Parents as Missioners: the Surprising Strategies and Challenges of Growing Faith in the Family

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Steven Tighe
Anglican Church in North America
La Frontera Youth Ministry Education

Introduction

"It is a fact that all Christian parents would like to see their children grow up in piety;

and the better Christians they are, the more earnestly they desire it." (Bushnell 1888,

13)

"To religious parents, faith forms the core of what is most valuable to them in life …. For

these parents the child's acceptance or rejection of their religious faith is a source of joy

or of sadness." (Bengston, Norella and Harris 2013, 77)

The faith lives of children are important to Evangelical parents. From the thousands of

parenting books bought by parents every year (Barna 2007) to the almost countless

curricula, programs, and training materials purchased by churches for the Christian

education of these same children, it's clear: the faith of children is important to parents

and important to the future of the Church. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow called "the

transmission of identity to new generations" the most serious task that the churches

face (Wuthnow 1995 53).

Of the institutions involved in the preparation of succeeding generations of Christians, the role of the parents is widely considered to be preeminent (Gane 2014; Powell and Clark, 2011; Barna 2007, 56; Smith and Denton 2005, 120; Bowlby 1988, 120) Parents spend more time with their children than other adults and generally make more decisions for their children than any other adult, sometimes, in the U.S. at least, into their early 20's.

A growing body of work has been done exploring the way that the influence of parents is mediated within the faith building ecosystem. This article is a report on a qualitative, "grounded theory" (Gall 2003, 167), study of eight evangelical families, all of whose children are strongly committed adult believers, "abiders" according to the Pearce and Denton study of 2011 (34). The study focused on two elements. First, the actions taken by parents to shape the faith of their children, leading to the conclusion that successful parents see their work the same way that missionaries do: carefully shaping their interaction with their children to match the needs, interests and context of each child, even as they battle a number of surprising limitations on their influence as their children move into adolescence. The second focus was on the reports of the children as they reflected on the actions reported by their parents, leading to the surprising conclusion that the actions that parents took that affected the adolescents lives outside of the home were more influential that the actions taken inside the home.

A word about parents as missioners

Missioner, a synonym for missionary, is ordinarily a person whose area of emphasis is on people outside the family of faith. It is not normal to think of the raising of Christian children in Christians homes as a missionary enterprise.

Two ideas lead to the title of this article. First, the findings of the study that indicate that raising Christian children, even in Christian homes is never a sure thing, there are countless numbers of non-Christians, who grew up in Christian homes and then left the Christian faith. This study of eight evangelical Anglican families is noteworthy because all of the children are following Christ as young adults, and because of the emphasis and effort that these parents placed on the evangelism and discipleship of their own children. Efforts that the findings indicate are substantially the same as those of missionaries trying to communicate the gospel to a culture that is not their own.

The second idea that led to a missionary understanding of the efforts of parents to build their children's faith has to do with the attention that all of these families paid to the faith of their children's friends. These families exerted influence on their children's friends that were clearly efforts to involve those children in the church, and to influence both the beliefs and the behavior of those children. These families saw the raising of their children, and their children's friends as outreach to the culture.

Overview of this article

This article is laid out according to the form of the dissertation it is condensed from (Tighe 2014). The following four divisions include a review of academic literature, a

description the research methodology, a review of the findings of the project and finally,

a discussion of the findings.

Introduction

This review is a brief examination of research exploring adolescent faith, including studies documenting the value of adolescent faith, others exploring issues that influence adolescent faith, theories that apply to the subject and finally a short review of scriptural references to the raising of children.

Value to the young

The transmission of religion is essential for the survival of the Church (Myers 1996, 858; Dudley and Dudley 1986, 3), as well as important for young people. In numerous studies religious faith has been shown to be strongly associated with healthy children. Adolescent religiosity was positively correlated with high educational performance (Regnerus, Smith and Fritsch 2003, 16), self-esteem (Markstrom 1999; Donahue and Benson), healthy diet, exercise, and seat belt use (Wallace and Forman 1998), and negatively correlated with depression (Harker 2001), drug use (Knight et al. 2007) and suicide. Religion was found to be good for families: church attenders were twice as likely to be involved in their children's education, and far less likely to be divorced (Clydesdale 1997, 622).

Value to the Church

Faith in its members is also important for the Church. Bringing children raised in Christian families to know and follow Christ is a crucial part of the Church's mandate on earth and a major key to its thriving. For the church to grow, the faith must be passed

on from one generation to the next (Dudley and Dudley 1986, 3). An earlier study by the

author (Tighe 2012) found that the percentage of youth group involvement among a

denomination's young people accurately predicted the growth or decline of the

denomination over the next ten years.

Value of parent's faith

Many studies have found a strong correlation between the religiosity of children and

the faithfulness of their parents (Gibson 2004; Dudley and Dudley 1986, 3; Black 2008;

Black 2006; Boyatzis, Dollahite and Marks 2006; Smith and Denton 2005, 261;

Regnerus, Smith, and Fritsch 2003). However there are also studies that claim that the

influence of parents on their children's is weak (Gunnoe and Moore 2002;

Clark, Worthington, and Danser 1988; Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982; Ploch and

Hastings (1998) or non-existent (Harris 1995, 458). Several studies indicate that this

difference might be explained by the different ages of the adolescents under study: that

parental influence may decrease as adolescents age (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 1997,

44; Newcomb and Svehla 1937; Keeley 1976). Studies have also pointed out that

parents indirectly influence their children's values by influencing their choice of friends

(Barna 2007, 69; Cha 2003).

Other parent related factors

Multiple factors, other than parental faith, have also been found to correlate with

adolescent religiosity. These include, parenting style (Baumrind 1980; Bader and

Desmond 2006, 324; Gibson 2004, 158), the influence of peers (Gibson 2004, 159;

Gunnoe and Moore 2002, 615; Bergler and Rahn 2006), youth group participation

(Black 2006; Bergler and Rahn 2002; Rosemeyer 1994; Gane 2006), religious schooling

(Benson, Donahue, and Erickson 1989), denominational membership (Hoge, Petrillo,

and Smith 1982, 578), the presence of non-parental mentors (Nuesch-Olver 2006, 100)

and even geography (Potvin 1981). There are studies that find that certain aspects of

faith may have genetic influences (Bradshaw 2008; D'Onofrio et al. 1999), others that

conclude that the transmission of religious faith depends on societal and historical

events (Sebald 1986, 12; Newcomb and Svelha 1937; Firebaugh and Harley 1991, 495;

Abrahamson 1983, 93) and some that find that religiosity is largely a matter of lifecycle

or age (Sherkat and Wilson 1994; Chaves 1989).

Pertinent theories

Two areas of theory are particularly appropriate to this article. The first area is

composed of sociological theories that deal with the transmission of values to children.

Sociological theories largely see the transmission of values as a consequence of

incorporation into a community (Smith 1998; Sherkat and Wilson 1994). Prominent

among these is Peter Berger and David Luckmann's (1967) work in the "Social

construction of reality" and their examination of the processes of socialization and

reality maintenance.

The second area of applicable theory has to do with psychology. Generally psychological

theories see faith as a consequence of individual, internal cognitive and affective

processes. Bowlby's attachment theory (1988) is an important example. Bader and

Desmond (2006) have used it to try to explain the transmission of religion by looking at the psychological attachment of children to significant others. Since this article deals with young people, the theories of the developmental psychologists are also important. They include Piaget's work (Piaget and Inhelder 1969) on the development of cognitive ability; Kohlberg theories (Kohlberg 1958) concerning the development of moral reasoning; and Fowler's understanding (Fowler 1981) of the development of faith from childhood to adulthood. Additionally, the field of social psychology, which deals with the development of individual identity, may also be an important source of theory for this study (Gergen 1991).

Judith Rich Harris argues that peer influences dominate parental influences in her 1995 paper and subsequent book The Nurture Assumption. Her article in Psychological Review (1995) suggested that the difficulty that many socialization researchers had showing strong causal relationships between parent and child occurred because the influence of parents on children is largely mediated through the child's peer group. She proposes Group Socialization theory, arguing that the socializing effect of groups is always stronger than the influence of parents, and that parents' main influence on their children is through their genes and the way their decisions determine the peers of the child (Harris 1995, 210). She argued that parents choose groups that have similar values to their own for the children to grow up in and through that choosing influence their children (Harris 1995, 458). According to Harris, the process of group socialization starts very early in childhood as children begin to participate in

playgroups. She hypothesizes that there are several different mechanisms that allow children to become members of a group and understand its culture. She attributed this idea to socialization researchers Eleanor Macoby and John Martin who wrote in the Handbook of Child Psychology in 1983 that after an exhaustive review of socialization research they could find no consistent connection between parental behavior and the social development of children.

Adolescent conversion

There are also considerations concerning the nature of adolescent conversion and faith. There is evidence that adolescent recommitments are important for adult faith (Rahn 2000), and discussions about whether the normal path of faith development in adolescents is a single powerful religious experience or whether a gradual bit-by-bit absorption of the Christian faith is more effective. These discussions have been going on for over one hundred years (Bushnell 1888).

Besides theory, theology also provides an important lens through which to view children, passing on values to children and the relationship between the generations. In the next section we will examine the scriptural contribution.

Scriptural Discussion

The Bible speaks of children over 1100 times. In the Old Testament, as the Law is given to Moses, God commands that parents should, "Impress them on your children" (Deut 6:7) and talk about the law whenever they are with their children. The fifth of the Ten Commandments describes the attitude that a child should have towards their parents

(Deut 5:16). The book of Proverbs contains many sayings about how to raise children and seems to emphasize that raising children is largely the parent's responsibility. At the end of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi foretells that before the return of the Lord will come one who repairs broken relationships between parents and children.

In the New Testament Jesus tells his disciples that when they welcome a child, they welcome Jesus, and the Father (Mark 9:37); that they should not keep children from coming to Him (Mark 10:13-16); and that the raising of respectful, obedient children is an important qualification for leadership (1Tim 3:4; Titus 1:6).

Conclusion

This has been a brief examination of published scholarship and scripture concerning the formation of faith in the young. The next section, will present the research methodology carried out in this qualitative study of parents' influence on their children's faith in adolescence.

Research Methodology

Sampling

The eight Anglican Evangelical families studied here represent a "purposeful sample" (Gall 2003, 165), and were unusual because all of their children were, at the time of the interviews, active evangelical Christians, that fit the Smith and Denton characterization of "Abider" (Smith and Denton 2005) children. The families were drawn from evangelical Anglican churches in Texas, Pennsylvania and Kentucky and were identified by talking to clergy and youth workers in the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). At least two children from each household were emerging adults and had been out of their parents' homes for at least two years.

Clergy families were excluded from the sample, because a study of clergy children (Tighe 2010) convinced the author that unique and significant issues in their relationship to the Church affect the development of clergy children's faith.

Data collection and handling

Each parent and at least two emerging adult children from each family were surveyed and then participated in an individual hour-long, open-ended interview according to the protocol in Appendix 1. The survey included demographic information, questions from the NYSR first wave (Pearce and Denton 2011) to identify "abider" children and family members' impressions of participant faith lives. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, tracked, coded, archived and analyzed using Modified Grounded Theory (Gall 2003, 167; Perry and Jensen 2001; Charmaz 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1998)

supported by the use of NVivo 9 and 10, (a product of QSR International,

www.qsrinternational.com, accessed April 18, 2012).

Issues of reliability and validity

The validity (Gall, Gall and Borg 2003, 460) of the process was addressed in three steps.

First, the process and instrumentation, were reviewed and approved by a committee

experienced in qualitative research design. Second, careful field-testing of the

instrumentation and protocol was done to confirm that the research design produced

data pertinent to the research questions. Third, representative participants of the study

were given the opportunity to review the findings and to comment on their accuracy.

Reliability (Bogdan and Biklen 2003, 36) was addressed by keeping a complete audit

trail of the data and carefully recording reflections and analysis as the data was

processed. In addition, the use of surveys and interviews from multiple family members

provided triangulation and multiple views of important impressions and events. (Gall

2003, 167).

Seven children from three of the eight families had been members in a church youth

group led by the author. Each was asked and agreed to ensure that they did not modify

their responses because of their previous relationship. As evidence that their responses

were unbiased, several of the participants' reflections on that time included criticism of

the group or its leadership.

A word about limitations

Conclusions will be made about the specific population studied. As is normal for qualitative research, generalizability to a wider population will require further similar studies in related populations or a statistically significant survey.

Description of families

The eight families, including sixteen parents and twenty children, were all middle to upper middle class. All but three parents had college degrees. Six of the eight mothers worked outside the home. All of the children's parents were still married at the time of the interviews, although one had a previous marriage. All of the parents self-identified as evangelical Christians and had leadership roles in their churches, including three in a church youth ministry. They were not all "perfect families." At least one member of three families was struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. Two families had serious financial difficulties during their children's adolescence.

The degree of religious socialization in their homes varied widely. On one extreme was a family who seldom prayed, and rarely if ever talked about religion or read the Bible. At the other end of the spectrum was a family who regularly did those things and had frequent family devotional times, where they would pray together, waiting for God's guidance over decisions. Two of the sixteen parents were sisters, raised by the same clergy father. Of the twenty children: four were homeschooled for part or all of their schooling, four attended Christian schools, twelve attended only public schools, and four went to Christian colleges. At the time of the interviews in 2012 all of the

participant children were between the ages of 21 and 30. Nine were married, and seven of those nine had small children.

Conclusion

The research methodology described in this chapter was carried out between the Fall of 2010 and the Spring of 2012. The next section reports on the findings of the study.

Findings

In this section we examine the findings of the study related to the missionary

actions of the parents, as well as the challenges under which whose actions took

place. First we will look at the challenges reported by parents and the children, then,

in light of these challenges we will examine the efforts by parents to evangelize and

disciple their children.

Definitions

The "Personal Relationship with Jesus Christ"

The traditional initiation into the evangelical Christianity is "being born again," (eg.

Smith, et al. 2003, 120; or The National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health,

1995) in an act that often includes a "verbal profession of faith." While all of the

participants in this study assented to having been born again, the language used

most frequently to describe their evangelical faith was of a "personal relationship"

with Jesus Christ (See also Bengtson, Putney and Harris 2013, 57), so that phrase is

used in this article as the major signifier of the participants evangelical faith.

"Commitment events"

In general, the participants organized the stories about the development of their

faith in terms of important spiritual experiences. In this research, these religious

experiences will be called "commitment events" (Tighe 2015). Almost all of the

participants reported multiple instances of these events, and these findings confirm

the connection reported in the literature between "religious experiences" and adolescents with strong faith (Smith and Snell 2009, 229).

"Parents" and "Children"

The words "parent" and "children" will only be used to refer to a participant's role in the family. "Child" implies nothing about the age of the participant.

"Childhood," "Adolescence" and "Emerging Adulthood"

Parents tended to place events in their children's lives according to grade in school rather than age. So, in these findings, "childhood" indicates that the child was in elementary school or younger. "Adolescence" refers to the child's middle school and high school years. "Emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2000) refers to the period of life after high school.

"Youth Groups"

Especially in adolescence and emerging adulthood the involvement in church that both the children and the parents most frequently referred to was the "religious youth group" (Smith and Lundquist 2005, 50). These groups in both secondary and college will be referred to as "youth groups."

Reporting Conventions

When referring to a response shared by several participants, the number of participants will be listed in parentheses. For instance, in the sentence, "most children (14/20) attended church," the fraction in parentheses indicates that fourteen out of the twenty children interviewed attended church.

Challenges

Introduction

The introduction of this article argued that parental actions to influence the faith of their children were similar to the actions that missionaries took when they communicate the Gospel to other cultures. One of the reasons that these actions can be considered missionary has to do with the challenges that parents face as their children move into adolescence. In this section we will examine some of those challenges.

The Faith Influence of Parents Declined in Adolescence

A surprising finding was the decline of parental influence on the faith of their adolescent children. This finding showed up in comments, by both the children and the parents, and was confirmed by direct questions about the children's significant faith influences during different periods of their life (in the "Influence Table" - Table 1), as well as a content analysis of references to important faith factors in the interviews, and by an analysis of the context of important "commitment events" (Tighe 2015).

Comments From the Interviews

Almost half of the children (8/20) mentioned their awareness that by high school the influence of their parents on their faith was decreasing. Aaron said, "My parents kinda took a back seat in high school. And, of course, high school is the age where you want to push your boundaries and learn things for yourself, and we, or I, didn't care as much about what they thought."

Tara agreed: "Yes, in junior high people were still clinging to [their parents ideas] …

kids were still trying to find their identity. It was the breaking point of whether to

follow what their parents had told them to do or go behind their backs."

Parents (7/16) also recognized that their influence was waning. Ford reported that,

"kids in those [teenage] years were hard to bring together. They're not actively

rebellious, just like, 'Oh, can't we do something else?' I honestly can't say that the

spiritual leadership, praying, sometimes family prayer, various things like that in the

home [were very influential]. Other activities kept them closer to God."

The Influence Table

Each of the twenty children was asked to list and then rank the most important

influences on their faith in five periods of their lives: childhood, middle school, high

school, post-high school and overall. Those results have been summarized in Table 1

below. The first column shows how many children listed their parents as the most

influential factor in their faith during each period. Note that some factors are left out

of the table and there is overlap between categories, so the rows will not add up to

20.

Table 1. Influence Table.

The number of children who ranked each factor first in their list of faith influences.			
	Parents first	Peers first	Mentors first	Youth Group first
Childhood	20/20	0/20	0/20	0/20
Middle School	11/20	4/20	3/20	4/20
High School	1/20	9/20	3/20	11/20
Emerging adulthood	2/19	8/19	6/19	3/19
Overall	9/18	1/18	1/18	4/18

As the children age, more report that their peers and mentors were the most influential factor in their faith. In childhood, all of the participants (20/20) listed their parents as their most important faith influence. By their high school years, only one (1/20) of the participants still listed their parents as their most important influence. Of particular interest was the number of participants that listed a church youth group or group event as the strongest influence. When asked about the most important influence overall, over their entire lives, 9/18 listed their parents (two children didn't answer).

As a check on these results, the entire body of the children's interview material was divided according to which period of life was being discussed: childhood, adolescence or emerging adulthood. Then each mention of various factors (parents, siblings, peers, mentors, family, church and God) was counted by hand, including pronouns, and normalized to references per 10,000 recorded words[1]. This simple content analysis (Patton 2002, 453) confirmed the author's observation that "parents" were discussed less often as the children aged. A count of references to parents in childhood (230 references in 10,000 recorded words), compared to references in adolescence (144) and in emerging adulthood (62) showed a steady

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[1] Synonyms and sub-categories are counted also. So "Parents" includes "family," "mom," and "dad." "Peers" includes "friends," "boyfriend", "girlfriend," "siblings" or youth group with peers listed first. "Mentors" includes "youth leaders," or youth group with mentors listed first. "Church" includes youth group events, such as a retreat, camp, mission trip or conference. Note that when participants listed peers or mentors, no attempt was made to determine whether these mentors and peers were also part of the youth group. From comments in the interviews it appears that often the children's Christian mentors and peers were part of the child's youth group, meaning that the youth group and the relationships that children found there are perhaps more important that the table indicates.

decline. At the same time the frequency of references to peers increased, from childhood (27) to adolescence (172) to emerging adulthood (239).

Commitment Events

The children reported a total of thirty-seven commitment events, only three of which took place in childhood. The great majority of those events (27/37 events) took place in the context of a church youth group event: a retreat, conference or mission trip. More than half of the children (12/20) reported multiple commitment events. Only three events involved parents as "advocates" (Rambo 1993), and two of those took place in adolescence. No child reported a commitment event taking place in a Christian school, or Sunday school.

The Influence of Parents in Adolescence is Replaced by the Influence of Peers, Mentors and Spiritual Experiences

Peers

All of the children (20/20) and most of the parents (14/16) talked about the strong faith influence of peers, or same age friends, both positive and negative. In general, (with two exceptions) Christian peers, whether from public school or church strengthened the children's faith, however, non-Christian peers were one of the strongest reported negative influences on the children's (8/20) faith, Jonathan said, "In a negative connotation at the highest. I mean it was all about peers at that point in my life."

Boyfriends and girlfriends were reported as having a powerful influence on the children's faith (14/20), both positive and negative. This influence increased with age.

Mentors

Mentors were identified as important faith influences by most of the children (19/20) and parents (13/16). Mac said, "In college I found two guys that … were a little bit older than me. I needed someone to just give me a little bit of guidance." For the purposes of this research, a mentor was defined as someone who was older, not one of the child's parents, and had influence in the child's life either formally or informally. Mentors included teachers, pastors, coaches, and even older siblings. By far the most frequently mentioned mentors were youth group leaders (17/20). Several children (7/20) mentioned that they preferred mentors who were only a few years older.

Supernatural Encounters with God

Most of the children (15/20) spoke of a spiritual experience: a message from God (3/20), an awareness of God's presence (10/20), or a miraculous event (9/20) that strongly affected their faith. There were more than 40 individual stories of these experiences. For many of the children a supernatural connection was one of the hallmarks of their commitment events (28/37 commitment events). Zed reported, "I remember I just felt the Holy Spirit come down on me and I was crying in the middle of an amusement park at a grunge band concert." They talked about a "personal experience" of God, and view this as the start of their personal relationship with God.

A small group (4/20) reported an experience of spiritual evil that caused them to seek God more urgently. Finally, most thought they had received clear answers to prayers.

Parents Were Unaware of Important Events and Decisions in Their Children's Lives

Especially in the later part of their adolescence, the children (14/20) reported that their parents did not know what was going on in their lives. For instance, Baley, who was homeschooled, had a boyfriend that she never told her parents about. Ben was partying and drinking regularly, yet his parents still believed that "Ben had enough understanding of what we expected from him that he didn't veer off into sinful behavior." Most of the children had a secret life that they were not sharing with their parents. This finding is similar to what Chap Clark (2011, 44) called "the world beneath" in his study of adolescents, but it was surprising to find these highly religious teenagers were keeping secrets from their parents. Often the secrets that the children were keeping had to do with their faith (See Thompson, Acock and Clark 1985). Lana had given up her faith at 12, and her parents were unaware. Brothers Mac and Isaac reported similar experiences.

Parents and Children Misunderstand Each Other's Faith

On the other side, some children weren't able to accurately judge the faith of their parents. Children (2/20) reported surprise at discovering that their parents had a personal relationship with Christ after the children found their own personal relationship outside the home. Baley talks about seeing her parents reading the Bible as a teenager, "I guess I was more surprised. I don't know. I guess it just

showed me that it's just not an act that they really do love God." Elaine said

something similar as she reflected on why she hadn't understood her parents

personal relationship with God: "I saw mom and dad praying all the time. But I

wasn't the one who was praying for long periods of time at that point. I didn't really

understand how to have a connection [with God] until [that retreat]." Deborah

reports a similar experience, "Only recently, after reading letters that [my dad]

wrote to my mom while he was in the army, I realized he probably had more faith

earlier than I realized and more what you would call evangelical faith."

Children's "Personal Relationship with God" Came through the Church, Not the Home.

A finding, possibly related to this inability to understand each other's faith, is that

overwhelmingly, commitment events took place in the context of the church rather

than the family. Only three (3/37) of the commitment events that the children

reported involved parents in any capacity. Even though all of the parents reported

having a personal relationship with God (16/16) and half of the parents (4/8 sets of

parents) reportedly discussed religion and the personal relationship with their

children, the great majority of children discovered the personal relationship on a

youth group event (27/37 commitment events), rather than with or from their

parents. About a third (7/20) of the children specifically commented that even

though their parents had talked to them about having a "personal relationship with

Jesus" they did not understand what that meant until they attended some church

event in their adolescence. Tracy was one of these. She said, "My parents were very

intentional when we were young about introducing us to the Bible. They'd always

taught me that I could have a personal relationship with Christ, but it wasn't 'til I

actually went on [that mission trip] that I realized I could make that relationship my own."

Parents' Missionary Actions

Having explored the findings that challenged parent's influence in their children faith lives in the preceding section, this section examines the findings related to parental actions reported as being influential to their adolescent children's faith.

Parents Insisted on Their Children's Involvement in Church

Every family (8/8) required church attendance for their children during their adolescence. Ron said, "As we got into teenage years. We got them connected with … anything the church offered for their age group." The children (14/20) talked about their parents requiring church, even in adolescence when they didn't like it (4/20). Requiring children's involvement in church was the only action that took place with the same frequency in adolescence as it did in childhood. Another piece of these parent's insistent on the children's involvement in church was reported by the three families (3/8) in the study that moved during their children's adolescence. They reported selecting churches in new locations based on how attractive those churches were to their children.

Parents worked to connect child's interest to the corresponding ministry of the church.

Two families, (2/8) followed a deliberate strategy of engaging their children in church activities that fit their particular interests. Deborah C said, "Kevin [CP] is interested in international things and ministry things and I went out of my way to

set him up with stuff. Like the year he went to Kenya, I like sold mission crafts at craft fairs to raise money."

Parents Encouraged (Or Required) Involvement In Youth Programs

While every family (8/8) encouraged participation in church youth programs only two families required it. (These two were also the only families whose parents were volunteers in their church youth groups.) Some parents (4/16) talked about their encouragement of youth group mission trips and the important effect that had on their children's faith. Fifteen (15/20) of the children reported that their parents encouraged or required them to go to youth group, and all but one of these reports occurred in adolescence. The encouragement included verbal urging, as well as funding for events and driving the children to events.

Parents Worked to Influence their Children's Peers

Most parents (11/16) reported trying to influence who their children spent time with (see also Barna 2007, 69). They did this by discouraging or encouraging certain friendships (11/16); and promoting involvement in activities, like high school band, that would bring children into contact with others who shared their values (3/16). Parents also tried to influence what adolescent children did with their friends by: getting involved in children's activities (11/16), inviting children's friends to their houses (2/16), warning against bad behavior when children went out, and making sure adults were present where they were going. Parental efforts to influence their children's peer group extended into late high school, and in one case into college.

The children (13/20) were aware of their parents efforts to influence their peers, chiefly in their adolescence (11/15 reports). Children from two families reported that their parents taught them, "you will become who you are around." Most of the female (6/8) children reported efforts to influence their choices of boyfriends. No boy reported a parent's attempt to influence his choice of girlfriends.

Parents Promoted Faith in their Homes

There were other actions that parents took to directly influence their children's faith, these included about a third of the children (7/20) reporting that their parents had talked to them about religion in their adolescence. Most of the children (13/20) mentioned their parents prayers.

When asked about parental actions that affected their faith, a number of activities were reported that were not actions deliberately taken to affect faith, actions that could be described as "normal parenting." For instance, children reported that their feelings of being part of a "close" family influenced their faith in a positive way (3/20 children). Likewise some (7/20 children) reported that their parents efforts to discipline them fairly when they were in trouble influenced their faith. Finally, a third (7/20) talked about how important the trust and support of their parents had been to the development of their faith. A smaller number (4/20) said that their parent's mistrust was a challenge to their faith. Lana said, "They were real controlling with boys. I was like, what the heck? When have I ever done something to not have your trust? I'm like the best kid ever. I've never done drugs. I've never slept around. I don't even get drunk. … I was angry, even into college." The

implication was that because the children believed that their parents loved them and worked to be fair, the parents' religion was more attractive to the children.

Discussion

The design of the research assumed that parents were the main agent of religious socialization for their children in adolescence. There were good reasons for this assumption. First, these parents were determined to raise their children to have strong faith. Second, all of the children in these families grew up to be evangelical Christians, just like their parents. Third, much of the current literature on faith formation points to parents (Smith and Denton 2005). For these reasons, the documented decline in parental faith influence was a surprise and highlights the observations that the activities that the children claimed were most important for the development of their faith did not directly involve their parents. And that makes the achievement of these parents more surprising and more intriguing and leads to another question: How were the missionary intentions of the parents mediated in the faith building ecosystem in which they raised their children?

In this section, I want to discuss the findings related to the challenges the parents faced and then look at the way that these parents overcame these challenges in their missionary efforts to build their children's faith.

A discussion of the challenges

Parental Influence Declines

The finding of the serious decline in parental faith influence illustrate the first and most important of the parental challenges that had to be overcome in promoting the faith of their adolescent children. For the most part both children and the parents recognized this fact.

Parents Had to Learn to Use Indirect Influence in the Faith Lives of their Children.

The documented decline in parental influence doesn't mean that the parents were without influence in their children's lives. They still had influence, but this influence changed from direct influence to indirect influence. Indirect influence consisted of efforts to affect with whom the children spent time, either to limit exposure to relationships that the parent deemed unhealthy for their child, or to expose them to peers, mentors or activities that the parents believed would benefit the child. Discussing this indirect influence Cornwall et. al wrote, "One way that parents socialize children in faith is to direct them to other socializing agents who reinforce their faith. As children become adolescents, the parents influence children's faith development more through directing them to other socializing agents and programs that help children's growth, than from their direct interaction with children" (Cornwall et al. 1986).

Parents Miss Faith Milestones Happening Outside the Home

The finding that only a very few of the important commitment events took place in the context of the family is surprising -- especially considering that all the parents

had a personal relationship with God, that they discussed with their children. This was true even among the children who had Bible lessons every day in home school, as well as the children in Christian schools who took Bible classes and went to regular chapel services. The result is that the parents were not as aware of the faith development of their children in adolescence as they were in childhood when they were the most influential agent on their children's faith.

Parents and Children Do Not Understand Each Others' Faith

To further complicate the faith building work of the parents, their children developed a secret life in adolescence. This is not an unexpected development in "ordinary" teenagers, however it was a surprise that even among these very religious children, several involved in homeschool and Christian schools, children started to hide important things from their parents. It seemed that one of the things that several of the children hid from their parents was questions that they had about their faith, making it that much harder for parents to figure out what was going on and to respond in appropriate ways. Another factor complicated the faith building efforts of the parents, that was that a number of children reported that they never really understood what the parents meant by "personal relationship" until they experienced it for themselves outside of the home. The parents talked about it, and the children assented, but never actually understood what they were assenting to.

Conclusion

These factors, the increased difficulty of reading what was going on in the faith lives of their children, combined with the decline of the parents' influence on their

children's faith meant that in adolescence, parents' efforts to shape the faith of their children were much more difficult than they had been in childhood. At the same time, in spite of the parental challenges described, all the children in these families grew up to be active Christians. How did the parents overcome these challenges?

How parents influenced their children's faith

As we consider the work of the parents its helpful to look at the things that the parents had in common. While each set of parents was committed to the spiritual health of their children, in the home each family pursued this goal in a different way. On one end were families that did regular times of family worship and prayed together as their teenagers made difficult daily decisions. On the other end were families that only together during meals, and rarely, if ever, talked about their faith. The things they did in the home were not things they had in common.

The things that they did have in common were these:

1) The parents were very committed to their children's participation in church and especially youth group activities.

2) The parents tailored the faith approach to the gifts and interest of each child. And offered help based on the needs of the child.

3) When children got off track (not all the children were actively following their faith for the whole of their adolescence) the parents used their influence, now more indirect that in childhood to gently nudge the child back to the church at a critical time.

We'll discuss each of these three points.

Parents Involved Their Children in Church Programs, Especially Youth Programs.

The findings show that as the parents direct influence on the faith lives of their children declined, it was replaced or overtaken by the influence of their mentors, usually found among their youth leaders, their peers, both Christian and non-Christian, and reported spiritual experiences. For the most part, these three factors are found in the Church and church activities. And this was one of the most striking things that the families did have in common: a strong commitment to their children's involvement in church and youth programs.

I originally started working with these eight families because all of their children were committed evangelical Christians. I hoped that somewhere I would find a "magic pill" -- something that these families knew and practiced that the rest of us had missed that led to the faith of their children. It seems that their serious commitment to their children's attendance and involvement in church was the only thing that was common to all the families, and identified as important by both parents and children. If there is a magic pill for influencing the faith of adolescents, involvement in the church and church programs was it. If involvement in church was the magic pill, then we need to look at the way the parents used their declining influence to move their children towards church involvement.

Parents Used the Unique Interests of their Children to Promote Church Involvement.

Parents used their knowledge of their children's interests and gifts to connect their children to the corresponding ministry of the church. For one parent, that meant taking advantage of the child's interest in music to involve her in the music ministry

at church. For another it meant understanding her son's fascination with foreign cultures to promote his participation in church mission trips, and then to help him raise the money to go.

The Parental "Nudge" - The Role of Directing Children Back Towards Church

Another key strategy by parents to involve their children in church was used in the lives of children who for one reason or another turned away from their faith in their adolescence. For most of them, the crucial connection that led to a return to faith was a parental nudge back to the church at those rare times when the children were open to their parents influence. For instance, Ben played football in high school, and as a young "star" quickly gave in to sneaking out and serious partying. Practice meant that he stopped coming to youth group. When his plans to attend a football camp the summer before his senior year fell through, he was devastated. His mother gently suggested that he might like a Christian camp that she had heard about. At that camp, a powerful spiritual experience brought him back solidly to his faith. Marc was in college and fell into a serious drug addiction. When his life crashed, there was an opening for his parents to find a Christian rehabilitation center to send him to. Marc's profound encounter with God in rehab moved him back firmly to his faith. After Elizabeth's second DUI, it was a conversation initiated by her father that prompted her to find a church. By Kelly's junior year in college he had lost his faith. His father continued to invite (and pay for) him to attend a men's retreat every year, even after college. Kelly reported two commitment events at those retreats, that brought him back to the church, and back to a growing faith.

The influence of parental nudges operated over the whole of adolescence and emerging adulthood in the lives of these children. The parents serve as a permanently connected relationship always acting to encourage a child's participation in church activities if they become disconnected. While people often outgrow friendships, or mentoring relationships, the parents remain permanently connected to the child, especially in close families. Smith and Denton (2005, 162) also reported on the power of parents' ability to make important faith connections for their children.

Musings

Musing About Children Finding Faith In The Church Rather Than The Home

In this group of adolescent children, by far the majority of important faith changing encounters happened among their peers and mentors, rather than in the context of the home. The author considered several possible reasons for this finding. First, there is the possibility that, as one mother hypothesized in the findings, there is something important about the "away from home" nature of the retreats and mission trips where the commitment events occurred. Kenda Dean (Root and Dean, 2011; 169) suggests that it is not simply the fact that these events occur away from home, but that the defined end of away-from-home events somehow catalyzes these experiences.

A second possibility that the author considered was that it was a developmental issue. Most of the parents' reported discussions about faith took place in the children's childhood. It could be that when the parents discussed their faith with

their children, the children were cognitively incapable of grasping the nature of a personal relationship with a being that they could not see.

The third possibility has to do with the observation that a "personal relationship with Jesus" has an element of friendship in it that makes Jesus a peer. It may be that a peer of the children's parents will always be the parents' friend, and therefore never the child's peer. On the other hand, when a person is introduced to a personal relationship with Jesus in the context of their peers, Jesus can more easily be understood as their friend.

Musings about Group Socialization Theory

Judith Rich Harris' Group Socialization Theory suggests that a child will reflect more strongly the beliefs and actions of the groups in which they are involved than the beliefs and actions of their parents. This theory seems to predict the findings of this research: adolescent's faith is most strongly influenced by the church than by parents. She also argues that this influence is stronger in childhood, but the findings of this study did not find that to be true.

Recommendations

The findings of this research suggest several recommendations for parents and church leaders. Four recommendations are made below.

Understand that The Roles of Parents and the Church Change as a Child Matures

One important observation about this change in influence on faith deserves to be stated clearly. In childhood the parents were by far the strongest influence on their

children's faith. After puberty, that changed. The church and not the parents became the strongest influence on their children's faith. So, while one of the critical jobs of the Church is to equip parents to raise their children, the nature of that equipping changes as children pass into adolescence and emerging adulthood. In adolescence the job of the parents is to support the church in its crucial faith building efforts. In childhood the church supports the parents, in adolescence the parents support the church.

Nudge!

Parents continuing involvement in their children's lives, throughout the whole of their lives provides access to occasional moments of openness to connect your children back to the church, and it will be their church that supports their faith as they mature. Note also that this research found that emerging adulthood children begin to feel closer to parents than they did in high school. The findings included the value of faith conversations with parents, and these were reported as being important more frequently in adolescence and emerging adulthood than in childhood. The final important finding is that children seem particularly open to parental nudges when they are in transition, such as the movement from high school to college, when they change towns or they are in trouble, such as Marc's drug addiction.

Work to Involve your Child as Much in Church as Possible

The strategy that seemed to yield the most helpful results in this set of participants was the one quoted by a father: "plug them in to whatever the church has going on."

Two corollaries have come up in the findings: first, it is worthwhile to tune the effort to involve a child in church based on that child's interests. A second corollary comes from observations about the parents that were the most involved in church: it is easier to get your children involved if you are heavily involved in church. Mentors will be especially important. In adolescence your children will probably start to build a secret life, one that you are not a part of. Their mentors will often be the ones they turn to when they have problems in that secret life. You want to try to connect them to mentors that you trust to talk to them. Finally, do not wait until puberty to involve your children in church programs, use your extraordinary direct influence in childhood to connect your children to church peers and mentors so that these relationships are in place as children enter adolescence.

Church Leaders should schedule Special Events Where "God Shows Up"

The big events, like retreats, mission trips and conferences are very important to your teenagers' spiritual health, and it is at these events that many spiritual breakthroughs happen. That does not mean that occasional big events are a substitute for ongoing support from Christian peers and mentors, but the two work together. Each has a crucial place in the developing faith of an adolescent.

Conclusion

This article summarized the findings of a study of evangelical Anglican families all of whose children are committed to their evangelical faith in their 20's. The study highlighted the way that the parent's influence on the faith of their children declined in adolescence, and was replaced by the influence of the children's mentors, peers,

and direct experiences with God that often took place on youth group events. This decline in influence meant that parents were unable to directly influence the faith of their children and had to rely on some of the same missionary activities that people in cross-cultural ministry practice in their evangelization of other cultures: The parents carefully understood the unique strengths and interests of each child and worked to connect those interests to the ministry of the church. They worked hard to involve their children in all the activities of the faith community, but in particular the activities of the youth group, and finally, when children got off track, the parents used their indirect influence to nudge the children back into participation in the church.

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