



A Milestones Focus on Adults: Replacing Programs with Relationships

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If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults.

In our urgency to “grow the church”, we look around and see an aging congregation and jump to the conclusion that by adding a staff person or a volunteer position to specifically work with youth, our problems are solved. Surely adding someone on staff to help with youth or finding a new program to address declining numbers will make a difference. Time and time again we are finding these are false assumptions. There is no magic pill. As leaders in the church, what are we to do? I believe it is time to embrace the reality in our congregations. In

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mainline denominations, we are graying more and more each year. Time and time again research has shown that what makes the difference is building relationships, not introducing a new program. When people begin to know one another and know each other's joys and sorrows, they thirst to be together. Relationships bring people of all ages back together regularly. Where do we start?

Milestones Ministry, an organization helping households and congregations nurture the Christian faith through life's milestones, promotes five principles for living and passing on the faith:

1. Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships, often in our own homes.
2. The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and ministry of the home.
3. Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too.
4. Faith is caught more than it is taught.
5. If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults.
(www.milestonesministry.org)

How do we apply these principles without making what we do be a program? How do we take advantage of times to encourage faith formation by bringing faith talk and actions into our everyday lives?

In 2014, Milestones Ministry introduced eight new templates to use as guides specifically designed for milestone moments in the lives of adults. They provide opportunities to celebrate either in the congregation or in the home. Research was done to ask and determine what events in the lives of adults were important and should be the first written as a milestone to experience in a setting in the congregation or do with family at home. Church goes from across denominations voted. The top eight: Retirement, New Job, New Home, Return from Deployment, Marriage Anniversaries, Aging Parents, Empty Nest, and Becoming Grandparents. Next and still in the works are Loss of a Loved One,

Becoming a Parent, Joining a Faith Community, and Connecting Life with Spiritual Gifts.

In January, I presented a workshop titled, "Connecting Faith and Everyday Life with Adult Milestones." I asked attendees to name significant times in their own lives when adding just a *dash* of faith could make a big difference for family and friends. Suggestions surprised me as they began to name times when prayer and thanksgiving are needed but we seldom turn to our faith and add meaningful conversations, prayer and blessing to these happenings. They mentioned organ transplants, paying off a house, paying off a car, and end of medical treatment. It becomes clear that the list of times in our lives to recognize as opportunities to lift up the moment and share with friends and family is endless.

Clear-Cut Steps

The goal has been to provide an uncomplicated means to acknowledge milestone moments in our lives. A basic program is helpful but in most settings, from my experience, we need simple, easy ways to recognize these occasions. How can we do this? The answer is clear-cut.

1. Begin with conversation and invite everyone to be involved. For example ask questions like: *Why is this moment something to talk about?* or *How does it change our lives?*
2. Pray with one another. Encourage finishing sentences such as: *I Praise God for. . . .* and *I thank God for. . . .*
3. Bless one another. Choose a familiar blessing you can use at this time and also daily with one another such as: *"May the Lord bless you and keep you."* or *"May you feel God's love at this moment and always."*

These clear-cut steps lead to building and growing relationships with family and with

friends. They become a traditional approach and response when milestone moments happen in our lives.

The 75 blessings for life's milestones found in the book, *For Everything a Season* outlines basic steps for inviting conversations in small groups or in homes. The steps are 1) Welcome, 2) Prayer, 3) Bible Text, 4) Reflection, and 5) Ritual Action.

The individual milestone modules from Milestones Ministry also outline some basic steps which are named, *The Four Keys for Practicing Faith*. They are 1) Caring Conversations, 2) Devotions, 3) Service, and 4) Rituals and Traditions.

Five Principles

Let's get back to the five principles listed at the beginning of this article. Where do they fit in our lives and how can they contribute to our understanding of the importance of relationships?

1. *Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships – often in our own homes.*
The important words to me in this principle are "trusted relationships". For some milestones for adults, the home may be the best and only place to take time and provide opportunities for conversation about the milestone. There are both joyous and sad milestones. Building trusted relationships through caring conversations is a step towards faith formation. When conversations, prayers, and blessings bring a family and friends together, faith is formed by the Holy Spirit. The best place for this to happen is in the home.
2. *The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and ministry of the home.*
I have often compared the ministry of the congregation to the children's program Sesame Street and the ministry of the home to the children's television show

Mister Roger's Neighborhood. Sesame Street always chooses one lesson to teach children a day. If the lesson for the day is the color orange, the color orange is seen and heard throughout the program in a variety of ways and taught by repetition. Ministry in our congregations provides many ways to learn about our faith. Prayer is taught and repeated by a variety of people in a variety of places.

From 1968 until 2001, Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers Neighborhood made children feel like he was talking one on one with just them. Children and sometimes adults trusted Fred Rogers for his caring approach. Mister Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian pastor who role modeled and taught us the value and impact of trusted relationships. Ministry in the home likewise is a place to practice and talk one on one about what has been learned in the congregation in a very trusting setting.

We are fortunate if adults spend 2 to 3 hours a week in our congregations. But this is very little time compared to the hours spent in the home. It is imperative that there be a vital connection and partnering of the congregation and the home. What is taught in the congregation needs to be talked about through caring and trusted relationships in the home. Adults need to understand the importance of this partnership for the sake of the church.

3. *Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too.*
As congregations place tools in the hands of children, youth, and adults for realizing faith practices in the home, a better understanding of the home being a place for faith talk happens. Taking the time for intentional conversations about our lives and connecting them to our faith through prayer and blessing help make the connection between the congregation and the home. If what we do in the congregation is church and the place we

learn of Christ's presence in our faith, then encouraging what we do in the congregation to be done at home results in the realization of Christ's presence in our faith at home too. This helps adults to role model for children and others in their home resulting in the home being church too.

4. *Faith is caught more than it is taught.* This principle helps emphasize the importance of relationships and the need for church leadership to begin helping those in the congregation to recognize that home is the primary and best place for one to role model and teach the faith. One expects to be taught about faith in church. We seldom consider how faith is really "caught." How do we catch something? One definition of catch in the dictionary is *to get and hold something*. In the outfield in order to catch the ball, the player needs to be where the ball is. In the home in order to catch the faith, one needs to be there and get and hold it. This is done by exposure to the faith and happens through parents and other adults in the home where faith is role modeled.
5. *If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults.* Without adult faith role models for our children and youth, our faith would not be passed from one generation to the next. It is this principle that causes me to reflect on the need to prioritize faith formation tools to help adults establish faith practices.

Taking this principle into consideration, rather than seeking staff and volunteers to help with children and youth, I reflect on how transforming it could be if we sought ways to help adults establish faith practices. I believe we make the assumption many already are steeped in faith practices, however; I fear that the opposite is true. If faith formation is perceived as only happening in the church, what consequences can we predict if we do

not emphasize intentionality for faith formation to happen in the home also? How are we helping adults to become Christians? Where in our church lives and in our everyday lives do we walk alongside adults in their faith journey?

If principle five is true, then it is imperative we give attention to adults. Let's begin by building relationships, not starting yet another program. Identifying milestones in the lives of adults is a creative way to open the door to a different approach.

A Different Approach to Adult Faith Formation

Why place an emphasis on the need to recognize milestones in the lives of adults? Perhaps the answer lies in those physically present in mainline denominational congregations today. Richard H. Gentzler gives me pause to think about how we can seek ways to address the adults in our midst: *The church is in the hands of its elders*.

While the popular perception is that the aged are needy and infirm, Gentzler affirms the majority of older adults have plenty to give. The church needs to tap into their wisdom, energy, experience, and talents. Gentzler stresses that older adult ministries need to be by and with elders as well as for them, since participants will represent all stages of retirement and activity levels. In addition to the practical issues of programming, Gentzler takes on more difficult topics of aging including chronic conditions, depression and death. He also recommends that churches pay special attention to the needs of the Boomer generation, since they are now becoming the older adults who will determine the church's path for years to come.

These adults are ones in great need of having personal, trusting relationships in their lives. They need a faith formed by the power of the Holy Spirit. They need to be practicing their faith in the home and we, as the church,

need them to be our sought after and essential Christian adults to pass our faith on to the next generation.

Taking Action

Milestones in the lives of adults are about sad times, happy times, and fearful times. Conversation, prayers, and blessings can be embraced and be a fulfilling time in the lives of adults. Many are struggling to care for aging parents, reinventing their lives after retirement, losing loved ones, and becoming empty nesters.

Marking milestone moments for the entire congregation or for individuals is a step towards replacing programs with relationships. The focus on adults can strengthen the congregation.

Where do you start? I suggest we begin with assessing milestones happening in our congregations by talking with people. Milestones Ministry provides a structure for each milestone. Begin by simply *naming it* and then *equip it* by helping the memorable moment to happen. Next *bless it* with prayer. *Gift it* by thinking of something special to remember the milestone. In the case of one who cares for aging parents or for aging parents, a holding cross or prayer shawl are helpful to not only remember but continue using as faith tools. *Reinforcing it* is important. Revisit the milestone celebrated by helping

someone remember this special time and letting them know they are in prayers.

I look forward to providing examples of congregations embracing and acknowledging milestone moments for adults in our everyday lives through a faith lens in the near future. At this point in time, I have only come across a few that have begun to realize the potential this simple relational ministry tool has to transform the church.

All the ages can be involved when observing milestones for occasions in the life of adults. It is our role modeling through building trusting relationships, praying together, and blessing one another that we feel Christ's presence in our lives. This happens in the congregation and in the home and ensures a living partnership between the two. It begins by taking one step at a time.

Follow them, because they make a path that will lead to a long successful life in the land the LORD your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 5:33, CEV)

Work Cited

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