

Strategies for Learning the Christian Story with Children and Adolescents

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Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

(Deuteronomy 6:5-9, NRSV)

Many of us have attended training sessions on how to be better Sunday School teachers or youth leaders, but rarely have the topics of talking about words when we are at home or away, or signs on our hands and foreheads come up. Yet when Moses instructed Israel about teaching faith to its children, these are the methods that were identified. First and foremost, faith was something that was shaped by a community. It was not something that was deposited in one's heart and grown in isolation. Secondly, it was about words, but not just words. Words that wrapped around these sacred truths were exchanged in conversations through out the day, from their lying down to rising in a new day. There were words they used in the comfort and routines of their homes, as well as words that inspired and challenged them in the times they were away from home. Beyond words, faith was taught with symbols and signs and emblems. And it was taught through repeated practices in actions as basic as going in and out of a doorway.

Thousands of years later, we now know more about the process of teaching faith traditions to our children and adolescents. New research on the stages of cognitive, spiritual, and social development informs how and what we teach. We better understand that changes in physical and mental abilities play an essential role in how they learn about the world around them and are able to respond by making meaning from what they experience.

Throughout this chapter, we will use the term “traditions” to refer to the practices of faith—the rituals, sacraments, hymns, words, actions, movements, prayers, creeds, and habits. It could also be defined as “the things we do and say and believe as the people of God.” We “practice” traditions, like a tennis player practices forehand drills or a singer practices scales. By this, we mean that traditions must be repeated, however perfection is never the goal. Rather, we practice traditions to create an aptitude. The tradition is never the sum of our faith, but it creates in us a capacity to experience it more deeply and thoroughly.

Traditions must become part of our experiences of our faith. To learn about a tradition is to gain knowledge. To observe and practice a tradition is to consider it and adopt it for personal use. To share that tradition with another is to create a community experience. Our hope is that these traditions will

become lifelong tools each child can use as they grow in their relationships with God, family and neighbor. Through traditions, their identity will be formed and their faith shaped.

Moses spoke to Israel with the conviction that our practices form our faith. In the same way, our faith is understood as we are taught to practice the traditions we have observed and inherited. As children age, their abilities to practice these traditions changes, as does their understanding of them. As we consider effective ways to teach our faith traditions to our children and youth, it is important to hold onto the methods introduced by Moses, while also understanding and employing the latest research for creating successful contexts for learning. We have identified these principles for creating these contexts.

1. Creating Safe Spaces
2. Understanding Cognitive Development
3. Understanding Faith Development
4. Understanding Social Development
5. Implementing a Plan for Action, Response and Practice

First, we will explore how each of these principles plays out for children (0-10 year olds) and adolescents (11-20 year olds). Then, we will apply them to teaching the tradition of Communion.

Principles

1. Principles for Creating a Context for Effective Learning

The cognitive, faith, and social development of children play an essential role in how they grow, learn, and respond to the world around them. As they mature, they are making meaning in response to all that they are experiencing. Creating a safe space for children to learn, observe, and practice the Christian tradition helps ensure that they will grow to trust and find value in them.

Take Communion for example, if children never see, learn about, or participate in this sacrament, they will not have a reason to recognize or value the act of breaking bread as a community and as an act of experiencing and remembering the presence of Jesus Christ in their lives. If a child is ostracized the first time she takes communion for spilling juice on her new dress, she will most likely be hesitant and fearful the next time she is invited to participate. The development of a child requires that they witness, observe, and practice traditions in a safe space—giving them opportunities to try, to fail, and to learn the important practices in our faith traditions. This is why experiential learning is key for learning and practicing new skills.

We want the traditions and faith practices of the church to become part of the identity of our children. In order for this to occur, the traditions must become part of their experiences. This is also true for the multitude of spiritual disciplines, memorized creeds, hymn singing, prayers, and sacraments. To learn about a tradition is to gain knowledge. To observe and practice a tradition is to consider it and adopt it for personal use. Our hope is that as young people observe and practice traditions of our faith, they will become lifelong tools each child can use as they grow in their relationships with God and neighbor.

Creating a Safe Space

Creating a safe space for children to practice the traditions of the faith is essential for them to learn and grow. Language and tone used by adults are key. Children should feel welcome. They should be invited to watch and learn from others. If they mess up the liturgy or miss a step in the ritual, they should be offered grace as they summon the courage to try again. The congregation must be encouraged to model this tradition for those who are experiencing it for the first time. When children feel welcome and safe they will participate fully, increasing the opportunity for a faith tradition to become their own personal practice.

Understanding Cognitive Development

Children learn by observing, wondering, and practicing. They are very literal and often repeat what they hear others saying and/or doing. Inviting children to observe and practice faith traditions will inevitably stir up questions that adults might find difficult to answer. Wondering is a great tool to use with children when we are unsure of the correct answer or when we are responding to a question that does not necessarily have one correct answer. It is important to provide children with time to process what they are experiencing. You might consider inviting children into a space after experiencing Communion where they can ask questions. Or you might provide questions for families to talk about on the way home from worship. Children also benefit from downtime and free play time following a faith community gathering.

Giving children space to reflect and process what they have experienced is essential. This gives their brains and bodies an opportunity to consider what they have learned. It also gives them the chance to internalize and practice the tradition in which they just participated. Symbols and physical objects help a child adopt a tradition as their own. Using real bread and real juice, allowing the child to taste the bread, to drink the juice, to touch the cup, and to see the liturgy unfold is essential. Children use all five senses to learn and make meaning. As they touch, see, hear, smell, and feel an experience their brains are absorbing the process and the value of the tradition. When we invite children into the process, the tradition becomes valuable and important. It is in these moments that children store traditions in their memory and their lifelong learning.

Understanding Faith Development

The traditions in our church are some of the tools that children can use as they grow in their faith and relationship with God. Our faith traditions provide persons of all ages different ways to engage in relationship with our Creator. The stories, liturgy, prayers, and rituals invite children to connect with God and neighbor again and again as the practice of faith becomes an important and life giving process.

Symbols, location, music, actions, and visuals are all essential in helping children practice the traditions of the faith. These often serve as memory markers for children as they connect all they are seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling, with God's presence in their lives. As children experience the traditions, using their five senses, they not only make cognitive connections and learning but they make spiritual connections—linking the act or words of a tradition with God's love and grace.

Understanding Social Development

Children absorb information and develop new skills as they observe and learn from others. Community is essential to a child's development. If we want to pass our faith traditions on to our children we must invite children into the faith community where they can see and learn from others practicing the tradition. Children should be invited to participate in the tradition alongside persons of all ages so that they have someone to watch and model in the process. It is helpful for parents as well to be surrounded by community so that they too have people to watch, wonder with, and learn from.

Implementing a Plan for Action, Response and Practice

As ministry leaders, planning for these experiences is essential. In every moment of ministry it is important to consider if a child feels and/or is safe. It is also important to ask if the ministry is a faithful response to a child's developmental needs. As ministry leaders our work requires thoughtful and intentional planning. When you feel led to begin a new ministry or to evaluate a current ministry, these are good questions to ask:

- Does this ministry offer children a safe space to learn and grow? Do children feel welcomed into this process?
- Does this space and the teaching methods used reflect a child's developmental needs for learning? Is there space for children to use their five senses as they learn and practice a tradition? Do the teaching methods make use of symbols, objects, music, and other manipulatives to help a child experience the tradition in multiple ways? Is there time for a child to wonder about and reflect on what they are learning?

Using these questions as a guide, develop a plan for how you want to: 1) Create a safe space, 2) Share the tradition, 3) Invite children to experience the tradition, 4) Wonder with children about their experiences, and 5) Practice the tradition.

When we are intentional in our work we will create safe spaces for children to experience and practice our faith traditions. In this space children will have the opportunity to embrace our traditions as their own and will begin to incorporate these traditions in their own faith practices.

2. Principles for Creating a Context for Effective Learning for Adolescents

Creating Safe Spaces

As with ministry to children, all spaces for adolescents must be physically and emotionally safe. Because they are growing in their ability to connect ideas and to reflect upon action, it is extremely important to surround younger and older adolescents with mature and thoughtful adults who are able to articulate their faith and whose behavior is consistent with the beliefs they hold. These adults must invite dialogue by encouraging and navigating questions, while also offering wisdom based on life experiences.

The younger adolescent will be eager to have the freedom to connect ideas. The older adolescent will seek safe spaces to test limits and to offer push back. It is important in both settings that adults allow for these processes, without judging or leading astray. Safe spaces will be filled with trust and consistency. When adolescents feel safe, they will have confidence to explore questions and new ideas. As adolescents are affirmed and guided by their parents, teachers and communities, they begin to form an identity and an understanding of what is meaningful and important.

Understanding Cognitive Development

According to Piaget, the final stage of Cognitive Development occurs during adolescence. What he refers to as the “Formal Operational Stage” begins in adolescence and continues throughout adulthood. At this stage, a child is now able to solve abstract problems and to think scientifically. In other words, adolescents are newly able to take evidence of repeated patterns and articulate theories of behavior. From these patterns, they are able to develop beliefs and build systems that help them understand their world and their role in it. Attention to developing a personal identity increases significantly with the onset of adolescence. As the adolescent develops identity, he or she is also capable of deeper empathy and compassion. As one connects the ideas of identity and beliefs, an awareness of social justice issues also arises (Keeley, 100-101).

As adolescents go through dramatic physical changes, their brains also experience a “growth spurt.” The brain of an early adolescent “over produces neurons and synapses similar to the growing brain of a toddler.” This growth ushers in the ability to “think more abstractly, to understand multiple perspectives and to think critically about themselves and others.” At this early stage of adolescence, multiple ideas and pieces of information can be connected and understood (Joiner and Ivy, 94). In the later stage of adolescents, the effort to connect ideas is replaced by efforts to discover meaning in these ideas. The discovery process is best done in dialogue with others. It’s a stage of “trying on” ideas, which results in increased episodes of self-expression.

Parallel to the sequential cognitive development of an adolescent is the paradoxical occurrence of impulsive and seemingly nonsensical and contradicting behavior. The latest findings in brain science tell us that while the brain is increasing in intellectual capacity, the limbic system, the part that manages impulse control and risk-taking, is growing at a faster rate than the pre-frontal cortex, which regulates behavior (Joiner and Ivy, 94). So at a biological level, the brain is going through cognitive disorientation. Though all young people experience this, the involvement of parents and other mature adults, can temper the behavior around these changes.

Understanding Faith Development

The emotional landscape of an adolescent has implications for faith development. While intellectually they are able to understand abstract concepts, beliefs are often confirmed by feelings. When asked, “How do you know something’s true?” a probable response could be, “I just feel it.” In an ideal setting, an adolescent will be surrounded by adults who can help them reflect and articulate reasons for belief.

Both younger and older adolescents look to the group around them for guidance in understanding their faith. While early adolescents lean upon the unquestioned faith traditions of their parents, older

adolescents lean more into the questions they have about their faith. Younger adolescents reason that a faith commitment is a good idea because their parents and the people who they like around them have also made that same faith commitment. (“My parents believe it, it must be true!” or “I like these people, so I am okay believing what they believe.”) They are not so much affirming the beliefs, as affirming the people who hold these beliefs.

Older adolescents look to the group to help them explore the questions they have concerning faith. They are not so willing to adopt beliefs just because they are held by their community, or even people they like and admire. However, they are very willing to turn to the community to ask their questions or to gauge their response as they “try on” certain beliefs. Some may reject the faith of their parents and congregation out of rebellion or a desire to demonstrate that they can think for themselves. In these cases it’s important that they know they are always welcome at church, as are their questions and doubts.

Understanding Social Development

In his classic work on faith formation, *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler identifies the importance of belonging to a group that typifies faith development in the adolescent stage. At this stage, they are moving from simply doing good to avoid punishment to a more ‘conventional’ level of faith...where the key is conforming to what the group or culture defines as ‘normal’ and acceptable (Keeley 53-55). Belonging to a group and agreeing with what the group believes is important to adolescents who have committed to a faith. Adolescents also seek a group so that they can be in dialogue about ideas and understand concepts from another person’s perspective.

In early adolescence, the role of the group is to affirm. As ideas and expressions are affirmed, confidence is gained and an identity is gradually shaped. In later adolescence, a group is sought after that aligns with the growing sense of identity. For example, if a ninth grader has been affirmed in the past for her acting abilities, she will take steps to move into a theater group at her school. A student who enjoys politics will find others who enjoy politics. Confidence to leave a tight friendship group emerges, while the desire to be with like-minded others increases.

Implementing a Plan for Action, Response and Practice

As adolescents mature, they grapple with the question of purpose. They increase in their desire to change the world. Believing in an idea is not enough. Action must follow. Action will flesh out the validity of their ideas. The younger adolescent will look to adults to help create a response to an idea. The older adolescent is more likely to take leadership in creating action plans from ideas. Opportunities for action as well as leadership will create successful situations for adolescents to confirm their beliefs through consistent practices.

When these principles are implemented to create successful contexts for learning, teaching the traditions will be more effective. To demonstrate this, we will show how teaching the Christian tradition of Communion can be done in a context created by these principles. Though we recognize various traditions use the terms “Eucharist,” “Lord’s Supper,” or “Holy Communion,” for the purposes of being consistent, we will use the word “Communion” throughout this chapter.

Strategies for Teaching Christian Traditions to Children

Using the information from these principles for creating a context for effective learning, we have developed five strategies for teaching faith traditions to children.

1. Create a safe space
2. Share the tradition with children
3. Invite children to experience the tradition
4. Wonder with children about their experiences
5. Practice the tradition with children.

1. Create a Safe Space

Creating a safe space for children to experience and respond to the Christian traditions is essential for strong faith formation. Children need to feel welcome and they need to know that there is room to explore, discover, and play. This is how they learn and make meaning from everything they see, hear, touch, feel, taste, and smell.

First, the environment should be inviting. Create a space that includes child size chairs, bookshelves with hymnals and bibles that children can reach, and other creative tools that invite children to draw, write, or create as they respond to all they are experiencing. Look at your space through a child's eyes. Where do they sit? Where are they invited to participate? If they stand can they see? If they are learning a prayer is it there for them to see or read? Can they turn the pages in a hymnal without someone worrying that they might tear the page? Do they have a Bible they can color or draw in? These are all questions to consider when creating a safe space. Each of these items say to a child you are welcome here. We want you to come and learn in this place.

Second, creating a safe space for children to learn and practice our traditions requires education with the children and with the adults. Children should be taught about the expectations of the community, the meaning of the traditions, and the importance of their participation. They should be encouraged to participate in the community. However this requires that the rest of the faith community engages in hospitable behavior. This requires education of the entire faith community. You might choose to place pew cards in your Sanctuary that remind the worship community that children are welcome and present in worship. The presiding pastor or priest might include a statement about welcoming children and their families in the opening greeting each week. Whether the greeting is written or spoken make sure you remind the gathered community that children are present and that they are watching, learning, and practicing the faith. Affirm that children are an important part of the community. Help your congregation understand that everyone's work (including children) is to learn and develop tools that help them connect to God and to the faith community.

Third, children must be respected for who they are and for where they are on their faith journey. We are all learning and growing together and it is important that we respect children and offer support as they grow and learn. While we often see children as cute and/or funny we must remember that they are

doing the hard work of growing in their faith and that they need a safe space to think out loud, to process, and to practice. Children can be cute and they can be funny, but these are not the only gifts that they bring to the faith community. Laughing at children can often be devastating and embarrassing. The role of the congregation is to welcome children and to give them a safe place to learn and grow. Invite members of the community to model the faith traditions for those new to worship, offer encouragement to children as they practice, avoid glaring or shaming of children who are learning to worship, and to give support to families as they strive to include their children in the traditions of the faith community. It is the role of the entire faith community to create a safe space for children and families as they participate in the faith community and practice the traditions that the community values.

Practicing Creating a Safe Space through Communion

Invite your children to a place where they can see everything that takes place during the communion liturgy. Encourage them to watch and learn from others as they participate in the liturgy. If children mess up the liturgy or miss a step in the ritual, they should be offered grace as they summon the courage to try again. The pastor or priest presiding over communion might consider offering words of invitation and explanation for all persons in the room. The congregation might be encouraged to model this tradition for those who are experiencing it for the first time. As long as persons feel safe in their practice, they will trust the context and feel comfortable returning to experience God's presence that is revealed in and through the faith traditions.

When children are welcomed and invited to participate, when adults lovingly model the traditions and encourage children to practice without fear of rebuke or shame, they will step into the practice of the traditions and will find a way to make these traditions their own.

2. Share the Tradition with Children

In this safe space, take time to share this tradition with the children in your faith community. First, decide how you want to teach and model the tradition. You might choose to host a workshop for children and families to teach the tradition, introduce a prayer by saying the prayer every time you meet with the children, or explain the tradition before inviting children and the rest of the faith community to practice the tradition together. There are many opportunities in worship, at meals, and in learning communities where we can stop to take time to explain what we are about to do and why. This is helpful for both children and adults as they gain a deeper understanding of the Christian traditions that are an important part of the church.

Second, make sure to incorporate all five senses in your instruction and explanation of the traditions. Children use their five senses to learn new skills. As they touch, see, hear, smell, and feel an experience their brains are absorbing the process and the value of the tradition. Find ways to incorporate all of these senses in your teaching of a new tradition. When introducing Communion, invite children into a space where bread is baking so they can smell the aroma of homemade bread. Invite children to taste the bread and the juice and then ask them to describe what it tastes like. When teaching a prayer such as the Lord's prayer, invite children to hear the prayer spoken by different persons you might even include a song to help teach the words of this ancient prayer. Include children in worship and other

gatherings where they can see other people participating in the faith tradition you are trying to teach. Make sure children are present for Baptisms, Communion, and other important days such as Easter, Pentecost, Advent, Christmas, and Lent. Let children touch the elements, the prayer book that holds the prayers, the paraments on the table, the stain glass windows, the water in the baptismal font, and other items used in your faith community. As children participate in the different traditions ask them what they see, feel, hear, smell, and taste. These five senses help children connect with the tradition as they find meaning in the actions that help them recognize the importance of the tradition as well as encourage them to adopt the tradition as their own. There are many ways to incorporate the senses into a child's learning of the Christian traditions.

Finally, symbols, locations, music, actions, and visuals are all essential in helping children practice the traditions of the faith. Provide pictures of persons practicing the traditions, symbols that reflect the meaning of the tradition, and objects that children can touch, taste, and smell as they take in all of the dimensions of a tradition. Music is one great way to share and teach your traditions to children. Pick a song that teaches a prayer or a creed and use that every time your children gather to practice professing what you believe. Remind the children as they sing that they are singing a prayer or a creed. Invite them to wonder about what the words mean and to share what it feels like to say those words. If you are teaching a tradition that takes place in a specific location, take the children to that space, talk about baptism in front of the font in the sanctuary, talk about caring for creation outside as you explore nature together. If you are teaching a prayer or a creed incorporate sign language, hand motions, or body movements as children recite the words. By providing many different ways to learn about and experience the traditions, you increase the chances that the traditions will stay with the child, not just for today but throughout their entire faith journey.

Practicing Sharing through Communion:

Communion is a reoccurring sacrament and tradition that offers children and adults multiple opportunities to learn and grow in their understanding of this tradition. In order to share this tradition with your congregation consider hosting a workshop where you teach children and families about this tradition. Also, the presiding pastor or priest might offer words of introduction and explanation before beginning the liturgy for communion. Remember to engage all five senses and the use of movement, music, and objects in your teaching. Provide real bread and real juice when you teach about and invite children to experience communion. This provides children an opportunity to taste the bread, to drink the juice, to touch the cup, and to see the liturgy unfold. This is essential for their learning process. By taking the time to share the tradition with children and people of all ages you increase their ability to understand the tradition as they find ways to incorporate this holy work into their own personal faith practices.

3. Invite Children to Experience the Tradition

Too often faith formation is top down or information only. We share information with children but we never invite children to participate or practice the tradition. In order for a child to make a spiritual connection with a tradition children must be invited in to the process. They need opportunities to participate in the tradition.

First, children learn best when they can see. Invite children up to the front of your sanctuary or gathering space. Make sure they can see what you are doing and hear what you are saying. Often families want to sit in the back afraid their children might make noise or might be a distraction. Encourage families to sit up front where their children can see and hear all that is taking place.

Second, ministry leaders should intentionally consider when and how they invite children to experience and practice each tradition. In faith formation groups leaders can offer the invitation and then lead the group in the practice. Children can say a specific prayer every night before going to bed, a creed every time they are in worship, or a grace before meals. Children can bake the bread or serve the elements. They can watch a baptism and join in the congregational response. In Sunday School or another setting, children can retell the story of Communion, reenacting this sacrament as they commit it to memory. You might also consider inviting children to practice the Lord's prayer together, to rewrite a prayer or creed in their own words. There are many ways to invite children into an experience. Children want to participate, they yearn to be part of the community. All they need is the invitation.

Practicing Invitation through Communion

When inviting children to participate in the tradition of Holy Communion ministry leaders must first consider their context and their theological understanding of this sacrament. For some, children can be invited to watch, to participate in the liturgy, and to observe as others partake of the holy feast. Where children are invited to partake, ministry leaders might offer an invitation to persons of all ages to come to the table. Engage the five senses and invite children to pay attention to the objects, locations, and symbols they see throughout their experience. Invite children to come forward to physically see the sacrament of Communion. Show children the hymnal, the book, the bulletin, or the screen where the liturgy is provided and they should be invited to follow along. Non-readers after hearing the liturgy several times might learn some of the words orally over time. Readers can be encouraged to follow along and recite the words with the congregation. Invite older children to help in the making of the bread. In communities where children can partake of communion and can lead liturgy, invite them to help serve the elements.

When children are present and the invitation is extended, children will participate and learn from all they see happening around them. This is an important part in the faith formation process. Once the invitation is extended children become active participants in this and other traditions. This is where they begin the holy work of adopting this tradition as their own spiritual practice.

4. Wonder with Children about their Experiences

Once children are invited into a safe space and begin to experience the faith community's traditions, they will have many questions. Some questions might be difficult for adults to answer. The process of wondering with children offers an essential teaching tool for use with children as they process all they are experiencing.

First, wondering creates a safe space for open discussion. You can create an environment that encourages listening and respect as participants ponder a question together. Some examples of wondering questions to use in your community include: I wonder what you heard? I wonder what you

felt? I wonder what your favorite part was? I wonder if you have any questions? These wondering questions are great tools to use with children when we are unsure of the correct answer or when we are responding to a question that does not necessarily have one correct answer. Children ask questions as they learn and grow in order to develop a deeper understanding of what they are experiencing. We do not need to have all the answers. We can wonder with them and we can admit, “You know, I wonder about that, too.”

Second, wondering offers an opportunity for us to continue the conversation as we learn together. Using open ended wondering questions while recognizing that some questions do not have “one correct answer,” we invite children to consider different possibilities and to use their imagination and critical thinking skills as they consider the possibilities’. When we as leaders are unsure of how to answer a question, we can guide a child’s wondering towards another source of information by inviting other persons into the conversation. This helps children see how the community learns together. Invite children to continue wondering about all they experienced when you say goodbye at the end of your time together. Say: “I wonder how you will use this tradition at home and while you are away from this place? I wonder if you will keep thinking about what you experienced today. Practice what you learned. The next time we are together I hope you will share with me other thoughts you have about this tradition?” These wondering questions at the end of your time with children help children see that the conversation will continue, that the work continues, and that they are welcome back when they can return to continue the wondering, the conversation, and the learning.

Practicing Wonder through Communion

After a child has learned about and experienced a community’s tradition it is important to give them an opportunity to process all they have seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted. Wondering offers children an opportunity to reflect openly about their experiences as they make meaning from all they observed. When sharing the tradition of communion with children, you might consider inviting children into a space after experiencing Communion where they can ask questions. Or you might invite families to talk about this tradition on the way home from worship. If you host a learning workshop where you provide families to practice Communion together, make sure to include time for wondering together following their experience. This will give each of the participants an opportunity to process what they experienced as they learned about and practiced the tradition. Adults can wonder with children following communion asking, “I wonder what your favorite part was?” or “I wonder what God is calling us to do next?” By engaging in these conversations with the children in our faith community, we are including them in the sacred traditions and inviting them to respond in their own daily faith practices. This helps children attribute value and meaning to all that they experience and makes them want to practice the tradition again and again as it continues to sustain them on their faith journey.

Giving children space to reflect and process what they have experienced is essential. This gives their brains and bodies an opportunity to consider what they have learned. It also gives them the chance to internalize and practice the tradition in which they just participated. The art of wondering provides one helpful tool for doing this holy work together. Practice wondering with the children in your community. I wonder what you will discover?

5. Practice the Tradition with Children

When we are intentional in our work we will create safe spaces for children to experience and practice our faith traditions. In this space children will have the opportunity to embrace our traditions as their own and will begin to incorporate these traditions in their own faith practices. Every person develops and sharpens these traditions by observing and learning from others and by practicing these disciplines over and over again.

First, practice and repetition are essential to a child learning and personally adopting a faith practice. With Communion, a child cannot simply hear about the sacrament in a class and then never see or practice it. Value does not come in learning about, but rather in practicing and adopting as one's own. Participation is key. Repetition is also important. Inviting children to observe Communion once will not give them enough time to understand the tradition, nor does it provide the child with the time, space, and practice needed to make a personal connection with the tradition. For a tradition to become part of a child's faith development, it needs to be practiced again and again on a regular basis. This is how children make meaning and spiritual connections to words and actions. Ministry leaders must provide children with multiple times and places to practice. As children experience the tradition over and over again they begin to embrace the tradition as their own, finding ways to use these tools to connect with and respond to God's presence and love.

Second, practicing in community is essential. As mentioned above in the section on social development, children need opportunities to witness the faith community practicing the faith traditions together. Children should be invited to participate in the tradition alongside persons of all ages so that they have someone to watch and model in the process. It is helpful for parents as well to be surrounded by community so that they too have people to watch, wonder with, and learn from.

Provide multiple opportunities for children to observe and practice the faith traditions. Children learn best when they observe and practice a new skill over and over again. If you want to teach a new song you should find a way to sing the song regularly in your faith community. Maybe you are teaching a traditional grace sung before meals. Make sure that this grace is sung at every meal in your community and then give the words or a recording to families and encourage them to practice it at home. If you want to teach the traditional Lord's prayer, find time every time you gather with children to say the Lord's prayer. Invite them to practice it with you. Encourage families to practice it at home. Invite children to listen for it and practice it in worship. The more opportunities children have to see and practice a tradition the more likely their brains will commit the tradition to memory as a meaningful and important tool for faith formation. Create a ritual for every time you gather that includes the tradition you are trying to teach. For example, if your community often begins worship or communion liturgy with the worship leader saying "The Lord be with you" and the community responding "and also with you" then you might choose to include this in your time with children. Explain: the church has a special way of greeting each other. I say: "The Lord be with you" and you say: "and also with you." Practice this greeting every time you are together. When the children are in worship they will hear these words and since they are familiar they will respond.

Practicing Communion

Communion is an opportunity to help children experience and participate in the important work of the church. It is an invitation for all members of the Body of Christ to gather around the table and to participate in the holy meal together. Communion embraces many facets of our faith including Christ's sacrifice, Christ's eternal presence with us, God's grace and love, and the importance of Christians living and serving in community together. Through this tradition children experience the Christian story. There is much for children to experience and learn when they gather with the faith community to participate in this holy Sacrament. Participating with the community in this holy tradition gives value to the practice. The key here is for children to be present in the community when this tradition is practiced. As mentioned above, there are many ways for children to participate. Whether your tradition invites children to observe or participate in this meal, inviting children to witness this act of the gathered community is essential in sharing the importance, value, and meaning of the tradition. When children are included in the act of Communion (either observing or participating), they feel connected to the community and will begin to see the experience as a meaningful and important part of the faith community.

As children experience God in this sacrament they will want to respond. Some might want to go home and "play" communion sharing the bread and the juice with their dolls, family, or friends. This art of play is the child's work of processing all he or she experienced that day. Others might wonder where the extra bread goes and might volunteer to help consume, distribute, or deliver the extra elements. Our work as ministry leaders is to provide time for our children to experience and practice the tradition, offering multiple opportunities for children to begin incorporating the Christian tradition into their own faith practice.

Children learn by observing, wondering, and practicing. When we create a safe space to share our traditions, invite children into the process, wonder with them as they learn, and encourage them to practice all they have experienced, the tradition becomes valuable and important. It is in these moments that children store traditions in their memory and their lifelong learning. The traditions in our church are some of the tools that children can use as they grow in their faith and relationship with God. Our faith traditions provide persons of all ages different ways to engage in relationship with our Creator. The stories, liturgy, prayers, and rituals of our traditions invite children to connect with God and neighbor again and again as the practice of faith becomes an important and life giving process. Create, share, invite, wonder, and practice the traditions of your faith with the children in your community. I wonder what you will learn? I wonder what the children will learn? I wonder how each of you will grow in your faith?

Strategies for Teaching Christian Traditions to Adolescents

We have identified five strategies, based on the newly developed capabilities of the adolescent, that are useful in teaching faith traditions to adolescents. Because of the unique changes in cognitive, faith and social development for adolescents, the strategies are slightly different from those used for children.

INVITE: Belonging to a community
RECITE: Words, but not just words
LIVE: 24/7
REMEMBER: Signs and emblems
REPEAT: Walking through doorways

We selected the tradition of Communion because so many of the principles come together when teaching this tradition. The need for emotional and physical safety, the increasing intellectual capacities, the desire to feel what one believes, the inclination to seek community and the intention to seek authenticity all meet when the adolescent comes to the communion table.

1. INVITE: Belonging to a Community

In Beyond the Screen, Andrew Zirschky does a brilliant job of explaining how the Christian tradition of Communion can be taught to adolescents. As adolescents begin to raise questions about who they are, where they belong and what purpose their life will have, Zirschky believes that those answers can all be found at the communion table.

He begins with the adolescents' use of technology, which he argues, has been misinterpreted as the love of screens and all things that glow. Rather, he argues, this is the platform upon which adolescents create community. Instead of community occurring in a neighborhood or at a specific time and place (like youth group), adolescents now find community through networks. These networks are not instantly available to them, as a neighborhood or a youth group program might be. Instead, they must be created, engaged, grown and curated by the individual. Through these efforts, an identity is formed. However, both identity and community require work, as they demand to be constantly updated and recreated.

Zirschky then makes a powerful argument for the communion table being a safe place by juxtaposing the community created through social networking with the community formed at the table. Around the table, identity is received: an adolescent is a child of God. In the same way, community is offered. As the worship leader invites the congregation to the communion meal, all are reminded that there is always a place for him or her there. Belonging is a given, it is not something that is earned or achieved. It is not created, engaged, or grown based on efforts or curating. This community, or *koinonia* as it is called in the New Testament, is based on acceptance, belonging and a common identity. It shapes how we live and interact with each other.

Though communities cultivated through social networking play an immediate and important role in the life of adolescents, Zirschky argues that they are faceless and ultimately not safe. It requires constant attention and reinvention. Approval and belonging is a forward moving target. In juxtaposition, the communion table always offers a place of acceptance and intimacy.

2. RECITE: Words, But not Just Words

Because adolescents are now able to think conceptually, they can hear and understand the meanings behind the familiar words. The metaphor of the table and invitation to the banquet can be understood in new ways. The concept of hunger and being fed can be applied to the spiritual life in a much deeper and meaningful way. The act of remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then remembering our own death and resurrection in Christ, can be explored in ways it could not be at younger ages.

Because the brain is literally paving new pathways of understanding life and creating meaning, participating with a community in the sacrament of communion is a crucial step in understanding one's faith. When early adolescents are included in the practice of communion, they are given a means of imitating the faith of their parents and the community. When older adolescents come to the table, it is important to communicate that though they may still have real questions and doubts, they are still welcome and invited. What we do at the table is about more than the words. God can still use them in the act of feeding another. God can feed us, even if we don't recognize our hunger. In the landscape of exploration, the practices or habits of faith provide important landmarks of faith, which should not be put on hold or denied to our adolescents, simply because they can't embrace the words.

3. LIVE: 24/7

Adolescents demand authenticity. Ideas and beliefs are validated in the road test. Do these words hold beliefs that work in the real world? Does what works at home, work on the road? Does what works in the night, work in the day? Can I feel the truthfulness of this belief in my daily life?

Adolescents understand that we don't live at the table. We eat, so we can live. That means that once they have been fed by God at the table, they need to wonder what God is asking them to do in the world. Words coupled with rituals and a bigger story can be understood as putting demands on their behavior and morality. The personal encounter with Christ at the table takes on a much greater implication of how to interact with others. The adolescent brain is ripe for connecting what happens at the table with their purpose in the world.

The Lord's Supper is a community event. Rarely is it something done individually. As adolescents are seeking groups and a sense of belonging, the communion table is an excellent place to see this as a reality. It is a place where the community affirms its beliefs and joins in a common ritual. The communion table appeals to the experiential needs of adolescents: one either comes forward or is served by another; the bread has a texture and feel, wine or grape juice comes with an aroma and taste; the ritual is full of sound and silence; the passing of the peace requires and facilitates a connection with the strangers and family. The Lord's Supper creates an individual experience prompted by the words and beliefs of the community.

4. REMEMBER: Signs and Emblems

Because young people are newly able to think metaphorically, it is an opportunity to revisit many basic beliefs and teachings of the Christian tradition. It may be as if they are learning it all for the very first time! For this very reason, some denominations wait until this stage of older adolescents to hold confirmation or profession classes. There is a depth of understanding that was not previously available to young people.

With the ability to think metaphorically, adolescents are not only able to grasp how a loaf of bread can be broken and can feed, but they are also able to make intellectual leaps to see how this could be pointing to another story line. They are now able to perceive meaning behind the presenting facts or objects. The realities—that we cannot eat just bread and wine, or that no one is full after eating a small piece of bread or drinking a sip of wine, or there is nothing very sacred about the bread and grape juice that a church member bought at the grocery store—push them beyond the physical and literal towards the spiritual meanings.

So much of the Christian tradition is rich with symbolism. So much of what we do and say in worship, how we decorate our worship spaces, how we represent our congregation to the community, is based on what we allow the symbols to remind us. It cannot be assumed that they have ever made these connections before. Therefore, it is a crucial time to teach and to explore the words and objects that nudge us into deeper understanding and spiritual devotion.

5. REPEAT: Walking through Doorways

Moses, when instructing the people of Israel how to teach the faith traditions to their children, brought up doorways and gates. This reinforces the understanding that what happens at communion, must be taken into the world. The meal we receive at the communion table is to sustain us for the journey. It is not about the moment, rather it is about what we do next. This appeals to the adolescent desires for authenticity and purpose. It demands action. At the communion table we are reminded of our neighbor and that we are called to care for that person, not because we like them, but because they are part of God's family. We are reminded that we share a purpose with this group that gathers and that purpose goes beyond the walls of the church. With the blessing we receive at the table, we are called to be a blessing to others.

The mention of doorways can also point us to the repetitive and ordinary moments of our lives. We walk in and out of doorways hundreds of times each day. Most of us do it without realizing. As we are fed at the table, the doorway reminds us how God uses the ordinary and repetitive moments in our lives to create sacred, renewed and refreshed opportunities.

Conclusion

At the communion table, the developmental needs and capabilities of adolescents beautifully collide. Faith claims and practices are demonstrated in the words and action. Metaphors and symbols are used in the language and movements of the liturgy. It is a communal event, which means that although the individual experiences and partakes, all that is said and done is interpreted within a larger group. The

liturgy reminds us that we are part of a much greater salvation story. Faith cannot stay personal because the communion table reminds the adolescent that they are part of a much larger community who share a greater purpose and mission in and to the world.

As faith communities, we are called to pass our faith onto the next generation. Careful attention to creating the context and understanding the unique developmental needs and capabilities of each age will be essential as we rise to this call. In and through our best efforts, the Holy Spirit can work in the hearts and minds of our children and adolescents to raise up the next generation to love and to serve the Lord. Thanks be to God!

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