



Milestones Ministry: An Effective Model for Lifelong Faith Formation

Debbie Streicher

A faith milestone is a marker along life's journey that says, 'This is something important and God is here, too.' It is a faith formation practice for both home and congregation that helps all generations recognize God's presence in everyday life.

David Anderson

In theory, Sunday school is a good model to teach the Christian faith. However, in many congregations across the country, attendance is low and leadership is thirsting for a magic pill to make it all better and move back to the success of the past. We try name changes. We try time changes. We try weaving Christian education into worship services. Across denominations, we have shown concern and been in conversation about the need to revisit the way we plan and execute Christian education programs for more than a decade. *The Teaching Church* by Eugene C. Roehlkepartain and *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education* by Charles Foster were written in the mid-90's. Both are relevant today and are being used by leaders to help re-evaluate the way we do faith formation.

Debbie Streicher is a member of the Milestones Ministry Team serving as a writer, developer, and coach. She also serves as President of the Christian Education Network of the ELCA. Over the past 25 years, Debbie has served in the role of volunteer and on staff for all aspects of Christian education in a congregation. She has facilitated, overseen, organized, and developed faith formation programs from infants through adults. She worked intricately with Faith Inkubators resource development and has consulted and led events for congregations using these materials for over 15 years. Debbie has held volunteer leadership roles in education and evangelism at synod and national levels for 12+ years. Her vision is to involve all ages in faith formation, strengthen family relationships through spiritual growth, and empower God-given gifts to do ministry.

Recently I was in conversation with a pastor who has been in an interim position in a congregation for the past 18 months. He has been trying to move the congregation ahead and invite them to do ministry differently. Establishing a children's worship service did not work. Adding a fellowship time was not helpful. Something he said caught my attention and helped me put into words the reality we face today. He said, "People will not give to a failing enterprise." It is hard to admit that we, as church leaders are placed in roles to manage, oversee, and facilitate a failing enterprise. By replacing the word enterprise with organization, I feel we face the truth about where we stand today in the church and find myself asking, "What can we do to turn this organization around?" and "What needs to change so that people are moved to give their time to the organization?"

In this article I propose that, as leaders, we think outside the church walls. Rather than think we can attract people through worship and Christian education programs, we should ask questions about people's needs and wonder how we can address them. We should begin to think about where we can find a crossroad to meet the needs of the people with the richness we can bring to their lives through the Christian faith. Let's view our communities through a different lens and provide opportunities to gather and celebrate the meaningful moments and times in their lives by adding the element of faith to those times.

- ◆ How often do we go to a birthday party and not thank God for another year in our lives?
- ◆ How often do we hand the keys of the car to a new driver without blessing safe travels?
- ◆ How often do we honor and appreciate and pray for those who are caring for loved ones?
- ◆ How often do we enrich everyday happenings and milestones in our lives that happen both in and beyond the church walls such as becoming a

grandparent, getting a new home, or a new job?

A Different Approach

Historically, Sunday school was established as a way to reach unchurched children in urban areas. Although Sunday school can still play an important role in congregations, families' busy schedules and sporadic church attendance sometimes hinder its effectiveness. That's where Milestones Ministry steps in. It can help strengthen the church's role in the community through simple, yet memorable, celebrations of important life events.

Milestones Ministry provides a creative and different approach to faith formation. In some cases, milestones replaces the system for Christian education. It does not have to be a weekly event or class. It can happen monthly and include all ages, from infant to adult. People feel compelled to get involved because each event embraces a significant milestone in the life of someone they know and love. And it involves all ages because when we celebrate special times in our lives, it involves the entire family. We tend to *show up* for birthdays and baby showers and other family times. Taking one more step outside the box, let's think about inviting these events to happen in private homes as well as in the church building. "*Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too*" is one of five principles listed in the book *Vibrant Faith in the Congregation* by David W. Anderson. All milestones ministry events include caring conversations, prayers, and blessings that immerse one in a faith journey alongside family and friends.

Milestones Ministry includes five parts: Naming, Equipping, Blessing, Gifting, and Reinforcing. By incorporating these into each Milestones Ministry event and providing monthly event opportunities throughout the year, it gives each milestone a greater chance to take deeper root in lifelong faith formation. (See the example at the end of the article.)

Naming

- ◆ Identify meaningful and memorable moments in people's lives.
- ◆ Honor, celebrate, and name significant events and times such as birth, the beginning of school, getting a driver's license, graduation, a new job, parenthood, grandparenthood, retirement and more.
- ◆ Enable people to name the holy in life, recognize milestones along life's journey, and take the time to be nurtured in the Christian faith in home and congregation.

Equipping

- ◆ Provide a basic framework for faith practices, caring conversations, devotions, service, rituals, and traditions as a way to experience milestones as a faith-forming moment
- ◆ Provide activities for an intergenerational event in the congregation
- ◆ Provide activities for celebrating in the home

Blessing

- ◆ Offer a prayer to bless the lives of those involved in the milestone moment
- ◆ Offer a prayer and special blessing during worship for this milestone
- ◆ Offer a prayer to use in small groups or to use with family at home

Gifting

- ◆ Give a visual reminder to help the milestone moment be recalled again and again
- ◆ Provide a gift as a visible sign that gives witness to one's faith

Reinforcing

- ◆ Host a follow-up gathering of those involved in the milestone moment to help it gain deeper roots in the life of faith of those who participated
- ◆ It is not unusual to recognize baptism, first Bibles, a mission trip, or entering Sunday school to mention a few, but I invite you to

think beyond these and consider how to recognize other milestones in the lives of those in our communities.

Milestones in Church Life and Daily Life

Many congregations celebrate milestones related to the sacraments and others to life transitions in the congregation such as entering Sunday school and first Bible. Events are designed for the entire year and often a schedule is sent to parents and families. For example:

Milestone	Age	Date
Welcoming Children to Worship	2-4 years old	Late August
Entering Sunday School	3 year olds	Early Sept
First Bible	1 st grade	Mid-Oct
Communion	2 nd grade	March
Confirmation	8 th grade	May
Graduation	HS Seniors	June

Faith formation around milestones, sacramental celebrations, and life transitions provides an excellent way to promote the spiritual and faith growth of all ages and generations, enhance family faith practice at home, and strengthen people's engagement in the church community or invite people to join or rejoin the church community.

As we move into the future together in ministry, a calendar like the one you see below including milestones in our daily lives can create outreach opportunities we can envision as an effective model for faith formation. What milestones could be done in your community?

Milestone	Age	Date
Driver's License	16 years old	August
Blessing Backpacks & Briefcases	K-Adult	Sept
Retirement	Adult 55+	Oct

New Job	Teen-Adult	Jan
Empty Nest	Adult	March
Prayer	All Ages	April

All milestone (both congregational and daily life) events include the entire family, friends, and relatives. They happen in large gathering settings and in the home. We recently celebrated my husband's retirement in our home. We invited friends, family, and neighbors.

- ◆ *Naming:* This was a time to recognize my husband's retirement and transition to a new lifestyle.
- ◆ *Equipping:* We enjoyed dinner together, showed pictures of his work history, and engaged in caring conversations.
- ◆ *Blessing:* Each person present passed a stone with retirement written on it and gave a wish about my husband's retirement and gave him a blessing. We said a prayer.
- ◆ *Gifting:* The gift was the stone as a remembrance of the occasion.
- ◆ *Reinforcing:* The stone is a reminder every day of this special time. We often reflect on the stone and plan to intentionally revisit the topic of retirement and talk about how life has changed at the end of the year.

I asked our pastor how many have retired in our congregation in the past year. The answer was 15 or more. I have begun to think about those 15 and about their friends who may have retired also. What milestones can be recognized in your own congregation and community this year?

Milestones Outside the Church Walls

It is not unusual to recognize baptism, first Bibles, a mission trip, or entering Sunday school, but I invite you to think beyond these and consider how to recognize other

milestones in the lives of those in our communities.

Is there a middle or high school nearby? Is there a nursing home in the area? Is there a military base close by the church? What are the needs of these people? What would invite them into a relationship with Christ? What would make them want to give their time?

Is the church near a nursing home?

Celebrate 70, 80, and 90 year old birthdays. Go to them or invite them along with their families to come to you. Or honor and bless caregivers for those individuals. Both family and staff are caregivers. Those in their 70's, 80's, and 90's are the ones who filled our churches over the years. How can we recognize this?

Is the church near a middle school?

Celebrate birthdays for the month. Post a banner outside the church and name one day each month where you have a party for teens. Invest in a large TV and updated video games. Provide free internet service, or invite one of the high school or middle school bands or musicians to participate. Take time for a blessing and prayer. Equip families with ideas and tools to celebrate their own teen's special day in their home with a prayer and blessing.

Is the church near a military base?

Families are constantly in transition on a base. There are some leaving for deployment and others returning. Recognize both occasions and invite families and singles for a time to be together and celebrate this significant time in their lives.

A New Venture

This past August, David Anderson and I were asked to manage Milestones Ministry (www.milestonesministry.org). David's wife, Gloria, and my husband, Burt, complete the team in our new venture together. We are committed to practicing these milestones

hands-on with each other, with our children, with our grandchildren, with family and friends, and in our congregations. We look forward to sustaining and growing this ministry by listening to you, hearing your stories, and sharing those stories with others so that we may learn together.

As leaders in the congregation our responsibility is to help others understand and recognize God's presence in everyday life. How we go about doing that and the tools we use is part of the challenge we face daily.

Opportunities to gather all the ages together to identify and bless God's presence throughout our lives for milestone occasions can be provided as ministry events. Let's not overlook the impact and potential these events can have in building our faith community. And also the lasting impact they can have for each

of us. I look forward to writing and sharing stories from congregations using Milestones Ministry in the next year. I believe we can all glean ideas and support one another in this ministry.

We are on a journey together to pass the faith from one generation to the next. *Let us rejoice and be glad in it!* (Psalm 118:24b)

Works Cited

Anderson, David. *Vibrant Faith in the Congregation*. Minneapolis: Vibrant Faith, 2011.

Foster, Charles. *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

Roehlkepartain, Eugene C. *The Teaching Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

Sample Page from an Adult Milestone



Retirement Milestone

In our society, retirement is a recognized civic and personal milestone in the life of an individual. It signifies a major life transition, impacting the retiree as well as the spouse and/or extended family members.

Retirement often means a major change in one's lifestyle, as life is no longer organized around a work schedule or the requirements of one's career. Retirement may signify a new sense of freedom and opportunities previously only dreamed about. Retirement may also represent loss, including a loss of income and benefits, status and identity, one's primary purpose and focus in life, and social contact with peers.

With more than 79 million baby boomers qualifying for retirement over the next few years, the faith community has an opportunity to mark this milestone by celebrating an individual's gifts, wisdom, history and contributions to church and society. It is an opportunity to connect a life story with God's Story and share one's faith with the next generations.

With people living longer, healthier lives, retirement has taken on new meaning in our culture. Congregations have a vital role in marking this time of endings as well as supporting people in discerning God's call in the third-third of life. As Christians, retirement is an opportunity for "re-firement" as God continuously calls us to serve in Jesus' name.

This Retirement Milestone incorporates a simple structure that includes:

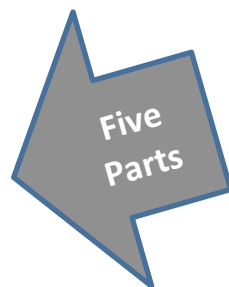
Naming – It is important to mark retirement as an ending, a transition in one's work and career, and a time for new beginnings as called children of God through baptism.

Equipping – This milestone acknowledges a worker's gifts, life experiences and wisdom that can be shared with the congregation, surrounding community and next generations.

Blessing – The blessing says that a significant personal and professional transition in one's life is also about faith.

Gifting – A gift to the retiree is a powerful way of saying, "We remember you and appreciate you. God will continue to be active in your life and walk with you in your journey." (See Appendix 1 for ideas.)

Reinforcing – Retirement offers many opportunities for congregations to offer ongoing support and resources to retirees who are members of the congregation as well as those who are neighbors in the community. The Retirement Milestone Follow Up is on page 7.



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