

My nephew turned one this past year. Despite the pandemic, my brother and sister-in-law found ways to mark the moment and celebrate Liam's first year of life—and their first year of parenthood. Family members mailed them cards. My mom made a caterpillar-shaped cake comprised of individual green cupcakes for a small group to enjoy. My husband and I jumped on the Zoom call to see Liam playing with our gift. After singing a song of God's blessings over Liam (to the tune of "Happy Birthday"), we anticipated the highlight of the party: watching him eat his cake, however he chose to feed himself.

As silly as it might sound, this cake-eating ritual is an example of a life milestone, a moment set apart to celebrate a gift given by God. In this case, that gift is life itself. Intentionally connecting life moments to prayer, God's Word, community, and the larger story of God's work in the world allows us opportunities to see life with eyes of faith. Throughout this issue of *Lutheran Life*, we'll consider various life milestones and how to intentionally connect them to our walk with Jesus,

celebrating how God is at work during significant—and seemingly insignificant—moments in life.

Celebrating milestones in the life of faith isn't a new idea. After His people crossed the Jordan River, God told them to set up stones so they would remember what He had done for them and as a way to teach their children about His love and faithfulness:

And He said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever." (Joshua 4:21–24)

We, too, can use physical reminders, whether stacked stones or birthday cake, to remind us of God's faithfulness in the past, His provision for the future, and His presence with us today. These markers line life's journey with the truths of God's Word and the realities of living life as His dear children. With each milestone, we celebrate a special blessing in our faith walk.

As you celebrate a faith milestone, look to incorporate these five Rs:

recognize

Recognize God's work in your life.

And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

- Identify the moments that mark your journey with God.
- Intentionally take time to recognize how God is leading, guiding, and working in you or your family.

rejoice

Rejoice that you are His, and rejoice in His blessings to you.

Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart! (Psalm 32:11)

- A public prayer of thanks and a blessing can be given.
- The surrounding community family, friends, or local congregation—rejoices together, celebrating the faith life event.

remember

Remember what God has done for you.

I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember Your wonders of old. (Psalm 77:11)

- Read from God's Word, reflecting on His promises.
- Remember who you are in Christ—a redeemed child, created for a relationship with Him and others.
- Retell the story of your faith milestone to others.

receive

Receive God's gifts for you.

Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)

- You receive God's gifts of love and grace through these faithlife moments.
- A physical gift can be given as a visual reminder of God's work during this time.

renew

Renewed in your faith, you're encouraged to commit to a renewed life of faith.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12:2)

 Encouragement and resources can be given; discussion starters and activities for the home and the church help strengthen God's people in their faith lives.

Somehow, an infant grabbing fistfuls of cake while adults cheer for his icing-stained fingers to find his mouth has, in the US, become something of a milestone to mark a little one's first birthday. With a tasty treat in front of the child, loved ones gather to celebrate the baby's growth and to encourage the child that more sweetness in life lies ahead—just dig in!

As a family of believers, we, too, have opportunities to gather with one another, recognize key moments in life, and point to God's goodness and grace. The life of a Christian is marked with thankfulness and joy. So open your hands, and dive in—there's so much richness from God to enjoy. ‡

About This Issue's Authors



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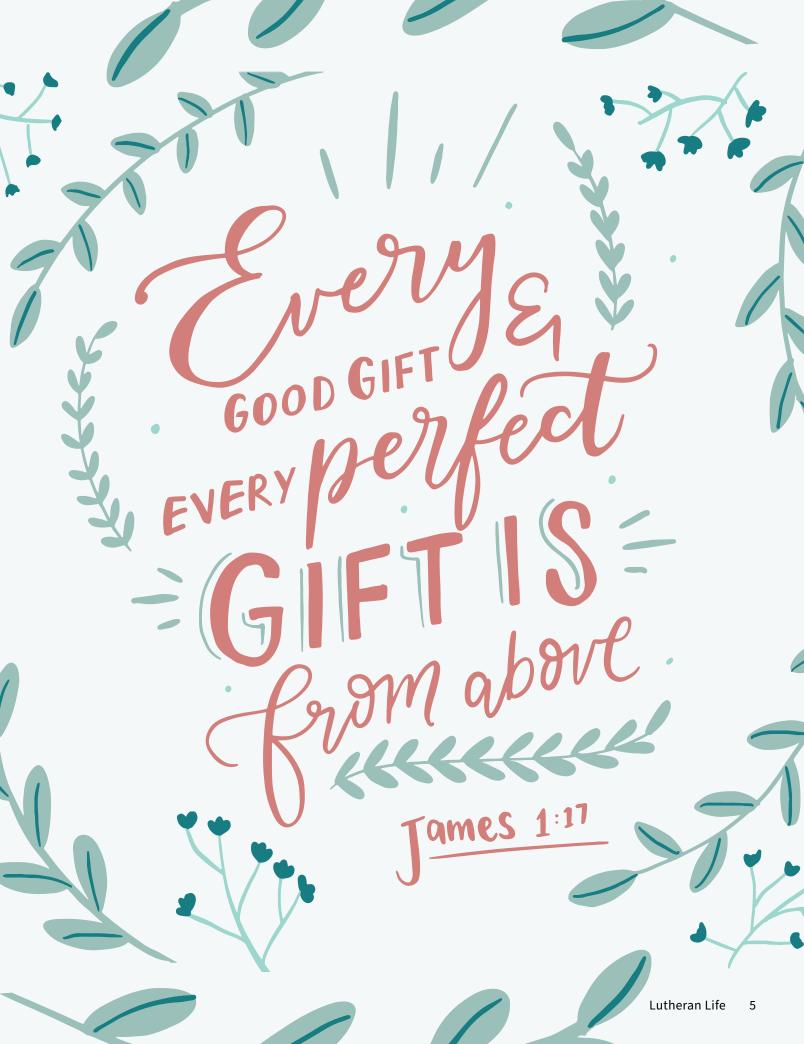
Michael Newman has served in ministry since 1987. After more than twenty years in local church outreach, he began helping to catalyze a Gospel movement in Texas. He now serves as president of the Texas District LCMS. Michael loves writing, running the Texas roads, and spending time with his family. He is grateful that Jesus came to give the gift of life (John 10:10).



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REMEMBERING YOUR BIRTHDAY

BY REV. DR. RICHARD DAVENPORT

It's that day again. It's the day that marks another year of your life. That's cause for celebration. Maybe you're looking forward to being a year older, maybe not. Either way, it's your day, and that means it's special.

You certainly aren't going to forget your own birthday. But your birthday isn't much fun if you have to celebrate it all by yourself. The real question is whether anyone else remembers. It doesn't always have to be presents and parties. A simple "Happy birthday!" at least lets you know other people are glad you're still here. Of course, friends and family will usually go out of their way to do something to let you know you're special to them, and it's those signs of love that really make the day something to look forward to.

You can probably think of other big events that you and your family celebrate. My wife and I just bought a house, and I can tell you we'll be celebrating when we finally get moved in and settled. But, of all the people that might find a reason to celebrate a big event, Noah is probably near the top of the list. You might think Noah would mark his calendar to commemorate the day he came out of the ark. The entire rest of the world died—except for him. If that isn't a reason to celebrate, then I'm not sure what is. Noah's adventure had started quite a long time before this, back when God told him He was going to wipe out all life in the world. Everyone had become violent and selfish. No one respected God or listened to Him, no one except Noah.

God was going to wipe out everything in the world except the eight people in Noah's family and a few of the animals. Thankfully, Noah trusted God and followed His instructions for building the ark and gathering the needed supplies. It is because Noah listened that the water, which meant death for everyone else, meant salvation for him. He trusted God

and was not disappointed. Noah should have died with everyone else but was saved because, when God spoke, Noah listened and believed.

So the great day came when the waters finally receded and the ark came to rest on the top of Mount Ararat. Noah opened the door and stepped out. He made a sacrifice to God in thanks for saving him as He had promised. God had already done plenty for Noah, but He had more in store.

God then declared He would never again send a flood to wipe out all life. He made a covenant promise to Noah and to all creation that would stand forever. God simply said this time of judgment against sin is done. Neither Noah nor anyone else need offer anything to make it happen. God makes a promise, and all there is for us to do is trust Him.

However, God wasn't quite done. As a way of signing His name to this covenant, God set a rainbow in the clouds. Now whenever the storms have passed, the rainbow comes out as a sign of God's promise.

You might think it was pretty comforting for Noah to look up at the rainbow and remember that no more worldwide floods would be coming—and I'm sure it was. But the rainbow wasn't primarily for Noah. It was for God. God told Noah He put the rainbow there so He would see it and remember His promise to the world.

As big an event as the flood was, God made it to be a prelude to an even bigger event: Baptism. In the account of the flood that we have here, there's a lot that tells us about Baptism. We are given God's promise of salvation as He saves us through the water that judges sin. Now when He looks at us, we are already judged and found innocent. There is nothing left in us to judge. We trust God to save, and He does as He

promised. In John 3, Jesus calls Baptism being "born again" (v. 3)—in part because what means death for everyone else ends up meaning life and salvation for us. We should die, but by God's grace, we are saved instead.

Many churches celebrate Baptism birthdays. Jesus tells us that we are "born again" in Baptism. We are made new through the water and the Spirit. It is truly a time to celebrate. Baptism birthdays are a lot like your regular birthdays. It's great that you remember them, but it's more important that other people remember them. It is because of your Baptism that God's promise

holds true for you as well. You should be dead, too, but when God spoke His promise that He died in your place, you listened and believed. Whenever God is thinking about judging the world's sins, He looks down at you and sees the sign of the promise He made with you: your Baptism. He sees your Baptism and remembers that you have already been judged and found innocent for Jesus' sake. There is nothing left in you to judge.

So mark your Baptism birthday on your calendars and celebrate! Celebrate God's promise, but, even more, celebrate because He remembers it too! ‡









children.



When a child is young, teachers say that "more is caught that

taught." While deciphering the sounds of language, children are already learning about life through what they experience and observe. It's why my young nephew says, "Uh-oh," when he drops his toy. And why my goddaughter boldly recites the Lord's Prayer, even though she doesn't know what the word hallowed means. Young children mimic facial expressions and match sounds, mirroring our goofy grins and loudly repeating the same words spoken at the dinner table. As they're learning to sing their ABCs, it's a critical time to also teach them to sing songs of praise. As they learn to say "grandma" and "grandpa," they can also learn to say "Jesus loves me."

Here are three milestones that can intentionally connect young children to their life in Jesus and the family of God:

and Words of Praise

BY AMY BIRD

Worship: Young children are learning family rhythms and routines. We brush our teeth before dad puts us to bed; we buckle our seatbelts before mom starts driving.

These routines help form a child until they become second nature. Going to worship on Sunday mornings is one such routine. It may take time to get the hang of it, just like figuring out how to buckle the seatbelt securely. It might come with some challenges, like wanting to read one more story before bed. But ultimately, establishing a family routine of regular time in worship sets children up for a life of faith with the family of God. It also models that faith is important to

mom and dad; therefore, it should also be important to

Here's a physical reminder you can use to make worship a weekly milestone:

Make the sign of the cross with your hand, starting at your forehead down to your heart and then across your chest. You can do this before you get out of the car to prepare yourself for the service. Or you can listen closely to the service and make the sign of the cross when you say or hear "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." As you do, you recognize God's work in your life by remembering your Baptism, receiving anew God's love and mercy, rejoicing in the gift of eternal life, and renewing your faith.

You can do this when your pastor starts the service with the Invocation, proclaims the Words of Absolution, or ends the service with the Benediction. Depending on your church's setup, you might even dip your fingers in the baptismal font before or after the service as a further physical connection to your baptismal identity in the water and the Word, claimed as one redeemed by Christ's blood.

Sunday School: The human brain is most flexible during the first five years of life. It's a key time when neuropathways form and cognitive, emotional, and social capacities develop. and "grandpa," they One way parents and caregivers can help with this develcan also learn to say opment is through music.

Singing songs helps children develop important motor skills. And when this is done at Sunday School, children also learn about Jesus' love for them and for the other children in their class in developmentally appropriate ways.

Sunday School also provides children a weekly time to hear Bible stories, interact with their peers, and participate in hands-on activities that teach the faith. As your family develops a weekly routine of participating in worship, include time for Sunday School as well. Considering the eternal significance faith holds, it's well worth the investment during these early years of growth.

Here's a physical reminder you can use to make Sunday School a weekly milestone: stickers! Give your children

stickers or other small tokens each week. As your children receive the sticker, encourage them to recognize that they're part of God's family story, remind them of God's love, rejoice together in His plan for your life, and be renewed to go back next week to learn more of the story!

Oh, and don't forget. Show your children how important Sunday School is by going to an adult Bible class at the same time. When you just drop them off and go elsewhere, you undermine the importance of their Sunday School.

Family devotions: Children might see a pastor or Sunday School teacher an hour or so once a week, but they see the people they live with every day! Just as developing a weekly rhythm of worship and age-appropriate

teaching are key milestones in the faith, so is developing a regular time for family devotions. It doesn't need to be long or elaborate. And parents don't need a seminary degree to lead it. The key is to set aside a consistent time to come before the Lord as a

As they learn

"Jesus loves me."

family. Perhaps this happens at the end of dinner or before bedtime. A parent or older sibling could read a devotional thought or passage of Scripture. And together, you can bring to say "grandma"

prayer requests to God.

Here's a physical reminder you can use to make family devotions a regular milestone:

Create a prayer board. Children can color pictures that you pin to the fridge or a separate board. Draw things you're thankful for, list names of people to pray for, and ask for

God's care over your family. As you develop your prayer board, you'll be invited to recognize God working in your life, remember how He's answered previous requests, receive the people and things He brings into your life, rejoice in His faithfulness, and be renewed in your prayer life.

During early childhood, more is taught through experience than words. And a lot is caught! Young minds are soaking up the world around them, setting the foundation for their lives. Christian families have the opportunity to build their children's foundation firmly on Jesus Christ, our chief cornerstone and teacher for life. ‡





On the first day of a new school year, parents snap a photo of their child posing with a backpack and fresh haircut, ready to begin a new grade. It's a milestone marker signifying the next year-long journey in a child's education. As parents receive report cards and attend school programs that show their child's progress throughout the year, they can also engage in opportunities for their child to grow in the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Here are three milestones that can intentionally connect elementary-school-aged children to their life in Jesus and the family of God:

First Bible: A child's list of firsts doesn't end after the first few years of life. Along with documenting a child's first solid food or first step, parents can also document and celebrate their child receiving a first Bible! Some churches and Lutheran schools work this into their curriculum by gifting new readers their very own book at a certain time or service during the year. And these Bibles aren't meant to stay in the pristine condition they come in, with the plastic wrap still intact. Rather, Bibles are meant to be read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested! Parents can encourage their children to open the book and flip through the pages to get oriented, and then maybe even read passages together, using a pencil to mark verses that are special to their child.

Receiving a Bible is the physical reminder that serves as a milestone in the life of faith! Building upon the Bible stories they've heard at church and school, as children read it for themselves, they can recognize they're part of God's story, be reminded of God's faithfulness to His people, rejoice that God's plan includes a purpose for their life, and be renewed as they keep reading more of the story. What a special way to elevate family devotions or a bedtime routine by asking children to read the Bible to their parents!

Ten Commandments: It's amazing what little brains can absorb and retain. They regurgitate the names of every reptile crawling in your region (whether you'd like to hear this information or not!) and spout off the stats of their favorite sports team. Add memorizing the Ten Commandments to their list of fun facts! These commandments tell us how to live life as God the Creator

intended. Not only do they keep us safe, but they are also for our good! And when we recognize how we fail to keep these rules, we can be encouraged to run back to church to make the sign of the cross and hear the words of God's grace and forgiveness again. This knowledge also sets children up well for a meaningful confirmation experience.

If children already know the Ten Commandments, work on another milestone: memorizing Martin Luther's explanations in the Small Catechism!

First Communion: When your child receives Communion for the first time—wow! is it a milestone in the life of faith to celebrate! As children (or adults) *receive*

Christ's body and blood in, with, and under mere bread and wine, they *recognize* they're connected to the body of believers, are *reminded* of the forgiveness of their sins, *rejoice* in the new life that is theirs, and are *renewed* and strengthened in the faith. This is a "first" milestone to celebrate but also an ongoing milestone to keep enjoying every time you take Communion. When you're assured in your faith, Christ's body is for you! When you're doubting your faith, Christ's body is for you! When you've messed up again, Christ's body is for you! So "taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!" (Psalm 34:8).

As children enter their school-aged years, faith milestones can help ensure that they are learning more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. They're also growing in their relationship with Jesus! ‡

HOW CAN I HELP? GOD'S CALLINGS FOR KIDS



Teach elementary-age children that God calls people in lots of ways, each one their own vocation, in this illustrated picture book. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at cph.org/llresources.



CONSTANT IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

Milestones
for Middle and
High School
Students

BY BRANDON METCALF

Two of the milestones in life where the greatest number of young people disconnect from church are after eighth-grade graduation (confirmation for many) and after high school graduation. Each of these graduations, these transitions, results in isolation and separation from church for many. So it's easy for churches to look at graduation with trepidation rather than as an opportunity.

Instead, we need to look at these milestones from the students' perspective and ask, "What do they need in this time of transition?" Moving from middle school to high school or from high school to college is a huge milestone. But these big transitions are also filled with a lot of unknowns. "What if I don't fit in at my new school?" "Will I be good enough to make the team?" "What if I picked the wrong college?" "Will my relationship last long-distance?" The questions, worries, and doubts can go on and on. Graduation is a time of tremendous excitement but also tremendous change. What is it that students need amid so much change? They need something that doesn't change—something that's constant. That's the church's role in these times of transition.

We are to be an anchor amid all the change that's going on. We are to be a constant amid everything else that's changing. We are to tell our young people that while their circumstances are rapidly changing, our God does not change: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

The facts that God's Word doesn't change and that His promises are true have numerous application points, but let's zoom in on one of those: what God says about our identity. This is one of the main ways that we can connect faith with the milestone of graduation. God's Word never changes, His promises are true, and that means that you are who He says you are. That's not going to change whether you struggle in your new school or thrive academically, if you don't make the team or if you're a starting player, if you change your major or you don't, or if your relationship works out or not. No matter what happens, you are who God says you are.

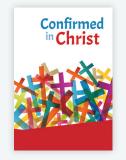
And what does God say about you? You have been created in His image (Genesis 1:27), He sent His Son to die for you and forgive all your sins (Romans 5:8), and He has brought you into His family in Baptism (Titus 3:5–7). You are God's loved, forgiven, valuable child. That's who you are! You are who God says you are.

As you seek to bring this message to your graduates, I'd encourage you to begin by thinking more about the months after graduation than just the graduation party. That doesn't mean that you skip the party. But also think about how you can continue to support your graduates and, as a church, be the constant in their lives in the weeks and months after graduation. Here are two ideas to connect your graduates to the anchor of God's Word in this major life transition:

- If you're going to get your graduates a gift, get them something that will connect them to a community because that's what they need. Words of Strength and Promise, for example, is a book of topical devotions that will apply God's Word to their lives. But give them even more than that—give them a community. Invite graduates to a small group where they can read through one of those devotions each week together and discuss the topic and pray for one another, either in person or through a video call.
- Get some key mentors—adults, parents, and peers—to write letters to members of the graduating class. Have them write about their hopes for the graduates, adding favorite memories and reminders of God's promises that they are who God says they are. Mail your graduates one of these letters each month to highlight their constant connection to the church.

These are two ways among many that you can connect with your middle and high school youth in these important milestones in their lives. Look at graduation as a time not to worry if your youth will come back but as a crucial opportunity to connect them to our constant God, whose promises are true regardless of the changing circumstances in life. ‡

CONFIRMED IN CHRIST



Confirmation is just the first step to living a life following God as an adult. Let confirmation-age teens ponder what living their life in Christ is like while being encouraged and inspired to grow in their faith. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at

 ${\bf cph.org/ll resources}.$

Where Is the "Adultier" Adult?

BY JULIANNA SHULTS



Sometime in my late twenties, faced with yet another big adult decision, I posted a meme on Facebook that said: "That horrifying moment when you're looking for an adult, then realize you're an adult. So you look for an older adult, someone successfully adulting—an adultier adult." I expected my peers to empathize and adults older than me to offer comfort. Surely, all these milestones and transitions become easier over time.

I was shocked when adults at all ages and stages beyond mine responded to my post saying this still happened to them. It was a strange comfort to hear that my responsible, loving, Christian mentors were still looking for that adultier adult. Young adulthood is marked by a variety of new experiences and milestones: first jobs, first apartments or houses, first loves, marriages, and even children. Add on that we are navigating 401ks, insurance plans, taxes, cooking, and more, all at the same time. All these milestones

come with joy and excitement, but they can also leave us overwhelmed and vulnerable to disconnection from faith and the church.

The 2017 "Millennials and the LCMS" research found that 54 percent of those who grew up and remained in the LCMS into young adulthood said their church ministered to them in times of transition. Only 28 percent of those who grew up in the LCMS and left said the same. Young adults are not looking for just adultier adults but also for a community of support and encouragement that will point them to Jesus as they navigate the joys and hardships of adult milestones and transitions.

Ministering to young adults doesn't necessarily look like a program. Instead, there are three things the church can do to support young adults as they approach their many firsts and transitions.



Help them develop adult tools.

While new milestones are constantly in front of us, we can develop tools to help us make wise and faithful decisions. We have God's living and active Word, worship, and prayer. Young adults can also gain practical tools from Christians around them, from professional mentors to people who can help them locate new churches when they move. I once spent two hours in the car on the way to a servant event talking with teens about how taxes and student loans worked. God's good gifts to us and sharing vocational skills will help young adults prioritize faith as they reach new stages.

Model what faithful Christian practice looks like in their next stage.

When we look around for that adultier adult, who will be our example? Young adults benefit from relationships with healthy Christians who model what their next steps may look like. As their romantic relationship gets serious, they need examples of Christian marriages. As they move, they will look for models of how to share Jesus with neighbors. Even in failure, more experienced adults can help show how confession, forgiveness, and the sanctified life can look in the next stage.



Give opportunities for contribution and belonging.

As young adults leave youth ministry, it's important for them to find places where they belong in the life and mission of the church. Congregations can be a refuge of warmth and comfort when everything else is changing. In our Baptism, God has brought us into a family, centered around the Gospel, where God has gifted and arranged each of us as a part of the Body. We all benefit when young adults find places to serve and lead, even if it requires mentoring and flexibility as they grow and change.

I remember that Facebook post on adulting even today. It reminds me that uncertain first times, difficult decisions, and transitions will always come. In these moments, we get to experience joy and excitement as well as fear and doubt. They are places where God can draw us closer or where faith can falter. Perhaps in our search for the adultier adult, we are really looking for our God, who is always faithful to His promises.

God promises that when we pass through waters and fire, He will be with us because we are precious to Him (Isaiah 43:2–4). Our God was willing to send even His own Son that we might be saved from our sin and doubt. Yet God knows that as humans we are prone to uncertainty and panic, especially in our firsts. May young adults (and adultier ones) know our loving God, who forgives and walks with us through all that will come. ‡

MEANT FOR MORE



God is calling you to more in this life. He has given you the equipment to excel. All you need to do is answer His call. Are you ready to see how you're meant for more? Find this title and others listed in this magazine at **cph.org/llresources**.

Following Jesus for Life

Faith Activity Ideas:

Memorize Bible verses.

Learn to pray individually.

Serve with your family in the community.

Sing Christian songs with physical motions.

Read and memorize Bible verses with family.

Celebrating a Milestone

First Bible: Read, mark, and learn stories together as a family in a child's first Bible.

6-10



11-13

Faith Activity Ideas:

Develop a daily devotional routine.

Become a pen pal with someone who is homebound.

Write in a prayer journal—be sure to note answered prayers!

Keep going to church and Sunday school in your weekly routine.

Celebrating a Milestone

Confirmation: Spend time understanding why confirmation is important and how your faith has grown since you were little.



Faith Activity Ideas:

Sing Christian songs.

Listen to Bible stories.

Learn family rhythms, such as mealtime and bedtime.

Celebrating a Milestone

Baptism: Celebrate each family members' baptismal birthday each year with candles and a special meal.



Faith Activity Ideas:

Read and learn the Small Catechism.

Volunteer in the community or at church.

Pray for your friends and about your worries.

Meet with your pastor or youth leader and ask questions.

Celebrating a Milestone Luther's Small Catechism:

Read, mark, and learn about Luther's teachings as a family or with individual learning time.

First Communion: Prepare for First Communion and discuss this blessing from God as a family.

14-18



Understanding a person's developmental life stage can help us know how to best care for and explain matters of faith. Below is an overview of developmental stages alongside some ideas about how to talk about and celebrate faith milestones.

Learn more at discover.cph.org/stages-of-life-development.



Faith Activity Ideas:

Join a Bible study.

Bring meals to the homebound.

Pray with a friend who is hurting.

Serve as a lay leader, Sunday School teacher, usher, or tech team member.



65+

Faith Activity Ideas:

Join a young adult group or book club.

Have a regular meeting time with a faith mentor.

Ignite your passions by serving in the church, being a missionary, or volunteering in your community.

Place Bible verses on sticky notes, mirrors, or phone backgrounds to remind yourself of God's promises.

Celebrating a Milestone 18th and 21st Birthdays:

Celebrate both as markers of adulthood with increased responsibility.

30-64



Faith Activity Ideas:

Call your loved ones just to check in.

Greet the young people at church by name and find one to invest in.

Join the prayer team and serve in church leadership or with a local ministry.

Offer to be a "church grandparent" to a young family, sitting together during worship.



BY LINDSEY HAYES



As Christians, our faith in Jesus, the Savior, shapes the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live. It's the guide by which we learn how to live in relationships of service, love, and forgiveness with those God has brought into our lives. We learn to see God's grace in every aspect of our lives—in the grace we give, and in the grace given to us. Through the giving and receiving of grace in our families, God teaches us how full and

unending His love for us truly is.

As individuals enter into their own marriage relationship, they are going to have their own set of blessings and difficulties to navigate. What makes our faith stand out in comparison to any other faith in the world is that we have

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

(Luke 15:20)

forgiveness. We have forgiveness from God our Father in heaven, and we've been gifted with the ability to forgive our family, friends, and neighbors. Every marriage is going to require individuals to give of themselves in ways they have never experienced before. It's also going to require individuals to forgive in ways they've never experienced before. Marriage can help us grow in our own understanding of God's sacrifice and forgiveness for us, and it can help us grow in our own ability to follow the example of Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit constantly working through us.

I've often thought that if you would like your faults quickly exposed, getting married is a swift way to make that happen. There's nothing quite as revealing, even if only in your own mind, as having someone there to witness pretty much everything about how you live. While each marriage is going to be as unique as the individuals in it, marriage, in general, is designed to point us to the loving union we have with Christ. It's a lifelong lesson in learning to live as an accepted and loved person, even as all your faults are revealed and known.

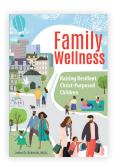
Raising a child may prove to be even more humbling, especially once the child begins to repeat back to you seemingly everything you've ever said. However, each life experience, when navigated by the light of Scripture, helps us both better understand our Father and to live as changed people. Being able to raise a child becomes a particularly spiritual journey as the parallels between parent and child and God and self become

glaringly apparent. As I search for patience amid the whines of childhood, I think how patient my heavenly Father must have to be with me—a grown woman who still whines and complains! As I reflect on the love I have for my own children despite frustrations, I catch a glimpse of God's deep, everlasting love for me.

Living as a spouse and a parent in light of God's forgive-

ness is the only way I can imagine it. Thanks to God, when the tears and frustration come, there is always the promise of healing and being able to start fresh again. May the picture of love that Jesus gives us in the parable of the prodigal son be a daily reminder to both you and me that our heavenly Father is filled with compassion toward us. And may we be filled with the same compassion as we navigate these special family relationships each day. ‡

FAMILY WELLNESS



Learn how to raise a family that's healthy in all aspects of their lives: mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Use five core-value sets and God's Word to create a meaningful guideline for your family to follow. Find this title and others listed in *Lutheran Life* at **cph.org/llresources**.

Becoming a Mom

The day I found out I was pregnant with my first son, so many thoughts ran through my mind. The one that stuck out the most was that God chose me, at that time, to love and care for another human life. God is always near, guiding me on my path in life.

—Stephanie DiDonato, Reliant Church, St. Louis, MO

God's Care for His Servants

Looking back at just over ten years of DCE ministry, I see more and more how God has used me in ways I couldn't even imagine.

Through my aspirations, shortcomings, triumphs, and fears, God's glory shines through it all and I get to be a part of it.

–Jaymes Hayes, DCE, Holy Cross LutheranChurch, Kearney, NE

Celebrating Life's Moments Together

While our lives of faith may have similar milestones—such as being baptized, receiving the Lord's Supper, or starting a job—they're also unique to the story God is writing in each of our lives. So we asked men and women from across the Synod to share a part of their life's story that has been shaped by their faith in Jesus.

Answering Big Prayers

When James was born and we learned he had Down syndrome, many thoughts of "Will he be able to ..." flooded my mind. One was "Will he be able to be confirmed, take Communion, and learn about faith in God?" As so often is the case, James proves those early thoughts wrong. He knows His God and tells people about Him. He has worked hard to learn Scripture verses, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, how to ask for forgiveness, and how to live a life of faith. He was the class's favorite for dancing to praise songs. And on Sunday, May 23, 2021, James joined his class for confirmation, had his first Communion, and read his faith talk. Inclusion at its best. Thank You, Lord, for giving us this example of faith in You! In James's words, "God is my Rock!"

-Linda Lohmeyer, Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Lake Arrowhead, CA

A Friend's Invitation

Transitioning from a middle school where I knew everyone and was plugged into extracurriculars to a high school where I only knew a handful of people was tough for me. But I'm sure glad it happened that way because I met my best friend, Carolyn—someone who just happened to be Lutheran and looking for new friends to invite to her youth group. My friendship with Carolyn started with an invitation to the 2007 LCMS Youth Gathering, which then turned into her family picking me up every Sunday for church, converting from Catholicism to the Lutheran faith as an adult, becoming a volunteer youth leader for our youth group, and then being encouraged on the path to Concordia Irvine to become a DCE! Looking back now, it is so easy to see the many small and large stepping-stones God was creating for my journey and relationship with Him, a thought that definitely gives me reassurance and hope for the future, knowing that He is not done writing my story yet!

-Brenda Segovia, DCE, St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Edmonds, WA

Joys and Worries of a Grandparent

When I became a grandparent, Psalm 139:16 quickly came to mind: "In Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." I was terrified about how my granddaughter's life would unfold—Meryl Rose was born with cystic fibrosis. But then I thought, *Jesus is the author of Meryl's book.* My heart was soon flooded with great peace.

—Rev. Dr. Reed Lessing, Trinity Lone Oak Lutheran Church, Eagan, MN

When Illness Lingers

Life on this side of heaven is wonderful, but it's not perfect! As someone who has lived with chronic illness for many years, I have been taught many things by God. He grieves as I grieve. Because of the faith God blesses me with, I can look ahead to an eternal glory that will be beyond my imagination! I have Good News to share, and I can reach people I might not have been able to without the life experiences God allows for me. God gives me strength for each day and works through me to His glory!

-Tawn Bueltmann, Trinity Lutheran Church, Kalispell, MT

Discerning the Call into Ministry

My inward call into the ministry was when my then future wife, Traci, boldly told me that if I didn't go to seminary, I would not be serving God in the best way I could. I knew she was right. My outward call came in that sacred service on the seminary campus. When I heard my name along with the congregation I would be serving, I knew the Lord was in complete control as I praised His holy name!

-Rev. Dr. Alfonso Espinosa, St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA



The Giving Path

Giving to LCMS congregations isn't one step. It's a path.

For nearly every LCMS member, giving isn't something you start doing the first day you walk through the doors for services. In reality, it's a journey for most members. It might start small, then grows as your participation in congregation activities and your closeness to other members become deeper.

Like a lot of accomplishments in your life, it's one that is marked by a series of milestones. Let's take a walk through the giving milestones that many LCMS church members go through in their faith-and-giving journey.

1. Giving for a Personal Event

Many members first become acquainted with giving to a congregation through a personal event they hold at the church. This can take many forms. Perhaps it's your child's wedding or your own wedding ceremony. It could be a Baptism. Maybe it's for hosting the funeral of a loved one, or for holding an organizational or faithgroup meeting in the facility.

Whatever that initial introduction to giving is, it's always eye-opening. These events show that the congregation is open and accepting of your family events. It also shows why members give. There are staff and volunteers who take time and make a sincere effort to make you feel welcome and comforted during these passages.

With these events, it's easy to see why making a gift to the congregation is a necessary and heartfelt gesture. You directly see the benefit the congregation brings to you and to your community.

This is how many members begin their giving journey. It might sound transactional: you pay a set fee for the church to host your friends and family for a meaningful day. But it's more than that. You're supporting a group of people who are offering meaningful services to a huge group of people.

This is the first step on the giving journey LCMS members take. It's only the first gift, though.



2. Using the Congregation's Most Effective Giving Methods

Many LCMS congregations are shifting away from the time and trouble of cash and check gifts.

By giving electronically—by text, online, bank transfer, and more—members reduce overhead and make finance work much, much easier for staff and volunteers.

That's why we see the second milestone for many members as using the eGiving tools their congregations rely on. These tools ensure that all gifts have the maximum possible impact on the church community. What's more, they make it possible for staff and volunteers to spend less time on accounting and more time making a difference.

When you're ready to make weekly or occasional gifts to your congregation, be sure to inquire about what eGiving methods are available. You might be surprised to learn how much technology your church uses to make giving easy. If you discover your congregation is still reliant on paper giving, suggest that you'd be more likely to give if you could do it electronically. It's likely not to be the first time your leaders hear this, and your request can be a catalyst to reach more members in new ways.

3. Support the Congregation through Purchases and Fundraising Events

This might seem like a small thing. But it's another important milestone for becoming a fully immersed member and supporter of your congregation. Whether you attend a bingo night, fall festival, holiday pageant, or another event, you can show your support by being there and making a purchase, no matter how small.

Congregations hold events like these throughout the year. And if your congregation uses eGiving tools, you can easily make a purchase or contribution without the limitations of cash and checks. Many congregations use card readers like the Vanco Swipe, which plugs into any smartphone and uses a free app to process payments for all kinds of things. It feels as natural as checking out at the grocery store or coffee shop, and it provides for the congregation. The technology is incredibly easy to put into place and learn. On-site transactions are

not the barrier they once were. If you help organize events, suggest using inexpensive and convenient card payments that can also work with your church management software. It's an excellent idea to raise with leaders.

4. Make a Statement through Recurring Giving

As we mentioned earlier, eGiving saves congregations precious time and money by simplifying financing and streamlining giving for members. But the benefit most congregations don't realize until they've adopted eGiving is this: recurring giving.

When congregations use eGiving tools, givers can set their gift to recur as often as you want. If you tithe every week, set it for weekly. Give every month? Schedule it as a monthly transfer. If you make an annual gift for a pledge drive, you can even preset it annually.

With recurring giving, you can set your giving schedule as you need to. And even if you can't attend services because you're on vacation or unable to be there, you will take comfort in knowing that your regular gift will be made. And you don't have to do a thing.

Recurring gifts also benefit the congregation in many ways. They can better forecast giving income to improve planning, and the staff knows that you're committed, even if you couldn't make it to services. You can also support special causes if you aren't in attendance at events.

Every member's giving journey is deeply personal and dependent on personal circumstances. But these milestones are the ones we see most often from members at congregations that use Vanco. Nobody expects a member to start using all giving tools and giving at every opportunity from the first day. We are all cognizant that it's a building process for each of us. Consider this to be a road map, not a mandate. And when you do, you and your congregation will benefit.

To learn even more about how churchgoers are making use of eGiving tools, download our nationwide study on the trends featured in our Virtual Churchgoer Giving Survey here now. Get your free copy at

www.vancopayments.com/virtual_survey.

9-to-5: Serving God at Work

BY AMY BIRD

"I keep asking God to send me. I'll go wherever He wants me to go." Sound familiar? I wonder how many milestones we miss seeing with eyes of faith because we're so focused on a hypothetical world of other ways to serve. While we're busy romanticizing scenarios of what could be, we're neglecting the moments in life that are actually happening here and now. While asking God to send us out to do His work, willingly trusting to go wherever He directs—which is noble and good—let's be careful not to overlook where God has currently sent us: to the place we live now, to the people we know, and the work we currently have in front of us to do.

Service to God can happen anywhere, but it always happens where we actually are. This is what it means to live in our vocations—to recognize the people He's placed around us and the ways we're equipped to love and serve them.

What might be a milestone when it comes to your work? It could mean celebrating years of service or the completion of a major project. Perhaps it's a promotion or, even better, the increased growth of a trusting relationship with a co-worker.

Haven't celebrated a work milestone yet? For better or worse, the majority of our adult life is spent doing some kind of work, whether at an office, at church, or at home. There are plenty of milestones to start recognizing and celebrating that can connect our faith to our work life—and help us deepen our relationship with the One who gives us work to do and calls it good.

While milestones don't have to come with physical signs, sometimes they do.

When Bill retired from his job in public service to the city, he was gifted a commemorative street sign named in his honor: "Bill Gray Way." The sign was most appropriate for a man who spent the majority of his professional career as a public works director overseeing the streets and infrastructure of the community. And while "Gray" and "Way" have a nice ring together, I think there's more behind the street name. "Bill Gray Boulevard," for example, could be as equally pleasing to the ear. But his colleagues chose a more fitting name: "Bill Gray Way."

Throughout his career at the city, Bill was known for doing things a certain way—the right way. Where others might take the broader path or the easier road, Bill was known for handling his work with a high level of integri-

ty and genuine interest to collaborate with others. This street sign is a milestone marker that not only signifies twenty-five years of service but also celebrates the manner in which he carried out his work. And that's a gift that can pave a workplace culture miles down the road.

The street sign now hangs above Bill's workbench, a sacred place he has more time to frequent in retirement. While his colleagues gifted him the sign to celebrate his years of service, through Bill's eyes of faith, the sign better represents the years of God's faithful provision. It reminds him of God's protection and care, of His favor and mercy. When Bill sees the sign, he can give thanks and rejoice for God's work in and through his professional career.

Milestones help orient us in reality, recognizing the work God has given us to do according to His good will in the here and now. You don't have to wait until retirement to recognize milestones in your career. What kind of physical reminder can you add to your workspace to encourage you that you're serving God here? *That* is a service worth celebrating!

A Prayer for Mondays

An @griefsandgraces prayer by Abi Tesfaye

God, it's Monday.

As we dive into the piles of work on our desks, ponder the decisions to be made, and prepare to connect with whomever You bring our way, bless us with energy, tact, and vision.

Whether our office is located on the top floor of a corporate building, at a borrowed table in a hipster coffee shop, or in a messy home graced by sticky hands and little feet, remind us that all work is holy work when we use our gifts for Your glory and the good of others.

Bless the work of our hands this week, Lord.

Give us joyful hearts as we work, knowing that You do extraordinary things through ordinary people and places—even on mundane Mondays. Amen.

In Christ, Death Has Become a Season

BY MICHAEL NEWMAN

All die. That truth hurts.

Just a few weeks ago, my neighbor closed her eyes and breathed her last. Family surrounded her. They invited me in to speak a word. She was our friend. Her sons wept. We prayed. Hearts hurt with the pain of loss that day.

All die, but the loss of life is not what God intended. Death was tragically birthed by humanity's union with a spirit of self-sufficiency. Decay set in when we determined God wasn't enough. A new reality of illness, suffering, struggle, loss, and death took hold in creation when people fell away from God's perfect will and plan. "Death and taxes" became a catchphrase of certainty. Funerals were added to the life-event lineup of births, graduations, and weddings.

All die, sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly. For anyone who forgot, COVID-19 delivered a frightful reminder of the wages of sin.

All die. Distraction and busyness and the pursuit of goals can keep you from the stark reality for only so long. Even the wealthy, powerful, wise King Solomon had to face the fact: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:1–2).

There is no way around it, but there is a way through it.

Embedded in Solomon's words is the radical shift effected by God's gracious intervention after the Garden of Eden calamity. Death would be transformed from an irrevocable state to a temporary season, from a hopeless certainty to a momentary stage.

With self-sacrificial love beyond any love anyone could muster, God sent His Son to carry the weight of broken and sinful humanity. But Jesus didn't stop there. He plunged deeper, into the darkness of death, suffering the suffocating punishment for our rejection of God.

Jesus died. His battered corpse became cold. He was laid breathless in a tomb. But early that Sunday morning, His lifeless body took a deep breath! Air filled His lungs again. His heart began beating. Blood coursed through His once-collapsed arteries. His eyes opened. He was raised to life. Death changed from permanence to a season—just a season.

God's Word declares the good news: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3–4).

The way through death has been revealed: "In Christ shall all be made alive!"

Loved ones who die in faith, your hurting heart, your wounded soul, your struggling spirit—in Christ, there is new and everlasting life! Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, your loss is temporary, your wounds will heal, and your struggles will cease. Death has become a season. It is transitory and fading. It hurts, but even when the din of death overwhelms, the Creator God is revealed to us—He who "will wipe away every tear," who promises that "death shall be no more," who provides the certain hope that mourning, crying, and pain will be no more because He is "making all things new" (Revelation 21:4, 5).

In Jesus, God rendered death a season. It is a season He brings you through by His grace to new and vibrant life that lasts forever.

GETTING THROUGH GRIEF



Grief is a powerful emotion that makes you feel trapped with no way out. Look to the Word of God and His eight gifts to help you combat your grief and find hope again. Find this title and others listed in *Lutheran Life* at **cph.org/llresources**.

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

1 Corinthians 15:21–22



The Hand on the Platform:

the gracious gift of ordinary prayer

BY SHELLY SCHWALM, DCE



The lights of the approaching train grew as we stood on the platform. A small hand reached up and gripped mine. My goddaughter had picked a light-rail ride into downtown to get donuts for our adventure day. In the clutch of her little hand, I felt the tangle of excitement and nerves for a day in a big city.

I can't bear imagining what she would do if she were on this platform alone. The very things that brought excitement would turn terrifying. But with her hand in mine, trains and traffic and strangers seemed manageable, fun, even. Anytime she felt unsure, a grab of my hand told her I was right there with her—knowing the way, making sure she was cared for. It was a delightful day of donuts, rainstorms, stories, and giggles all shared together.

Little ones have taught me much about prayer. Not in exhaustive theological explanation, but with their honesty, they've simply shown me what it looks like:

- Nervous whimpers while reaching for a hand or grabbing onto a pant leg.
- Big cries of pain or disappointment and collapsing into a loving embrace.
- Exclamations of, "Look at that! Did you see it??" with excited taps on the arm.

Prayer looks like these ordinary times when we reach our hands out to God.

The Book of Ephesians says to pray "at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (6:18). The Psalms offer a wide range of interactions with God, poetic or basic, in thanksgiving, sadness, and a whole lot of regular moments too.

We see this come to life in children. I long to pray to our triune God just as a child relentlessly wears out the word *mom*. Happy reasons, sad reasons, for no reason at all, just for that connection. Just to know we're doing this—whatever *this* is—together.

Reciting Celtic Morning Prayer regularly in chapel during college tucked its plain, ancient words into my memory for moment-to-moment fellowship with God, describing Christ as a light and shield within and all around me. Those words became the hand I grab in times of uncertainty or fear—everyday words that help me embrace God's presence and my dependence on Him in all things. Taking a deep breath on a single word, like *grace*, *peace*, *wow*, *thanks*, or *shalom*, or asking, "Holy Spirit, what are You up to here, and how can I

join you?" have become other familiar hands to hold.

Isn't it easy for us to go through life thinking we are alone on the platform? Often oblivious or overconfident, we forget God's caring presence in heights and depths. We miss that Christ's whole reason for coming was because He wants to be with us now and forever.

Prayer is talking to God, who invites us to pray as Jesus taught us. God has promised to hear us, and He does answer our prayers. Even as we seek God's presence and the power of Christ, we can know that He has already provided. We have His Word, the Holy Scriptures. Jesus, the Word made flesh, gathers us around His table and says, "Take, eat. Take, drink. This is My body and blood, given and shed for you." Each day, our Baptism reminds us that God has drowned our old Adam. Baptism is not just plain water but the water with the Word that has Christ's power. His power over sin, death, and the devil—for you. We need these continual gifts of God to keep us mindful of the good news that Christ's presence is not separate from ours, nor our mission separate from His.

This is why my friends Andy and Abi and I started Griefs + Graces (@griefsandgraces). It is a prayer project that is more of the doing than dissecting, voicing more questions than answers. It is engaging in the gracious presence of God in all things—in times of great grief, immense grace, and when they're all tangled up together.

While we don't need someone else's words to pray, sometimes it helps us when our words run out, like Abi's "a prayer for those who've lost something this year." Another person's words may also give us new insight into God's activity or beautifully capture God's character or our own feelings, like Andy's "a prayer for when we don't know what the Lord is doing." Perhaps we're invited to see ordinary things with a sacred view, such as "a prayer for weeding and confessing."

Collecting a range of prayers for various occasions, spoken across generations, has given the gift of permission and language—a hand to grab onto. God is here, even here.

It is in the gift of prayer that we are reminded we are not alone. Christ, the all-powerful Lord, comes to us in His Word and Sacraments. No matter what grief, grace, or task may come, God hears us with mercy. We are not alone. We can talk to God, and a scarred hand is ours to hold in all things. ‡

for weeding and confessing



God of Creation,

All creation sings Your praise and tells of Your glory.

As I sit in this garden and tug up these weeds, I know my heart needs weeding like this overgrown plot.

I confess my sins to You.

As I uproot what invades in the ground, uproot selfishness in my heart.

Pull up the weeds of pride and judgment.

Pull up the weeds of needing to be liked.

Pull up the weeds of snark and complaining.

A @griefs+graces prayer by Shelly Schwalm



Pull up the weeds of comparison and envy.

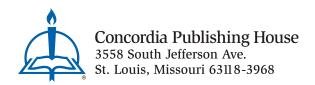
Pull up the weeds of being harsh and hurried.

Pull up the weeds of insecurity and isolation.

Pull up the weeds where my love has lacked.

Pull up the weeds in me, Lord, as my hands tug at these unruly roots.

Let only the fruit of Your Spirit bloom in this place. That the seeds of life from You, O Christ, would take root and grow as a tested tree, beautiful, steady, and pointing to the goodness of its Maker. ‡



SEE ALL OF THE WONDERFUL MILESTONES IN YOUR LIFE AND HOW TO CELEBRATE THEM THROUGH YOUR FAITH.



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