking it with their children. Or perhaps they think they are talking enough with their children already. At the very least we can say the most religious parents in America do not value intentional, frequent faith conversations with their children as highly as they should.

Parents do not seem to be ready to partner with congregations in faith transmission in the ways that many family ministry advocates might hope. Parents believe that “congregations should reinforce what parents teach at home, not determine it.” Parents appreciate congregations that provide an “inviting, comfortable community and some positive experiences for children” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2020, p. 31). If kids like going to church, that makes the parents’ job easier. Parents do appreciate it when churches provide some basic instruction in the faith,



especially basic morality like the Ten Commandments. But overall, parents do not see their congregations as important sources of religious input that play a significant role in the lives of their children. In particular, the researchers listened in vain for parents to express any appreciation for the more “religious” elements of their congregations such as “theology, liturgy, doctrinal teachings” (Smith and Adamczyk, 2021, p. 31-32). And because they don’t expect much, some parents make low investments in their congregations (Smith, Ritz and Rotolo, 2020, p. 268). Further, parents do not see themselves as representing or advocating on behalf of their religious tradition to their children. Nor do they see themselves as “engaged in a larger collective task of transmitting their particular religious tradition from generation to generation for the sake of the life of the tradition itself.” (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 269). In their minds, faith and church are valuable to the extent that they serve their project of helping their children live good lives.

Parents’ sense of personal responsibility in religious parenting is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, parents do seem to see themselves, not their churches, as responsible for passing on the faith to their children. So family ministry leaders may not need to expend as much effort as they once thought to convince parents to take responsibility. On the other hand, parents may be overconfident and ill-informed about what it takes to raise their children in the faith. And some of their default assumptions about faith transmission run counter to biblical teaching in many areas, chief among them being the purpose of life, the nature of discipleship, and the place of the church in God’s plan of salvation.

### **Why Christian Parents Think about Passing on the Faith the Way They Do**

What creates these cultural beliefs about parenting and what causes parents to be the most important players in religious socialization? In chapter 3 of *Handing Down the Faith*, the

authors offer a “somewhat speculative thesis” that the reason parents are so important in faith transmission is because of a long-term transformation in how religion functions in American society. Smith and Adamczyk characterize this transformation as shift from religion as a “communal solidarity project” to religion functioning almost exclusively as a “personal identity accessory” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 73). For most Americans today, the purpose of religion is no longer to form a community of people with shared beliefs, practices and morals. Meanwhile, what Americans expect their families to do has shifted over time from “community *social institution* to home-based *companionate relations* and then to individual *lifestyle options*” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 76). In other words, Americans do not tend to think of families as serving some larger purpose in society but rather providing private space in which individuals can experience relational closeness and develop their individual identities and potentials. In addition, western cultures have coded religion as a personal, private matter, so people naturally assume that the home will be the primary location of religious socialization and parents should be the primary agents in that process. Smith and Adamczyk note that their model for explaining the shifting place of religion in American society and its impact on parenting finds parallels in a dozen or more similar models created by prominent sociologists over the past sixty years who were trying to explain similar phenomena (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 79). Thus, when the authors theorize that religion now functions as a “personal identity accessory” they are on well-populated theoretical ground. The social-structural locations of congregations and families in American society really do push religious institutions into an instrumental, secondary role in people’s lives.

In particular, Smith and Rotolo draw on the work of Margaret Archer and Anthony Giddens regarding the nature of modern selves to identify something they call the “self-reflexive

imperative.” In modern western societies, the individual cannot avoid “making oneself the object of conscious scrutiny and evaluation, asking questions like, ‘How am I doing? What do I care about? Am I being my true self? Why am I feeling this way? Should I be making different choices? Is there something important that I’m missing?’” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 85). Self-reflexivity is not narcissism. Rather it is an adaptive response to the structures of modern life that demand that the individual engage in an intensive and probably life-long self-development and self-monitoring project. There are simply fewer normative external inputs to identity, and contemporary western people are wary of such “outside” influences anyway. Self-reflexivity can become self-centered, but it just as easily degenerates into “self-judging and berating” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 86). Functionally, self-reflexivity may serve “as a key mediating mechanism between people’s social structural contexts and their personal, ultimate concerns and actions” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 86). Developing skills for self-reflexivity is necessary for being able to reconcile external demands with one’s internal sense of self without going off the rails in one direction or another. What all this means for parenting is that parents instinctively realize that their children are ultimately in the driver’s seat about what kinds of people they will become and about whether Christian faith is “who they are.” Parents are trying their best to help their children learn to become healthy, Christian self-reflexive individuals, but this is a tricky business with many pitfalls and wrong turns, and parents are keenly aware of the limits of their influence.

Why do contemporary Americans believe they should use their faith as an “identity accessory” in the particular ways that they do? Specifically with regard to family ministry, why are religious parents so united in how they think about the proper role of religion in their children’s lives? Here recent work by a Christian historian on the origins of the modern self can

help us. In his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl R. Trueman sets out to investigate how it has come to be that when someone says “I am a woman trapped in a man’s body” many people in western societies will not only regard this as a statement that makes sense but will suspect that anyone who questions it is immoral or stupid (Trueman, 2020, p. 19).

Western societies have seen a fundamental change in what it means to be a “self,” that is, in our intuitions about “what the purpose of my life is, of what constitutes the good life, of how I understand myself -- my *self*-- in relation to others and to the world around me” (Trueman, 2020, p. 22). Ideas about happiness and where it is to be found are also implicated in how the members of a culture think about and experience a sense of self. Trueman compellingly argues that what we call the sexual revolution is really a symptom of a more fundamental revolution in our shared conceptions of the self. Drawing on the works of Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff and Alistair McIntyre, Trueman reconstructs the historical changes that have resulted in what Taylor calls “expressive individualism” and Rieff calls the “psychological self.” Taylor and Rieff share the conviction that modern people hold to a sense of personhood that “has almost completely dispensed with the idea of any authority beyond that of personal, psychological conviction” (Trueman, 2020, p. 36). Modern selves do not see the world as having inherent meaning, order and purpose which they must find and to which they must conform. Rather, the world is “raw material out of which meaning and purpose can be crafted by the individual” (Trueman, 2020, p. 39). Modern selves look to discover their sense of identity not by conforming to what is taught by society and its institutions, but through the “inward quest for personal psychological happiness” (Trueman, 2020, p. 45).

Modern people do not believe they are learning their identity through relationships with others; they think they are either discovering it within themselves or creating it from within

themselves. Indeed, contemporary western individuals are likely to see community norms, rules and institutions as either potentially or inherently oppressive. Community norms and institutions are only good when they protect and support individuals in finding and expressing their identities: “Outward institutions become in effect the servants of the individual and her inner sense of well-being” (Trueman, 2020, p. 48). It is hard for modern people to truly believe and behave as if they are being formed by their religious communities because, “Institutions cease to be places for the formation of individuals via their schooling in the various practices and disciplines that allow them to take their place in society. Instead, they become platforms for performance, where individuals are allowed to become their authentic selves precisely because they are able to give expression to who they are ‘inside’” (Trueman, 2020, p. 49). Because of the historical genealogies of these ideas about the self, contemporary western people are constantly on guard against ways that other people or institutions might impede the development and expression of their “authentic selves.” Contemporary Americans take for granted that their personal, inward, psychological sense of self is sovereign. Only you can decide who you really are. Don’t let anyone get in the way or tell you otherwise. It is easy to see how this view of the self goes hand in hand with seeing religion as a “personal identity accessory.”

The beliefs parents hold about passing on the faith to their children are just the kinds of beliefs we would expect in a society characterized by the “self-reflexive imperative,” “expressive individualism” and the “psychological self.” Religious parents believe that each child “possesses within themselves a ‘best self they can be,’ something like an inherent, unique, an inalienable ideal personality and optimal life-to-be-lived” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 24). This “best self” is an “inherent potential” that must be cultivated especially in the “first half of life.” To be successful, children need to overcome the problems and trials that come in life and as they do,

they will experience “positive growth, maturity and understanding.” The alternative is for children to “become compromised or wrecked by the inability to overcome the hardships” of life and so “fail to realize the ‘best selves’ they could have been” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 24).

Parents see life as a “journey” and religion learned at home as a “home base” or “grounding” from which to launch that journey. These two clusters of metaphors were among the most common in the interviews, with a full 100% of the interviewees using some kind of “journey” metaphor (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 37). Sociologists of culture who specialize in metaphorical analysis argue that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 235). Religious parents believe that in the journey of life, there are many opportunities as well as threats, good paths and bad paths. Parents are well aware that “‘the culture’ sends some ‘bad messages’” that must be recognized and resisted. They realize that each child will face trials, mistakes and discouragement, but the job of a good parent is to equip the child with resources to overcome such challenges. Only children who have “a solid internal ‘grounding,’ a ‘true sense of self,’” will navigate the journey of life successfully (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 16). When parents think about parenting and what they should do, the metaphors of the “journey of life” and helping their children find a secure “home base” for that journey are foundational.

Parents hope to steer their children toward the “good life” which is one in which “self-directed individuals are happy, live ethically, work hard, enjoy family and friends, and help other people.” But the good life is not primarily an external standard to which Christians must conform, rather “Good lives must be self-determined and pursued in ways that are true to each unique individual self.” To be fair, Christian parents do not want their children to be “*individualistic* in the sense of isolated or selfish.” Parents believe they need to equip their

children for “the task of self-realization,” yet “each individual must find his or her own particular way to discover their own purpose and lead a good life true to who they are as a unique self” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, 14). When religious parents speak of the “journey” of life, what they mean is not “stay on this trail” but rather “you must find your own path,” at least once you grow up (Smith & Adamczyk, p. 15).

No doubt many Christian parents believe that they are helping their children to discover their identities in Christ, but the underlying assumptions here about identity, the meaning of life, and how to find and achieve a “good life” are much more clearly formed by the culture of expressive individualism than they are by the Bible. No wonder that by the time many of the adolescents in the National Study of Youth and Religion had become emerging adults they saw the church as primarily an “elementary school of morals” that had done its work for them and which they could comfortably leave behind, at least for now (Smith & Snell, 2009). One of the many reasons that emerging adults stop going to church may be because their Christian parents, perhaps unintentionally, taught them that church involvement is a “resource” for self-development that is mainly needed in the first half of life. On the other hand, many parents have a “tremendous, though not absolute, faith in the power of religion to draw wayward children home after periods of error and confusion” (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 30). Parents believe they are helping their children establish a lasting religious “foundation” or “home base” and they hope that the “values” that their children embrace more or less reflect their own values. Nevertheless, much of the way parents talk about their task leaves fundamental assumptions of “expressive individualism” unquestioned.

The only potentially good news for family ministry in Trueman’s analysis of the modern self is that even though contemporary Americans tend to assume they are constructing or

discovering their identities “from within,” individual human identities are still inevitably “dialogical” (Trueman, 2020, p. 57). Again drawing on the work of Charles Taylor, Trueman explains that being human involves learning from those around us the very concepts and modes of expression with which we construct an internal sense of identity. Trueman quotes Taylor, “no one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us.” And because humans have an inherent need to belong, Trueman adds that “identity also arises in the context of belonging. To have an identity means that I am being acknowledged by others” (Trueman, 2020, p. 57). Trueman uses this insight drawn from Taylor to explain why members of sexual minorities feel such an intense need for society to unequivocally endorse their sexualized identities. In the context of family ministry, this same dimension of “expressive individualism” could in theory facilitate Christian parents and their children finding their identities in dialogical relationships of belonging in Christian families and churches. The Christian parents in the interviews realized that for their children to become their “best selves” they needed input from parents and to some extent from their congregations and faith traditions.

It is easy to see how “expressive individualism” and the resulting “cultural models” of religious parenting can undermine life-long discipleship and loyalty to the church. First, faith is easily called into question or discarded if the individual perceives that it is not living up to its job of helping navigate the challenging journey of life. And faith is primarily important in the first half of life, giving young people a “home base.” Further, faith is individualized and communities of faith are optional lifestyle enhancements. If faith is a personal life enhancer, then it is not hard to see how doctrine and theology could be seen as of secondary importance. Just “values” and the “big picture” of the faith matter. Family ministry advocates who attempt to



make the nuclear family the center of faith formation may be unintentionally reinforcing the cultural belief that congregations are largely irrelevant or at best, of only secondary, instrumental value. Even parents and families, it must be noted, are envisioned in this set of beliefs as an optional “home base.” It is really the child’s independent, happy, “good person” future which is the focus of adult attention in the church and the home.

Views of God, parental authority, and related expectations of how child-centered adult institutions will be do seem to vary a bit by race. A national study of race in the lives of teenagers found that white teenagers are especially likely to assume that family, schools, and churches exist to help them. If white teenagers perceived that these institutions were not adequately supporting them in their dreams and goals, they more readily expressed dissatisfaction than did African American, Asian, or Latino teens. Asian teenagers seemed to expect institutions to serve their needs but did not gain a sense of entitlement as a result. African American and Latino teenagers did not expect schools, families and churches to be as child-centered as white teenagers did, and they expressed less dissatisfaction with these institutions (Christerson, Edwards & Flory, 2010). In a parallel way, Smith et. al found that “while most parents in every other religious tradition tread lightly when it comes to their parental authority to teach, command or discipline their children, many of the black Protestant parents we spoke with clearly felt authorized and responsible to do that with greater authority” (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, 2020, p. 139). Citing other research, Smith et. al claim that “The God of many American black Protestants is loving and comforting, yes, but also holds high and unbending expectations for behavior.” Smith et all hypothesize that because of their view of God, black Protestant parents see themselves as authorized to “speak their minds clearly, demand conformity to certain behaviors, and to call children to account when they stray” (2020, p. 141). In contrast, Smith and

his team did not find anything in the theology of other religious groups, including white Conservative Protestants, that similarly shaped their views on their parental authority. Smith and his team also hastened to add that this difference in black Protestant parenting was observable, but not “absolute,” with black Protestant parents in their sample mostly agreeing with the dominant cultural models (Smith, Ritz and Rotolo, 2020, p. 139).

### **Reframing Family Ministry**

How should we reframe family ministry in light of how Christian parents really think? Much of what family ministry leaders have proposed should be retained. The goal of growing life-long disciples of Jesus through partnerships between families and congregations remains as important as ever. Research shows that what parents do – or don’t do—in faith formation really matters, and it matters even more than what congregations do. On the other hand, longitudinal research shows that churches do matter in faith transmission, but primarily via how well they form parents who take their faith seriously and practice it faithfully (Smith & Snell, 2009; Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 196). Churches should not be quick to discount their own importance.

In particular, the basic insight that churches need to help parents have the right kinds of regular faith conversations at home is more strongly affirmed than ever by the most recent research. Here the empirical evidence gives conflicting information about parental behavior. Smith & Adamczyk report that in their nationally representative survey 67% of all Conservative Protestant parents and 82% of “devout” Conservative Protestants claim to have weekly faith conversations with their children (2021, p. 108). We don’t know anything about the tone, content or length of these faith conversations or even whether they are happening as often as the parents surveyed perceived them to be happening. Meanwhile, according to the interviews, parents remain cautious about faith conversations with their children. Parents conceded that they

might on rare occasions initiate faith conversations with their children but were relying almost exclusively on modeling. Yet the research says that faith conversations that impact long term faith in children should be happening weekly or even daily. Family ministry authors have been right to exhort and equip parents for these conversations and they should do so more and more, while realizing that a high percentage of their audience may think they are already having these kinds of conversations.

Family ministry leaders should continue their emphasis on teaching parents a robust biblical theology of parenting and faith formation of children. The research shows that even some of the most religious parents in America do not think very theologically about their parenting. And although parents do not necessarily see congregations as crucial to their project of faith transmission, they do appreciate ways in which the church can provide their children some formal teaching of the content of the faith that they find hard to provide at home.

Since Christian parents instinctively believe that they must model the faith, must never be hypocritical, and should introduce their children to Christian practices and experiences, family ministry leaders should continue to emphasize these elements of their strategies. Parents will respond favorably to church leaders who equip them to live more consistent Christian lives at home. And they will welcome help introducing their children to prayer, worship and volunteering (Smith and Adamczyk, 2021, p. 33).

Family ministry leaders should continue to examine church strategies and practices in order to assess how well their church is forming individuals and families as disciples. They have rightly observed that if the church does not have a coherent strategy that is instantiated in ministry practices that promote intergenerational disciple making, then parents will default to

whatever the prevailing cultural norms and social structures tell them to do as parents. Family ministry leaders need to stay current on cultural trends impacting parenting.

Although much of what family ministry writers have proposed so far can be retained, we must especially reframe how we think about the challenges to family ministry. First, we need to think differently about the challenge of parental responsibility. The challenge is not so much that parents do not see themselves as responsible for faith formation. They may even be insulted if leaders imply that they are not taking their responsibility seriously enough. Rather, the challenge is that parents may not be thinking biblically about their faith transmission goals or about the actions they should take to reach those goals. One of the most significant challenges for church leaders is that “For few American parents does religion singularly determine their understanding of the ultimate purpose and expected experience of life” (Smith and Adamczyk, 2021, p. 17). Rather, their fundamental beliefs about the purpose of life and therefore the purposes of Christian faith and Christian parenting may all too often come from the underlying cultural values of expressive individualism. Smith, Ritz and Rotolo interpreted the uniformity of parental beliefs about religious transmission they found to mean that “any distinctive teachings of American religious traditions about passing on faith and practice to children is overshadowed and overwhelmed by the governing power of the dominant models and metaphors shared by most religious parents across all traditions” (Smith, Ritz and Rotolo, 2020, p. 272-273). While we need not concede defeat on this front as Smith et. al seem to advise, church leaders need to recognize that it will take considerable effort over time on many fronts to help contemporary parents internalize distinctively Christian ways of thinking about parenting.

On the other hand, we must not use the research findings analyzed in this article to negatively stereotype Christian parents or to treat them as obstacles to our task of forming young

people as disciples of Jesus. Smith, Ritz and Rotolo remind us that “Most of the parents we interviewed turned out to be serious, caring, thoughtful people trying their best to raise their kids in often difficult situations and in a culture they experience as seriously problematic” (2020, p. 273). And the researchers further note that one reason for the nearly universal appeal of the “cultural models of religious parenting” is that they “make logical, coherent sense” to parents even if they are not the same set of beliefs that religious leaders might choose (2020, p. 273). Family ministry leaders need to carefully examine the appeal and coherence of these common beliefs about parenting and if possible, create an equally coherent body of Christian teaching on parenting. Christian parents really do want their children to become life-long followers of Jesus, but they need more and better teaching on the biblical goals of Christian parenting, with clear explanations of how those goals contrast with the goals found in the “cultural models” of religious parenting. There is no need to introduce terms like “expressive individualism” or “self-reflexivity” explicitly into our teaching, and to do so might even be counterproductive. But the realities that these concepts are describing can shape how we teach. In particular, self-reflexivity is best shaped and re-shaped in conversations with others. Similarly, people only discover their assumptions and find opportunities to question them when they are asked to articulate them.

While leaders may want to use some of the language of expressive individualism and the resulting cultural models of religious parenting to communicate what they are trying to do in family ministry, such translations of biblical teaching into contemporary cultural idioms should be done with extreme care. For example, we might at times talk about how God and the church want to develop each person’s “unique self” or help her become her “best self” because this is language that parents and their children will instinctively understand. Similarly, speaking of life as a journey for which we need to be equipped will also resonate with both contemporary

Americans and the biblical teaching on the Christian life. Nevertheless, Christian teachers will want to analyze the universally assumed metaphors of “journey” and “home base” and identify better biblical metaphors that can either replace or supplement these metaphors. We must clearly teach a biblical vision of identity as determined by God’s eternal purpose that each person be “conformed to the image of his Son in order that he might be the firstborn in a large family” (Romans 8:29, NRSV). God’s purposes in Christ are clearly both individual and corporate, but contemporary Americans instinctively read the Bible individualistically. We must clearly teach that the “journey” of the Christian life includes suffering for the Gospel and investing in relationships at church. Learning to become like Jesus is a life-long journey in communion with God and the church, not just a “home base” from which to launch into an independent life that may or may not include the church. For many churchgoing parents, the Christian faith is not a communal life in a new kingdom; it is a set of resources for helping their children cultivate their best selves and for helping family members feel connected to each other. Christian parents may need as much or more teaching on the importance of the Kingdom of God, the Church and her mission as they do on the importance of the family. Even some understandings of the Gospel can be quite instrumental and individualized. “Jesus died for your sins so you can go to heaven when you die” really does sound more like an insurance policy than a life transforming adoption into the forever family of God.

The good news here is that many Christian parents do trust their congregations as sources of religious truth. And parents do realize that there are “bad messages” in society that need to be recognized and rejected. So they may be open to biblical teaching that can correct some of the theological errors inherent in the culture of expressive individualism and the cultural models of religious parenting. Teaching about the image of God, identity in Christ, and the communal

dimensions of Christianity are both urgently needed and highly susceptible to misinterpretation by Christians formed in the current cultural milieu. Parents need to be gently shown how some of their own assumptions about parenting may be undermining their stated goals of long term faith commitment and church involvement on the part of their offspring.

For some reason, most religious parents do not see conversion or other religious experiences as important in the faith formation of their children. Yet research has shown that religious experiences during adolescence are an important factor predicting stronger young adult faith (Smith & Snell, 2009). There is nothing wrong with seeing faith development as a gradual process of growth. But at the very least, there is room here to instruct parents about the role of conversion or other experiences of God in the process of faith development. Church leaders and parents can work together to build environments and encourage activities that increase the likelihood that children will have experiences of feeling close to God. The days in which childhood or teenage conversions were at times overemphasized or in which parents felt pressure to lead their children in the sinner's prayer seem to be waning if not long gone. More common today might be missed opportunities to help young people make a decision to follow Christ or to learn how to have ongoing experiences of God. Too many churchgoing young people make it all the way to my university without ever being able to point to a life experience that they interpret as an experience of God. In some cases, my sense is that they have had experiences of God, but have not had guidance to see them for what they truly were.

Parents would welcome more help from their churches in navigating what they see as their most difficult dilemma: how to use their authority to create conditions that will influence their children to voluntarily accept the faith, while not pushing so hard as to alienate them. Parents find themselves in a cultural and institutional situation in which they instinctively realize

that faith and church involvement have to be freely chosen and can't be forced. Interestingly, parents are well aware that they can get away with "forcing" their children to do their homework, but they instinctively realize that such methods won't work with regard to faith. Parents experience a lot of doubt, fear, and uncertainty regarding whether they are doing a good job responding to this dilemma (Smith, Ritz & Rotolo, p. 274-275). And the very parents most likely to be in the orbit of family ministry leaders are especially impacted. Smith, Ritz and Rotolo note, "Conservative Protestant parents tend simultaneously to be highly invested in their children remaining 'in the faith' *and* to view faith as needing to be an authentic, individual, personal choice, resulting in the force/choice dilemma impinging on these parents with particular force" (2020, p. 276).

Some parents do alienate their children in various ways, and this is an important pastoral concern that should be part of the family ministry agenda. But most parents seem more concerned not to "preach" to their children because they might "violate their children's ultimate self-determination" and "trigger teenage rebellion" (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 26, 33). Too many parents wrongly assume that modeling the faith and only rarely talking about it will be enough. Until we find ways to help parents feel competent and unafraid regarding faith conversations with their children, many of them will only rarely have those conversations. On the other hand, parental instincts about not alienating their children and their desire for family closeness can help motivate parents to connect with the church for help. But that synergy will only happen if the training and resources we give to parents are designed to help them have warm, relationship building conversations that connect to their children's lived experiences. Thankfully, a good number of family ministry leaders have provided just these kinds of resources. Still, family ministry leaders should carefully evaluate their family faith discussion



resources in light of the characteristics that researchers have shown to be effective for transmitting lasting faith (Smith & Adamczyk, p. 5, 53-54). And leaders should present such materials and provide training in ways that are sensitive to just how difficult parents find it to finesse the force/choice dilemma. Christian parents will be eager to receive any credible, compassionate help the church can provide as they face what they consider to be one of their most difficult challenges.

Family ministry leaders have been rigorous in reforming church strategies, structures and practices to steer parents toward becoming more active disciplers of their children at home. The same rigor should be applied to investigating ways that patterns of congregational life are supporting or discouraging the unbiblical dimensions of “expressive individualism.” It seems obvious that in the biblical witness, both Israel and the Church are portrayed more like “communal solidarity projects” than “personal identity accessories.” Are members of our congregations learning to view the Church as God’s people who are being formed by him in a shared way of life and in the kinds of Christ-centered relationships that allow us all to be transformed into the image of Christ? What specific strategies, structures, and practices do we have in place to steer church members toward a more biblical vision of the Christian life, the church and the mission of God? Which existing strategies, structures or practices need to be revised or replaced?

One specific recommendation in this regard is for family ministry leaders to incorporate even more church-based, dialogical, intergenerational faith formation activities into their overall strategies. Good curriculum materials for use at home can help, but it is likely that even theologically and pedagogically sound materials could be diluted by the cultural models of religious parenting. Those parents most formed by the patterns of thought discovered by Smith

et. al. will probably need to see intergenerational faith activities modeled, then try them with others at church, and finally try to lead them at home on their own. Here the “family ministry” movement could fruitfully collaborate with and learn from the “intergenerational ministry” movement. In addition, intergenerational faith formation practices, like all communal practices, will form people in new ways. They will begin to experience God through conversations with other members of the family of God, reorienting their loves and their instincts about self and church. The more conversations young people have with adults who have internalized a Christian disciple’s version of “self-reflexivity” the more they will learn how to do the same. They will be able to avoid the self-centered or self-berating traps that come with the inevitable self-reflexivity that all must now practice. Indeed, they may even learn how to incorporate God and his Word into their process of self-reflexivity. Intergenerational faith formation at church may also take some of the pressure off parents with regard to the force/choice dilemma. The current default assumption is that family and church exist to serve the individualized development of the self. Both parents and children need to experience a different reality in which God forms his family, the church, as the context in which family units and their members can find their true identities and purposes. If when the church gathers, its practices display the inherent value of the whole family of God and promote dialogical identity formation, that will provide a much healthier context for disciples of all ages to grow to maturity in Christ.

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