Passing on Faith—Milestone to Milestone

Linda Staats

In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?'
Tell them… (Joshua 4:6–7)

Julie and her peers at All Saints were called forward during worship to receive a blanket as a high school graduation gift from the congregation. These were not just any blankets; each young person's name was embroidered on one corner, and a symbol of the cross and the words *All Saints* appeared on the other. As the blankets were wrapped around the shoulders of Julie and each graduate, a blessing was given: "The arms of the congregation are wrapped around you as you go out into the world. This blanket is a reminder of our love for you, and that you are covered in God's grace and wrapped in the arms of Jesus. You are God's child and marked with the sign of the cross forever." There wasn't a dry eye among those assembled during this service, which is a highlight of the year for the congregation. But there was also a twinkle in the eye of the small group of wise elders known as the Cut Ups, whose experienced hands and hearts lovingly contributed their time, talents, and prayers to making each blanket.

But this is not the end of the story. In the fall, Julie wrote to me:

Dear Linda,

Months have passed since I graduated and left for college. I want to thank you for coordinating the graduation milestone. The blanket lies on the end of my bed. It does more than add color to my room and keep me warm. The adjustment to college has not been easy, finding new friends and freedom from the watchful eyes of my parents—and you! Every time I have a tough decision to make about what to do or how to fit in, all I need to do is look at the blanket and I remember who I am and whose I am. I am reminded of all who care and pray for me.

Gotta go!

Love, Julie

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The Life and Work of the Church

Passing on the Christian faith from generation to generation is at the heart of the life and work of the church. This fundamental task requires much more than passing on biblical and doctrinal information. Passing on the Christian faith to others involves the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives birth to trust and confidence in the creative, redeeming, and renewing power of God.

The goal of lifelong faith formation is to enable a seamless journey of learning and passing on faith to every infant, child, youth, young adult, adult, and elder in our congregations and in our homes. The purpose is for individuals to develop an active, deeply owned faith in Jesus Christ that grounds, sustains, informs, and identifies him or her as a child of God in every age, stage, and transition of life. To accomplish this task, congregations need to align their resources around a vision and mission to nurture and pass on faith by creating a vital church-home partnership and intentional cross-generational culture that forms disciples.

What does Julie's story have in common with baptism, beginning Sunday School, the first day of school, losing a tooth, learning the Lord's Prayer, going to camp for the first time, first communion, receiving a driver's license, graduation, marriage, a new home, loss of a job, a new job, retirement, reliance on a wheelchair, the move into an elder care center, and death? All of these are turning points, rites of passage and potential memorable moments in the faith journey of a Christian. These are milestones in life, and they are experiences that offer an opportunity to celebrate God's presence and be reminded of one's identity as a child of God.

Using milestones as a basis for ministry within the church is a powerful way to engage parishioners of all ages and stages of life in nurturing their faith and spiritual growth. Milestones offer an opportunity to bring God's presence into the home and connect the rituals of daily life with the life of the congregation, thus shaping a vital partnership between home and congregation. Most important, milestones ministry renews and transforms congregations by tending the baptismal journey through all the ages and stages of a life centered in Christ.

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My Story

Nineteen ninety-five was a milestone year for me, a time when my educational background in human development converged with my passion for ministry and service in the church. In that year, I left the academic world to serve as the Minister for Faith Development in a mid-size congregation; also during that year, I heard two similar prophetic messages, only months apart, that urged church leaders to partner with the home to teach the faith in new and relevant ways. That April I attended a conference hosted by the local Catholic diocese, where the speaker was John Roberto. I can still see him drawing a church and a house with a line connecting them, and hearing the phrase "church-home connection" for the very first time.

In October of 1995 I participated in a conference called Child in Our Hands (now called Passing on Faith) in Mesa, Arizona, presented by passionate, visionary voices from The Youth & Family Institute. Along with a sound theological framework for faith formation, they introduced the idea of filling a FaithChest® for children, rather than a toy chest (an idea that has spread across the globe), as well as an idea for giving handmade "Holy Comforters" as gifts at baptism. The host pastor for this conference, Rev. John Bratten, introduced participants to the concept of family-centered confirmation, which begins at baptism and continues with a specific equipping event every year of a child's life through high school graduation. In this approach, confirmation is an intentional journey that begins with birth and involves the entire family and congregation, not a just a step to graduation shaped within a classroom.

Early in his ministry, John had discovered the joy and effectiveness of providing children's education, adult Bible study, and evangelism all at the same time! John Bratten became my patient mentor, freely sharing all his ideas for connecting church and home, congregation and families, for the first eighteen years of life.

And so it was that in 1995, my passion for passing on faith was ignited as visions of church-home connections, Holy Comforters, and FaithChests danced in my head. My own faith DNA and lens for doing ministry were forever altered.

Development of Milestones as Ministry

The phrase "milestones ministry," although it is not trademarked or registered, is most often associated with The Youth & Family Institute in Minnesota. The Youth & Family Institute, under the leadership of Dr. Dick Hardel and Dr. David Anderson, supported by inspiration from Dr. Rollie Martinson at Luther Seminary as well as many other milestone practitioners, has developed and incorporated milestones ministry into the core of its own ministry. Milestones ministry provides congregations with a means to implement a vision for passing on faith. Here, the child is placed in the center and God's redeeming work is at play throughout the interwoven circles of home, congregation, community, culture, and creation. Resources and support for milestones leaders are created by many different sources, including publishers, and made available to congregations to help them connect church and home in the process of passing on the faith.

Over the past forty years, numerous voices and organizations in multiple denominations have called on the church to rethink its approach to faith formation. Anyone who is engaged in the theory and practice of lifelong faith formation is encouraged to read *Will Our Children Have Faith* (1976) by John Westerhoff, *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage* by Eugene Roehlkepartain (1991), and *Passing on the Faith* by Merton Strommen and Dick Hardel (2000).

Theological Foundation

How do we make every generation a generation of disciples who pass on faith? Part of the answer is to immerse ourselves in a theology of daily life, Christian vocation, and the priesthood of all believers.

The very point that Jesus makes in the gospel of John—"I have come that they may have life, an abundant life" (10:10)—is best communicated if we connect God with all the milestones of life. Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, the life" (John 6:14), "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48), "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God connects with us in all the milestones of life. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus promises, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us." To be effective in discipleship and evangelism, the ministries of Christian congregations must continue to connect God with more milestones in the lives of individuals and families.

Educational Process

Most churchgoers assume that Sunday school and confirmation are the primary means of fulfilling the catechetical, or teaching, mission of the church. However, ongoing research and observation over the past four decades have noted that Sunday school as a stand-alone program has had limited success in passing on Christian faith. Additionally, confirmation has been seen more as a graduation *out* of the Christian faith rather than as a deepening of that journey. Too much emphasis has been placed on isolated educational programs, especially programs that separate children and youth from their parents. Indeed, it has become abundantly clear that for the church to be faithful and effective in forming lifelong disciples, parents and other caregiving adults need to be seen as essential partners in the dynamic journey of passing on the Christian faith from generation to generation. This is the unfinished reformation.

One of the central concerns expressed about milestones ministry is the importance this model places on involving parents and essential caregivers in the faith lives of their children. All too often, critics say, parents are disinterested or already overwhelmed with the daily challenges of family life. The question of how to engage parents and other caring adults—who often seem ill equipped for the task of nurturing the faith of others—in the faith lives of our children and youth is a legitimate one.

Milestones ministry is a form of Christian education that subtly and gently involves parents and other caring adults with the ongoing Christian education of children and youth, while simultaneously engaging them in their own adult faith formation. Parents and caregivers are

motivated by the delight they experience in seeing their children receive recognition, the blessings they receive in the form of prayers and love offered from the congregation, receiving gifts (a visible and physical reminder of the milestone and a resource for faith nurture in their own homes), and connections made with other families and wise elders who form a community of support.

Social-Cultural Context

Stephen Wallace, the national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD who also directs the annual *Teens Today* research project, writes:

> For years sociologists and psychologists have mourned the loss of traditions marking childhood "rites of passage." In earlier American culture, movement toward adulthood was accompanied by more ritualistic, meaningful celebrations of transition to newfound independence and responsibility to the family and community. Indeed, absent reasonable recognition of their early milestones, many young people seek alternative rites to "maturity," including drinking, drugging, dangerous driving, and early intimate sexual behavior. In a culture largely devoid of formal "rites of passage" and too often unobservant of the few that exist, young people may make up their own. By paying attention to the important transitions of childhood and adolescents, influential adults…can make it less likely that poor choices will become a child's self-constructed mileposts along the path to adulthood.

The Milestones Ministry Model

The story of Noah (Genesis 8:8–22, 9:1–17) provides the template and the basic ingredients for milestones ministry, and reminds us to tell the story of God's promise from generation to generation. In the Noah story:

1. A significant life event, the flood, represents an ending and a new beginning. The transition for Noah and his family is named, recognized and marked. The event is memorable and transforming.
2. Noah and his family (two generations) are actively involved.
3. God's presence is recognized.
4. An altar is built. Noah and his family express their faith and gratitude for God's care. God makes a promise and a covenant with Noah. God further instructs Noah and his family on how to live. God blesses them.
5. There is a symbol, the rainbow, that becomes a means to "remember" and tell the story again and again and again. The symbol imparts meaning and creates a sense of belonging to a faith community of people who trust God. The rainbow is a gift from God and a reminder of God's faithfulness and promise in daily life.

Milestones ministry weaves the following four basic elements into a vital partnership between the congregation and the home, whether that home is a house in the suburbs, a farmhouse, dorm, apartment, hogan, casa, group home, room in an elder care facility, or a motor home. These elements can be incorporated into any milestone, whether it is a birth, a baptism, a new puppy, a graduation, a wedding, joining an AA group, losing one's hair due to chemo, a retirement, a funeral, or any occasion related to a stage, age, or moment in life.

1. Naming and Marking

Naming and *marking* the sacred and ordinary events in the life of a congregation and in our daily life (e.g., beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, rites of passage) creates rituals and traditions that shape us and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.

2. Equipping

Equipping provides instruction related to the milestone, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and brings at least two generations together. Participants learn from each other as they engage in experiential, cross-generational learning that serves as a model for faith practices in the home. Take-home resources encourage continued practice and the building of meaningful relationships. The equipping events may be a one-time gathering on a Sunday, or multiple-week gatherings on Saturdays or weekday nights. Today's families more readily make short-term commitments than those involving a larger time frame.

3. Blessing

Blessing the individual, marking the occasion in worship, and providing tools for naming and blessing in the home says this is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred and the sacred ordinary.

4. Gifting

Gifting is a tangible way to provide a symbol and a reminder of the occasion being marked. Gifting serves as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. It has the potential to engage people's interests and talents in milestone events, as well as connect them to one another in new, meaningful relationships.

The Four Keys

At the heart and practice of every milestone both in the congregation and at home are the "four keys," formative daily faith practices first introduced by Dr. David Anderson in 1989 (see *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples In Home and Congregation*). The four keys are simple and practical. Milestone leaders are encouraged to practice them at every equipping event, providing a model and a resource for use in the home. The four keys open one's imagination to explore and play with additional ways of celebrating the Christian faith both at home and away from home. They are:

- caring conversation
- devotions
- acts of service
- rituals and traditions.

It's *All* About Faith!

"Milestones" is a familiar word to most of us. When I open my hometown weekly newspaper, the caption on the last page reads, "Milestones." On this page the births, deaths, engagements, and weddings are announced to the local community.

Dr. Paul Hill, executive director of The Youth & Family Institute and author of *Coming of Age,* introduces his audiences to milestones this way:

> The research in the United States indicates that the average person connects the ministry of the Christian congregation to four milestones: birth/baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial. When teenagers say, "What does First United Methodist (or St. James Lutheran or St. Paul's Episcopal, etc.) have to do with life?" or "What does Jesus have to do with life?" they are not against God or the Church. They are only responding to what they have seen and/or experienced. If the only time a relationship with a gracious God is talked about happens in the buildings of the congregation and then, only around the four milestones of birth, confirmation, marriage, and burial, then our God and our faith are in a box.

How do we connect the events of our lives with God's biblical stories in a way that can help us realize God is traveling with us? How do we bring the milestones of the church year into the home, and how do we bring the milestones of home and society into the church? How do we celebrate those expected and anticipated events that are marked on the calendar and planned well in advance, as well as the events that are unexpected? In the midst of the milestones that give rhythm to daily life, how do families regularly acknowledge God at work in the highs and the lows, the beginnings and the endings, the giggles and the tears?

The following three categories are offered as examples for thinking about any and all aspects of life as having the potential for naming milestones that join our story with God's story. Milestones can intersect and weave together the circles of family, church, community, one's culture and creation. Each event listed has the potential to be claimed as a milestone and recognized in the congregation, at home and away from home.

- **Congregational milestones**: baptism, baptismal anniversary, celebration of Jesus' baptism, entry into Sunday School, first communion, presentation of Bibles, beginning confirmation, the rite of confirmation, marriage, death, the seasons of the church year (such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week), and learning the prayers, creeds, and various teachings of one's faith.
- **Human development and daily living**: birth, birthdays, first tooth, first steps, folding hands for prayer, toilet training, playing church, beginning school, burying a pet, braces, puberty, first date, driver's license, graduation, leaving home, going to camp, entering the military, lifelong commitment to another, end of a relationship, anniversaries, first job or new job, birth or adoption of children, first home, a new home, moving, disposing of possessions and moving into an assisted living center, retirement, and death.
- **Civic celebrations**: These important dates mark significant historical events and celebrations in our community and culture, and solidify our identity and sense of belonging as citizens of the United States: Memorial Day, Labor Day, the Fourth of July, Election Day, Thanksgiving, New Years, Mother's Day and Father's Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, President's Day, and Veterans Day. Within specific cultures are celebrations such as Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo, and many more.

Next Steps

So how do we begin to incorporate milestones ministry into our congregations and homes?

First, begin with yourself and your own household, extended family, and friends. Become deliberate about looking for opportunities to name and claim God's presence in your own daily life. Understand your own home as a center for faith formation for your family and guests. For example, every couple whose wedding my husband and I attend receives a red toolbox from ACE hardware. On the lid we inscribe, "Joe & Jane's Faith Chest." We then enclose a letter in which we explain that "ACE" stands for Active Couple Enrichment! Also enclosed is a gift certificate for the hardware store, and a few resources to support the couple's life together (our favorites are a copy of *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, written by Eugene H. Peterson, and a prayer book for couples). The unwrapped red toolbox perched among elegantly wrapped gifts always receives lots of attention—evangelism at its best!

Take inventory of all the milestones your congregation already marks; by the very nature of being a community of faith, milestones are practiced. Ask, "How do these fit the model of milestones ministry? Examine your entire ministry, asking, "How is this activity equipping parents and caring adults to nurture faith? How is this celebration supporting households to be centers of faith? Do we name? equip? bless? gift? Do we use the four keys to model in the congregation what we want individuals and families to practice in their homes? Are all the generations gathered at church and in homes to share stories and engage in meaningful interaction?

The following letter, from a Methodist youth minister in Virginia, contains an example of viewing one's ministry through a milestones lens:

> *The mother of a high school senior called this morning to discuss her daughter. The father is being deployed to Iraq in February, and the daughter is having a difficult time letting go. The mother was concerned because her daughter didn't want to attend two up-coming youth retreats, choosing instead to stay home with Dad and spend that time with him. She was trying to convince her daughter to attend the youth events.*
>
> *At that moment, milestones ministry "clicked" for me! The event this young lady will remember for the rest of her life is her father's deployment. This is the milestone event of her senior year. Nothing we do can change that; however, as the faith community, we have an opportunity to shape how this experience will be remembered. Will she remember this as a time of grief, loneliness, and worry? Or will she remember this as a milestone in her faith journey, a time when she chose to entrust God with the well-being of her father?*
>
> *The mother and I talked about what we could do to make this an important moment, a milestone in the faith life of the entire family. I suggested they consider inviting the pastor and myself to come to their home and, as a family, hold a "sending" service in which they might be able to express to one another what this event means, and together place it in the hands of God. Milestones ministry is reshaping how I look at youth ministry and the opportunities we have to impact the faith journey of our young people.*

Second, select a milestone you already mark as a congregation or household, and enrich it to reflect the milestones ministry model. For example, if your congregation already celebrates the giving and receiving of Bibles for a specific age group, add two or three weeks of cross-generational interaction and learning. Instead of the pastor or Christian education leader placing a Bible in the hands of the child, give the Bible to the parent(s), who then places it in the hands of the child, saying, "Today I am keeping my promise to teach you the faith."

Third, add one milestone each year to your church calendar and home calendar. For example, receiving a driver's license is a fun civic and developmental milestone to bring into the gathered community of faith and to lift up at home. When this milestone was introduced into my congregation, everyone got it! "Oh, this is about *all* of life. This is about *all* of us keeping our promises. This is *all* about faith!" Here's how this example can play out within the four elements described earlier in this article:

1. ***Naming***: Receiving a driver's license.
2. ***Equipping*:** Gather at least two generations, the one who is receiving a license and members of the household where that person lives. Include a presentation by someone who represents the community, such as a police officer, a company that provides car insurance, or a representative from the local MADD or SADD organizations. The book *Can I Have the Keys to the Car?* a book that invites caring conversations about covenants and expectations related to driving, may be given to participating families. Incorporate common road signs into the presentation as daily reminders of the faith journey.

3. ***Blessing***: Invite all new drivers to a special worship service. Pray for them and bless them. Provide a four key blessing for adults and youth to use at home as the new driver embarks on the first solo drive.
4. ***Gifting***: Give a key chain in the worship service or at the equipping event as a symbol of the covenant between God, the child, parents/guardians, and the community of faith that the new driver be accountable for his or her actions.

Milestones have the potential of weaving together the circles of influence in a person's life: family, friends, congregation, community, culture, and creation. For example, one congregation invited elders to bring pictures of their first car, which provided an opportunity for cross-generational storytelling. New drivers were engaged in acts of service by delivering items for shut-ins. They also helped plan the Trunk and Treat Halloween festival for the community. The equipping event inspired a small group who went on to research the driving laws in other countries. They also discussed alternative fuel sources and care for creation. A plan of action was formed for people to share rides to church on Sunday.

If every congregation linked receiving a driver's license to the practice of faith, as well as to the home and daily life, how might it affect the entire health of a community? Could it lower the high accident rate for teen drivers? It is *all* about faith!

Support for Milestones Ministry

Milestones ministry is much more than a program or a curriculum. The model as presented in this article provides the essential ingredients for identifying, strengthening, and creating a milestones approach to ministry. Specific resources, tools, and training are available for congregations and homes that want specific support in building an intentional partnership between home and congregation (see the bibliography).

Another source of support material is the Internet. Simply enter the words "milestones ministry" into a search engine such as Google, Ask, Yahoo and explore the sites listed. Calendars for a full year of milestones are listed at All Saints Lutheran Church in Phoenix, AZ (www.allsaintsphoenix.org) and Tanque Verde Lutheran Church (www.tvlc.org) in Tucson, AZ; St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Williamsport, PA (www.stmarkswilliamsport.org) posts pictures of the resources they provide for each milestone.

Challenges and Opportunities

It is evident that milestones ministry has greatly impacted and improved the efforts of congregations and households to pass on the faith. Yet there are still challenges for congregations to be aware of and explore in the process. These include:

- Incorporating and integrating all four elements of the milestones Ministry model into congregational life. Some congregations are caught up in the gifting aspect and forget about equipping. Others equip only the kids and forget about the adults.
- Remembering that the primary purpose of milestones ministry is to create homes as centers for faith formation. For example, participants in milestones are often blessed in worship, but may not feel qualified to bless one another in their own homes.
- Creating a milestones team with shared responsibility and a variety of gifts. The pastor and worship leaders need to be involved in the process, along with Christian education leaders. Enlist caring adults who are eager to do more than just drop off and pick up their kids.
- Naming rites of passage and marking milestones beyond the age of eighteen. Milestones ministry is for all ages and stages of life.

Some pastors initially panic when introduced to milestones ministry and say, "We can't be holding all these special services!" Although that statement can be debated, the worship team needs to decide which milestones will be recognized by the entire faith community, and which ones can be celebrated in homes or in smaller gatherings of the community.

Benefits

Now that we've explored how milestones ministry works, let's take a look at what it can do for your entire congregation.

- Church and home are connected as parents and caregivers of children are encouraged to grow in their own faith and equipped to be teachers of the faith, even in their own homes.
- The language of faith is spoken daily and expressed through actions both at home and in daily life.

- Children grow up anticipating their next milestone as a mark of maturation, supported by the community of faith. Households are supported through every age and stage of life.
- Daily life is connected, in real, tangible ways, to being a lifelong disciple of Christ.
- Children and youth develop a sense of belonging to God's family that can sustain them for a lifetime.
- Elders are encouraged to share their passion and stories, leaving a legacy of faith for the next generation.
- Authentic and affirming adults are available to lovingly surround children and nurture faith.
- Faith is modeled and practiced through the four keys.
- The nurturing of faith extends beyond the classroom, and becomes more than classroom handouts and isolated lessons.
- Members of all the generations are engaged in providing meaningful resources to support lifelong learning.
- Care and concern for other members of the faith community grows as interaction increases.
- People are motivated by faith to make difference in the community and world.
- Congregations are revitalized and renewed as ministries are aligned around a vision for nurturing and passing on the faith.

Finding our Way Home

Rev. Mindy Bak, author of *Together in Faith,* explains the need for milestones ministry with a familiar fairytale.

> When Hansel and Gretel leave the safety of their house to venture into the woods, they leave a trail of breadcrumbs to mark the way back home. The children of God have a way of wandering off as well, which is why it is ever important for us as faithful leaders and parents to leave a trail by which they may always find their way home. Instead of breadcrumbs, we leave a path of milestones. This way, when our children (of any age) become lost and begin to long for home, they will only have to look about them to see the trail of milestones and say, "Look, here is God in my life. And here, and here, and here." Milestones are a visual reminder, or mileposts, that help us find our way back home into God's arms, as well as the welcoming arms of those who love and care for us.

As Mindy gives this explanation to her congregation, she literally walks the church, dropping small stones in the baptismal font, on the altar, at the base of a chalice, by the front door of the church, and in the hands of new parents, caring adults, and wise elders.

Conclusion

Milestones ministry places all of life under the care, blessing and direction of our gracious God in Christ Jesus. Every ending, beginning, transition, and moment in life is an opportunity to actively claim God's redemptive and renewing work in the world and in our lives. To weave our stories with God's story is to live with confidence in God's care in every way, every place—all the time.

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Reflection Guide

Milestones Faith Formation

Milestones provide an excellent way of developing lifelong faith formation by fashioning faith formation around each milestone through preparation, celebration, and follow-through using the Milestones Ministry Model:

1. Naming and Marking. *Naming* and *marking* the sacred and ordinary events in the life of a congregation and in our daily life (e.g., beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, rites of passage) creates rituals and traditions that shape us and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.

2. Equipping. *Equipping* provides instruction related to the milestone, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and brings at least two generations together. Participants learn from each other as they engage in experiential, cross-generational learning that serves as a model for faith practices in the home. Take-home resources encourage continued practice and the building of meaningful relationships. The equipping events may be a one-time gathering on a Sunday, or multiple-week gatherings on Saturdays or weekday nights. Today's families more readily make short-term commitments than those involving a larger time frame.

3. Blessing. *Blessing* the individual, marking the occasion in worship, and providing tools for naming and blessing in the home says this is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred and the sacred ordinary.

4. Gifting. *Gifting* is a tangible way to provide a symbol and a reminder of the occasion being marked. Gifting serves as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life. It has the potential to engage people's interests and talents in milestone events, as well as connect them to one another in new, meaningful relationships.

Assessing Your Church's Approach

Use the following questions to reflect on your church's practice of milestones faith formation.

- Take an inventory of all the milestones your congregation already celebrates.
- Which of the following milestones are part of your church's faith formation efforts today?
  - ❒ Marriage
  - ❒ Anniversary of Marriage
  - ❒ Baptism
  - ❒ Anniversary of Baptism
  - ❒ Welcoming Young Children to Worship
  - ❒ Receiving a first Bible
  - ❒ Learning to pray
  - ❒ First Communion
  - ❒ Confirmation
  - ❒ Graduation (high school, college)
  - ❒ First Job
  - ❒ Leaving Home / First House or Apartment
  - ❒ Becoming a Grandparent
  - ❒ Illness
  - ❒ Retirement
  - ❒ Death
- How does your congregation <u>currently</u> provide faith formation around milestone events using the Milestones Ministry Model: 1) Naming and Marking, 2) Equipping, 3) Blessing, 4) Gifting
- What does your congregation need to do to strengthen its current approach to milestones faith formation? What are one or two <u>new</u> milestones around which your church can develop faith formation?

For Family-Centered Milestones

- How is this activity equipping parents and caring adults to nurture faith?
- How is this celebration supporting households to be centers of faith? Do we name? equip? bless? gift? Do we use the four keys to model in the congregation what we want individuals and families to practice in their homes?
- Are all the generations gathered at church and in homes to share stories and engage in meaningful interaction?
- How does your church provide home activities and resources for each milestone?

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SAMPLE Bulletin Insert for Congregational Blessing

Today we celebrate a milestone in the lives of our new drivers.
[Parents and guardians and new drivers come forward.]

Reading

Exodus 13:21-22: *The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

Leader: As you begin to drive by day and you see the clouds in the sky, remember the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites by day.

Congregation: Let God be your guide.

Leader: As you drive at night and see the lights of houses, signs, and cars, remember the pillar of fire that led the Israelites by night.

Congregation: Let God be your guide.

Leader: The scripture passage tells us that the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night never left their place in front of the people, and our prayer is that you, too, will know this and remember this, that the Lord will always go with you and guide you on your way.

To help you remember this, your parents and our congregation have a gift for you. These Key chains are in the shape of *[name shape, such as a cross]* and they display the words *"[read words on keychain]"* to remind you that God does indeed go with you wherever you go.

Gifting of the Key Chain and Youth Blessing

[Parents hand the key chain to their youth then lay hands on their children.]

Parents: Guardian of all, we give thanks for your Holy Spirit, who accompanies *[name]* on all journeys, short and long, for work, for learning, for relationship, for family, for mission, and for all destinations. We give thanks for your constant presence and guidance. Amen.

Parent's Blessing

[Students lay hands on their parents.]

Students: In this time of my new responsibilities and my parents letting go, help us to find reasons to trust each other. Even in the midst of worry let there be trust, peace, patience, and pardon, as the presence of your Holy Spirit guides us. Amen.

Congregation Blessing

Congregation: May the Holy Spirit fill you and give you wisdom and peace in this time of letting go and newfound freedom. Amen.

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Milestone Blessing Bowls

Bowls and stones created by Artist and Potter
Dawn Deines-Christensen

Meaningful, Memorable Moments Woven into a life lived in faith

When your children ask their parents in times to come,
"What do these stones mean?" Then you shall let your children know… Joshua 4:21-22
What do these stones mean to you?

EVERY DAY IS A GOD DAY
TELL THE STORIES – BLESS THE DAYS – SHARE THE PRAYERS

The extraordinary grace of God is hidden in the ordinary happenings of each day.
It is in the stories of families and friends that people receive their meaning, identity and purpose.

A Few Ways to Use Milestone Blessing Bowls!

1. Display on table or desk: People ask, "What is this?" and you will share stories of faith and life.
2. Family gathering or small groups: Invite each to pick a stone and tell about a recent milestone experience.
3. To honor a person: Invite everyone to pick a stone and tell a life story about the honoree.
4. Carry a stone in your pocket: Take into the day as a reminder of the people and the God whose love goes with you.
5. To pray: Pick a stone at random and pray for the life situation that comes to mind.
6. At the dinner table: Pass the blessing bowl, each selecting a stone and sharing a story of his or her day.
7. At a meeting: Use the blessing bowl to open the meeting, to check in on life's joys and sorrows.
8. To close time together: Take a stone representing what each is facing this week and ask, "What shall we pray for you?"
9. With young children: Match each stone to its picture on the pad. The inevitable question, "What does this one mean?" opens conversation.
10. Bible Study groups: Invite people to select a stone that describes what has happened in their lives since they last met.
11. Build a collection: Add to the bowl a pebble or shell or small memento that holds a memory.
12. Send a gift: Mark life milestones by giving a gift to a favorite ministry or charity.
13. Use a dry erase maker: On the blank stone, write your own milestone highlight for the day.

THE YOUTH & FAMILY INSTITUTE
1601 West Old Shakopee Road • Bloomington, MN 55431
Order bowls at: 877-239-2492 • www.tyfi.org
Caution: Please keep out of reach of small children

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faith · renewal · wellness

MEANING OF THE STONES

Beginnings & Completions

Examples…

Engagement • Graduation • First School Bus Ride
Driver's License • New Job • Moving Away • Retirement
Child Leaves Home

In blessing new beginnings or completions we are reminded that a God who is familiar with us meets us in unfamiliar places. The creation story in Genesis states that every day had a sunrise and a sunset, "And there was evening and there was morning."

Sacred

Examples …

Family Time • Wedding • Funeral • Confirmation •
Baptism • Creation • Christian Holy Days • Eucharist

The holy and sacred are found in the presence of God. Symbols, rituals and traditions are sacred when we meet God there Moses, standing before God in the burning bush was told , "the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Ex. 3:5)

Remembering

Examples …

Birthdays • National Holidays • Reunions • Sobriety
Anniversary • Baptism Birthdays • Anniversaries
Bible Stories • Songs

We learn from the past so that we can move forward in life. Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5 we are commanded to keep a Sabbath day, to remember what God has done and is doing in our lives.

Care

Examples…

Helping Others • Supporting Missions • Prayer
Campaigning for Peace, Justice, and Mercy
Medical Assistance • Visiting • Caring for Creation

This milestone represents giving and receiving care with grace and gratitude. "Who is my neighbor?" the young lawyer asked. Jesus answered with the Good Samaritan Story (Luke 10: 25-37), giving us direction for faithful living.

Gratitude

Examples …

Friendships • Family • Health and Healing • Miracles
Appreciation • Prayers • Gifts • Thanksgiving Days

We applaud, whistle, shout, stomp, sing, pray, smile, hug, give. " O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." (Psalm 136: 1)

Mountain Highs

Examples …

Birth of a Child • Recognition • Fishing with Dad
Learning to Read • Falling in Love • Achievement
Seeing a Comet or Star • Worship

After looking at the heavens, the moon, and all the stars, the Psalmist in Psalm 8 states, " what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Mountain Highs are Wow Moments!

Quests

Examples …

Learning to Dance • Job Interview • Running a Marathon
Discerning Vocation • Engaging in Mission • Try Outs
Climbing a Mountain • Finding a Treasure

Quests are the times of wonder, stepping into the unknown, and taking the risk of exploring a new path in life. In Matthew 16:24 we are reminded that we are called to step away from our comfort zones, pick up our cross, and follow Jesus.

Valley Lows

Examples …

Fired from Job • End of Relationship • Acts of
Inhumanity • Recognition of Sin • Broken Trust • Failure
Destroying Creation • Depression

Having the rug pulled out from under you, having the wind knocked out of you, depleted, disappointed, distressed, and distraught describe the low experiences and empty feelings of Valley Lows. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

Loss

Examples …

Death • Loss of Pet • Loss of Job • Miscarriage • Divorce
Loss of Health • Loss of Love • Loss of Family Farm

In our deepest pain, God graciously wipes our tears and holds us with the arms of the cross as long as we need to be held. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8: 37-39

Other Milestones

God wants to be centered in every milestone of our lives. A God who is familiar often meets us in unfamiliar places and surprises us with grace. Jesus last words to his disciples, then and now, are, "remember, I am with you always." (Mt. 28:20)

TELL YOUR MILESTONE STORIES!