

# Lutheran<sup>®</sup>

L I F E

ISSUE 121

*Inside this issue:*

*Living together  
as family  
the way God  
intended.*

COVID-19 really opened our eyes to the importance of family—especially when senior citizens were isolated from their children and grandchildren, and when extended families were forced to celebrate holidays and special occasions apart. The pandemic has caused isolation, loneliness, and separation. We all look forward in hope to the day we will no longer be separated.

your parents are deceased and you are the only one left from your family, you are still connected to every other human through the spiderweb of familial relations that came from Adam and Eve: the whole human family. A secondary explanation of family is a group of people living together at the same location. This definition of a family as a household has never been more highlighted for me than it has during the coronavirus pandemic, when one's place of residence and the number of people in contact there are key considerations. If I live with a friend and my parents are across the country, who is considered my family? Those who share a bloodline or those who share a kitchen? Perhaps there's a place for both. We can celebrate those to whom God has con-

# What Is Family?

But what is family? Biologically, it's a group of people who share a common ancestry. Genesis 2:20–25 gives us the origins of the family: Adam had no suitable helper among the animals, so God made him a helper, Eve, who was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. That is why “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

God established marriage as the basis for all human civilization. From Adam and Eve (and later through Noah) all people on earth find their familial beginnings—all 7.5+ billion of us. So even if you don't know your biological parents or you have only half-siblings or

nected us genetically and those He has placed in our lives through other experiences.

Throughout this issue, we'll consider family as those living under one roof, and usually under one head, whether all residents share a common DNA or they have been brought together through other means, such as fostering, adoption, or remarriage. Specifically, we'll focus on Christian families, which Dr. John Eckrich identifies as “the incubator for instilling and encouraging humble, compassionate servanthood.”<sup>1</sup> Regardless of how your family became family, each Christian home is a place where its members can practice giving and



receiving the love and forgiveness Christ first gave us. It's the fertile soil for faith formation, vocational growth, and a winsome witness to neighbors and friends.

We'll also acknowledge that family isn't just the first place people know love; it's also the first place we experience pain. Family holds both great joy and deep sorrow. Passed down from Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit, families have inherited neglect and doubt, deception and disobedience, pride and cover-ups, jealousy, and even murder.

Because Jesus shared our human nature, He understands what it is to be a member of a family. In His death and resurrection, He's forged a way for renewed relationships not just within our earthly families but also with our heavenly Father. Where Adam and Eve destroyed God's vision for family, Jesus reclaimed it, giving us His Spirit through Baptism, adopting us into His family, and making us heirs with Him of the heavenly throne.<sup>2</sup>

You might love your family or hate them, but you liter-



And yet, God cares so much about families that Jesus entered into the world as part of an imperfect, messy family. Jesus' ancestry through His mother, Mary, and His earthly father, Joseph, includes prostitutes and foreigners, adulterers and alcoholics.

In taking on flesh, Jesus experienced firsthand what it means to be part of a family—to be a brother, cousin, nephew. To go to social events together, like weddings, and endure family road trips—even getting separated from His family! He knew the ridicule of siblings and the nagging questions of a mother. He knew the work of taking on the family business.

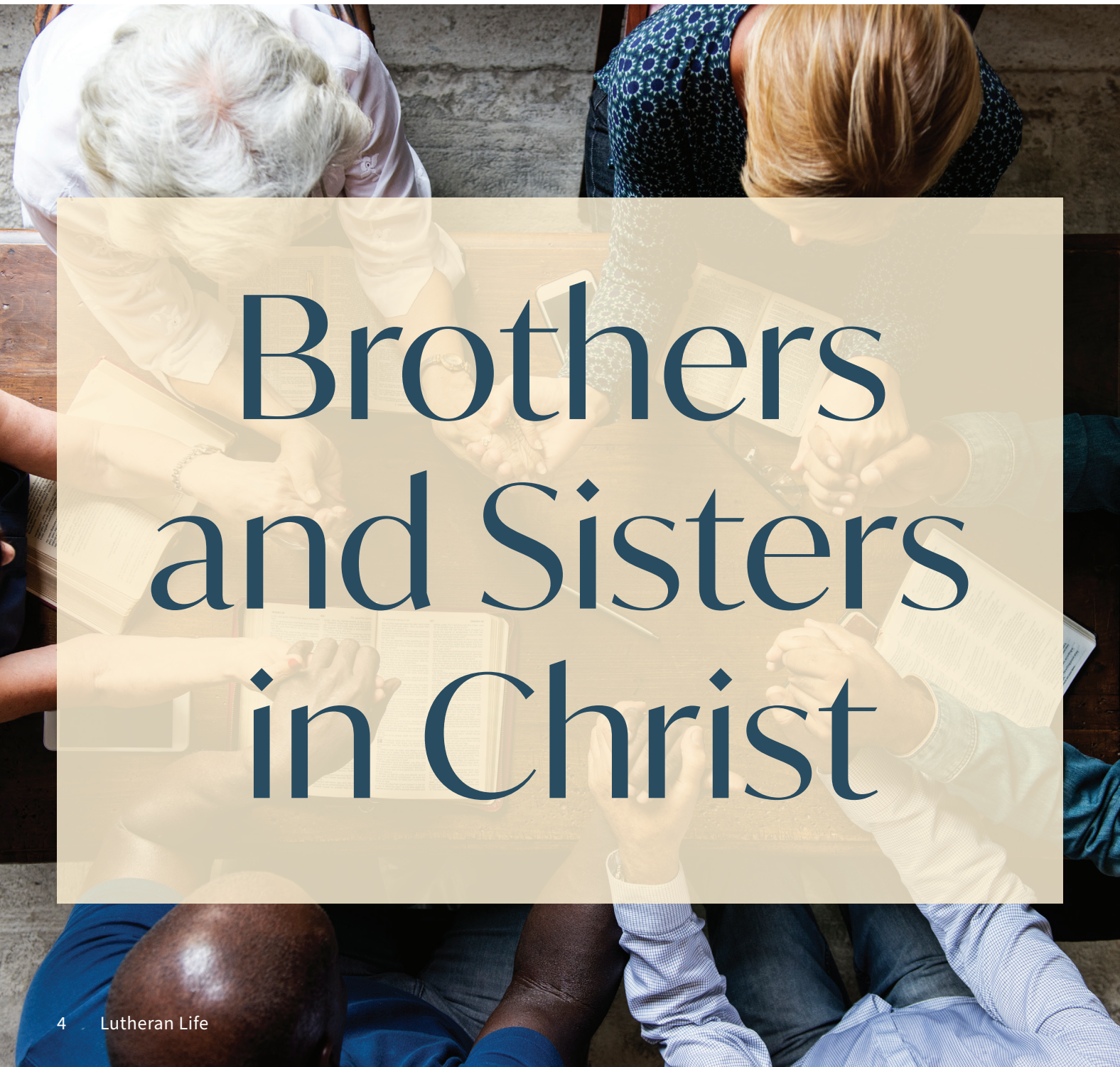
ally wouldn't be alive without them. So here's to all the grandmas and grandpas, moms and dads, brothers and sisters, aunties, uncles, and cousins—with all our beauty and warts. And here's to seeking to live by Christ's love and grace among those we've been connected to as family. ‡

<sup>1</sup> John Eckrich, *Family Wellness: Raising Resilient, Christ-Purposed Children* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 49.

<sup>2</sup> See Hebrews 2:14–18.

Just as God established family to be the basis of society, so He also used family language to describe the personal, connected relationship He has with us through Jesus. For Jesus teaches His followers to pray by using the address “our Father,” which invites us to call upon God intimately. Paul is so bold as to call out to God as “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15)—his cry to God is familial.

How is this possible?



# Brothers and Sisters in Christ



Through the waters of Baptism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who “Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.” (Romans 8:16–17). Regardless of our status in our earthly family, in Baptism we are adopted by God into His family, welcomed as His children, and given the gift of His eternal inheritance.

Our earthly parents may let us down or abandon us completely, but God is “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows” (Psalm 68:5) who loves, protects, and provides for us perfectly. Our earthly siblings may betray us or turn their backs, but Jesus is the friend who Proverbs 18:24 describes as “closer than a brother”—one who shows the greatest expression of sacrificial love by giving up His life for us (Mark 10:45).

Not only does the Spirit’s work in Baptism connect us to the Father and Son but it also brings us into a special relationship with the rest of the Church. All who have been baptized in the one true faith have been grafted into God’s family tree, making us fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. The person in the pew next to you isn’t just a neighbor or colleague but family and should be treated as such.

The apostle Paul gave the young pastor Timothy instructions on how to interact with various church members, a guide for how we should interact with one another: “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Timothy 5:1–2). In this way, we are never truly alone or separated from family.

This reality became true for me the first Christmas I was away from my extended family. My husband and I were in the first year of our call to a church far from either of our families. That Christmas, there were no family gatherings or traditions that I’d come to associate with the holidays. But sitting in the pew that Christmas morning, I soon discovered a new set of grandmas and grandpas, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. While separated from those I shared DNA with, I was joined with family around another table, the Lord’s Table, to enjoy a special meal that’s shared only with family—the Lord’s Supper—and to celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who gave us our family name.

In that moment, these words from Jesus took on new meaning: “‘Who is My mother, and who are My brothers?’ And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother’” (Matthew 12:48–50). This is not to neglect or reject earthly family but to elevate the significance of our church family. All who believe in Jesus and do the will of the Father are part of the same household, where Jesus is the chief cornerstone (see Ephesians 2:19–22).

Regardless of our standing with our earthly family, in faith, we are always welcome as God’s children, recipients of our heavenly Father’s love and mercy. As Luther said in his introduction to the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism:

*With these words  
God tenderly invites  
us to believe that He  
is our true Father  
and that we are His  
true children, so that  
with all boldness and  
confidence we may  
ask Him as dear  
children ask their  
dear father. †*

# Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6

BY MARK R. KIESSLING



Parents know the complexities of training young people in the faith in today's world. Our sinful condition, busyness, technology, competing definitions of success, and ungodly influences tug on the hearts and minds of our young people and adults. This proverb may seem simplistic, like a naive silver bullet to guarantee young people will never leave the Church or have doubts or questions resulting from living in our fallen world. But the truth of the proverb is encouragement that God blesses gifts He has given to His people to pass on the faith to the next generation.

For a parent, the process, tools, and time available to “train” a child may look different from King Solomon's day or even compared to the experience of grandparents, parents, and ourselves. However, one thing that has remained constant is the important role parents play in modeling and teaching faith to their children. Another constant is the end goal of faithful

parents, churches, and Christian communities—for young people to live as disciples of Jesus for a lifetime and live eternally with him.

In the last years, LCMS Youth Ministry conducted research in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that measured some aspects of effective “training” by today's parents. What we found was no secret, thanks to insight from Scripture, Church history, and God's design for families. The conclusions also reminded us that Jesus never promised that being His disciple would be easy (John 16:33), but He promises to be with us and provides His Word to strengthen us for the journey.

From the research, we might split “training” into two specific areas: **practices** and **environment**. This training had a positive effect on the retention of young adults in the Church and supporting them in their lifelong walk with Jesus.



We saw evidence of God's work through the gifts and opportunities He has given His people to practice our faith, mainly

- frequent Bible reading in the home;
- prayer in the home;
- regular church attendance; and
- at least one parent having a service or leadership role in the Church.

God's Word is alive, active, and effective (Isaiah 55:11; Hebrews 4:12) in the hearts and minds of Christian parents and young Christians. Family devotions and Scripture reading focus us on Christ's forgiveness and God's truth through times when our faith is challenged or life brings concern. The Scriptures are full of examples and exhortations to pray to our loving heavenly Father. Constant prayer (Romans 12:12) in good times and tough times nurtures a trusting relationship in our Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter. Regular worship brings the refreshment of God's gifts of Word and Sacrament and a connection to Christian community (Psalm 95:6–7). Service and leadership model one's value of the Christian community and response to God's grace (Galatians 6:1–10).

The home environment created fertile ground for these practices to take root in the lives of young people. In the family, young people saw the love of Jesus lived out in forgiveness, empathy, and patient listening. In our research, we especially saw the value of these factors:

- Good relationships with both parents, especially with dad
- Households open to discussion about life issues
- Households open to discussion about faith issues
- Parent(s) comfortable with discussing questions and doubts

Strong, empathetic, and forgiving relationships between parents and children opened doors for youth to discuss their questions and doubts and process difficult decisions or issues. Conversations happen in various times and places: on the way to an extracurricular activity, after experiencing a tragedy or crisis, during a TV show or movie. Any such opportunity could open up conversation about real life and the truth of God's Word.

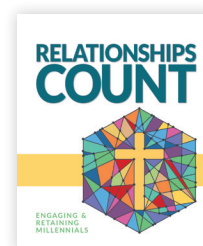
These practices and environment laid an excellent foundation for lifelong discipleship in the Church. They prepared young people for major transitions in life, some unexpected, but many for which one can prepare. As youth increase their independence in high school, they are in a key position to look toward the future. Youth are preparing to go into the mission field in new vocations—with new roommates and relationships, new jobs and responsibilities, new knowledge and understanding.

Our study showed that high school graduation is a time when young people often disconnect from the Church. In some circumstances, a young person may purposefully walk away from the Church, even if for a short time. In other circumstances, a young person may not intentionally leave the faith but may struggle to connect with another church or area of Christian community after high school. Parents can help prepare their children for this transition by raising the importance of considering their spiritual life when making decisions about college, career, or military service. Be honest about the struggles, temptations, and trials of this transition into young adulthood. Be mindful of the importance of the practices above and how we are all refreshed by Christ's promises through them.

Certainly, our data only speaks to broad trends and gives some researched insight into the key of healthy relationships, but it doesn't speak to every individual experience in the Church or family. I finish by saying that a parent's vocation is never over. In your role, you can continue to model discipleship, warmth, and grace, whether one's adult children are faithfully connected to the Church or have left the Church. Do not lose hope, for we have a mighty God who continually calls us to repentance, to receive His wonderful gifts of forgiveness and salvation, and to walk with Him. †

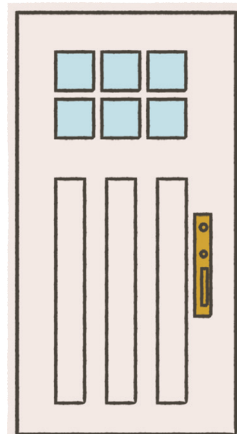
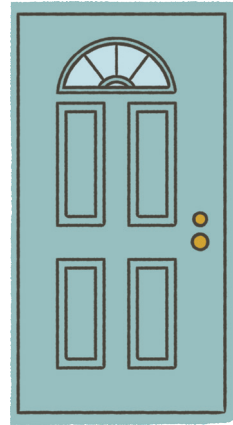
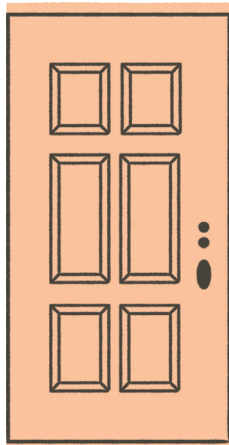
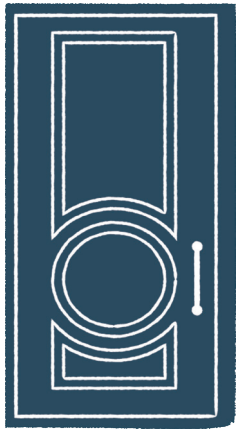
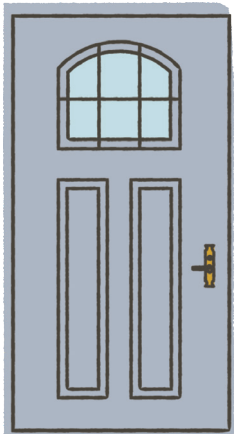
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## RELATIONSHIPS COUNT



For more information on LCMS millennial research, the importance of Christ-centered relationships, and the role of parents in passing on the faith to the next generation, check out *Relationships Count*, a free resource. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/lresources](http://cph.org/lresources).

# Practicing *Hospitality* beyond Your Family



Author Brenda Jank recently shared with me this story about teaching the faith to her daughter, Anna:

“ When Anna was seven, she asked me, “Mommy, is the most important thing we can do to tell other people about Jesus?”

This was a proud-mama moment for me, but it was short-lived. “Yes, Anna, it is!”

“Then why don’t you ever do it?”

Her question changed my life, the lives of my children, and the eternal destination of Jim and Peggy, who lived in our neighborhood. ”

There’s nothing like the piercing words of an innocent child to reveal our blind spots and push us to be better as a family. That’s certainly true for Brenda’s family. Perhaps you have your own story of a little one speaking the words of truth no one else would dare say.

That was also the case for my four-year-old neighbor, Ali, after she and I played in the sandbox one day as children. When I told her I couldn’t play the next morning because we’d be at church, she went home to ask her parents about church—a concept she’d never heard of. I can hear her inquisitive voice ask, “Mom and Dad, what’s church? Why don’t we go?”

A week later, Ali’s parents and my parents discussed the topic, enrolled Ali and her brother in a Christian school, and started regularly attending church as a family. All



this because two small children played together in a sandbox.

Adult Amy could learn a lot from little five-year-old Amy. That exchange with Ali might be the most transformational conversation I've ever had with an unchurched neighbor. Of course, I can make excuses: some neighbors already know Jesus, other neighbors are standoffish and never engage in conversation. Where I currently live, two of my three neighbors don't even speak much English. Excuses abound, but Anna's critical question remains: If the most important thing we can do is tell others about Jesus, why don't we do it? How do our days fill up with other tasks without making room for the most important one?

Families are perfectly positioned to practice sharing God's love and grace not only with one another but also with the people around them, like neighbors, classmates, and work colleagues.

A friend of mine strongly believes the best way she can witness to her nonbelieving friends is through how she conducts her family life. People notice how she talks to and about her husband, as well as how she treats her children. Her home is filled with the love of Christ and marked by the fruit of the Spirit.

What a witness Christian families can make by being known for their welcoming homes, service to their communities, and invitations to neighbors!

While the pandemic has kept many people apart, it's birthed many opportunities for neighbors to be, well, neighborly. Because travel is limited and schools remote, there's an uptick in neighborhood children playing together, adults sharing meals and supplies, and individuals checking in on one another. What might it look like after the pandemic if we continue to foster homes and neighborhoods of hospitality, where households grill out together, host neighborhood events, or even start small groups?

Children are never too young or adults too old to cultivate a servant-minded mentality that looks to put other's needs above their own. Each family member is equipped with gifts and abilities given by God for the good of others. Learning to identify and celebrate each family member's unique gifts is a way we honor God, build up our family, and serve our neighbor.

If families are incubators for instilling and encouraging humble, compassionate servanthood, then our neighborhoods are the perfect test sites for practicing what we learn.

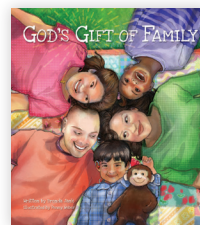
**Are you cultivating a household of hospitality?** Discuss these questions with your family at an upcoming meal to consider the opportunities you have in your neighborhood:

- How are we doing in accomplishing God's purpose with the resources He has given us?
- What have we done today for the good of God's kingdom?<sup>3</sup>
- Who in my community can I cultivate a friendship with?

End your conversation in prayer, asking for the Lord's guidance and Spirit's leading. †

<sup>3</sup> Eckrich, 44–45.

## GOD'S GIFT OF FAMILY



The beauty of family is that every family is different! This fun illustrated children's book shows the glorious gift of spending time with family and embracing all of your family's unique differences. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/llresources](http://cph.org/llresources).



*You*



# *A Welcoming Family*

BY BRIAN DAVIES



What would you do if you found out that Jesus was coming to your home? How long would your to-do list be? There would probably be cleaning, vacuuming, food prep, and more. And you would for sure break out the fancy china!

Luke 10:38–42 records the story of Jesus visiting the home of his friend Martha. It's recorded that she "welcomed Him into her house"—a beautiful act of hospitality. And while Mary is celebrated for sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to His teaching, no doubt Martha's warm welcome was a blessing to Jesus. Extending hospitality and creating spaces and moments that build community is a beautiful act of love and service. This was how Martha wanted to show her love for Jesus. The problem was, she let her preparations eclipse the joy of her Savior's coming.

Think about how this is played out in our homes with our families. Does the activity of maintaining our house interfere with making space for our spouse and children? Do we make them feel welcomed? Or do we begrudge their presence as more of a nuisance than a joy?

For the moment, let's focus on the welcome Martha offered more than her misplaced emphasis on her to-do list. Do you know anyone like that—someone really gifted at making family and others feel welcomed? It's a special gift, and having a "Martha" in our lives is a true treasure.

The challenge is this: the notions of hospitality, shared spaces, and places that build community are all under attack. You've likely noticed that culture seems divided and isolated like never before. From our political leanings to our choice of cable TV network—even to which chicken sandwiches we prefer—it seems like everyone has broken off into different tribes. Even family members can be divided against one another. Unfortunately, it's probably far more likely these days to find folks lobbing insults at others from behind a keyboard than sitting around a dinner table, sharing differing ideas and opinions respectfully. We need Martha's sense of hospitality now more than ever!

Two quick thoughts to keep in mind as we seek to be light in a divided and isolated world:

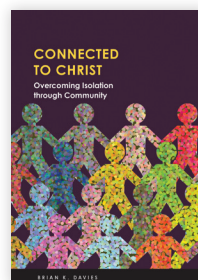
First, celebrate that through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus makes a space and a place at the table for imperfect ragamuffins like us. The greatest example of hospitality and community the world has ever known is found in Jesus, who welcomes us even when we don't welcome Him. "But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We can rejoice that in the Gospel, each one of us can find a sense of belonging and identity in Christ, a sorely needed stream in the desert these days.

Second, having been brought into life with God, we make places and spaces for our families and others. Even if you don't have the fullness of Martha's gift of hospitality, there are steps you can take that will make a tangible difference in the lives of others. Once you have made the members of your family know they are welcome and appreciated, you could open your home for a beautiful meal, but you certainly don't have to go that far. A spirit of hospitality finds the person standing alone in the church lobby, the co-worker having a rough day, or the new student who hasn't yet made many friends. A spirit of hospitality listens, actively and with focus, and seeks to understand before seeking to be understood. A spirit of hospitality follows the example of Christ, making a space and a place to build community, even when it hasn't been reciprocated.

Back to that meal and moment in Bethany—Martha and her family got a chance to welcome the One who had so welcomed her. Like Martha, we can still welcome Jesus into our families through prayer, devotions, and Bible reading. Similarly, the Lord Jesus Christ has made a place for you and me, solely by the grace of God. We rejoice in this, and then act upon it, sharing with others what we've received. "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). †

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## CONNECTED TO CHRIST



Christ wants His Church to be together in community with one another. But society has pushed us further into bubbles of isolation. Learn to come back to His community and reconnect to His Church in *Connected to Christ*. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/llresources](http://cph.org/llresources).



# Ponder

# the Path

An aerial photograph of a dense, lush green forest. A paved road winds through the trees, curving from the bottom left towards the right side of the frame. The trees are a mix of dark green and lighter, yellowish-green, suggesting a variety of species or perhaps the onset of autumn. The road is a light grey color, contrasting with the vibrant green of the forest.



During this pandemic, there is no question that the health of the family is of great importance. We have learned how to wear masks, how to control the bubbles that are our immediate contacts, and how to navigate the perhaps unknown world of online work and learning. But have we given enough attention to the health of our family when it comes to our spiritual needs?

After all, physical and emotional health, while important, will only serve us for a short time, but it is our spiritual health that will serve us for eternity. Of course, the challenge is that so much of our spiritual health comes from the fellowship that occurs in the gathering of God's Church. But being wise about our physical and emotional health does not mean that we cannot gather, and many of us have even figured out how to participate in Bible studies and worship while maintaining the physical distance that wisdom may counsel, whether in-person or online.

We hunger for the Gospel, knowing its power. We praise God that He has fed us His Word through this time, strengthening our faith. We know that soon we will share the peace with hugs and handshakes again, stand or kneel together at the altar to receive the Lord's Supper, and have that nosh and a cup of coffee with our brothers and sisters after the service. We have experienced the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, and we rejoice in the fellowship that we have with Him through Christ—and the fellowship that we have with one another as well.

But what about those children of God who are suffering a worse malady than anything a pandemic can inflict? Family wellness is about far more than our needs or even the needs of our immediate family. We are part of a larger family, and some of them are in need of being fed by the Gospel too. Some, even in our churches, may be overwhelmed by the news of the day, unable perhaps to connect with people via the internet, and in danger of being forgotten. And the danger is even greater for others of God's children, even His first children, the Jewish people, who have yet to receive the power of God in the Gospel of Messiah Jesus.

We are always challenged to focus on God and His calling for us. How is God calling you to grow in your faith, as we anticipate the wonders of God's sacrifice for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Burning Bush Ministries has been serving The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod for forty years and is still here to help you learn how to reach your neighbors, both Jewish and Gentile, with that very wonder-filled Gospel, that they, too, might believe.

We understand that it isn't easy to talk to people about Jesus, but it is easier amid a community of believers that understand the challenges. We have the resources and experience to help you and your church intentionally respond to the divine appointments that God makes for you and others. Because of all that we have learned about gathering over distances, it has become very easy to build that community.

We are offering our devotional *Ponder the Path* to you, available either by mail or online. We also have a six-sermon series that may help you explore our ministry and the need for sharing the Gospel with the Jewish people and others. We have resources to help your children learn and grow in their faith as they share the Gospel with their friends. Additionally, we are available to talk with you personally or to have a video conference with your church Bible study. More than anything else, we want to personally connect with you. It takes our community of faith working together to reveal Jesus to the Jewish people. †

### Call or write:

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**6327 Clayton Ave.**  
**St. Louis, MO 63139**  
**www.lije.org**  
**RevKevye@aol.com**  
**(314) 645-4456**



**Burning Bush  
 Ministries**

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile (Rom. 1:16).*





# Healing Hurts

**Family conflict.** Anyone who thinks his or her family doesn't have conflict is in denial. As soon as more than one sinner is put in a house together, there are going to be plenty of opportunities to give and take offense—resulting in the need to give and receive forgiveness. How do we respond when life happens—when parents split, alcoholism spills into the next generation, mental illness goes untreated, or hard conversations stay locked in our chests?

No family is immune to the realities of life together in a broken world. We can make light of quibbling siblings, but more often than not, arguments between family members are heated and deeply personal, especially when hurts are cited that can be traced back years or even decades. Unresolved family conflict can fester and spread like an infected wound; if left untreated, conflict can cause great physical and emotional damage throughout the family's collective body.

Sometimes it is easier to show more compassion to nameless strangers than to people with the same last name, people from whom we could use a little more space. Though obvious, and therefore sometimes overlooked, Jesus' words in Matthew 5:21–26 to love our brothers and sisters “includes our literal, actual, flesh-and-blood siblings,” notes author Christina Hergenrader, “and at the very heart of that love is grace. It's forgiveness.”<sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness does not accept or dismiss the sins of others; rather, it frees the victim from the prison of holding onto hurt. We recognize that when we forgive others, we receive God's forgiveness ourselves.

Hergenrader asks us to consider this: “When someone you love hurts your feelings, do you find yourself harboring your anger toward them, replaying their sins over and over?”<sup>5</sup> Refusing to forgive is its own punishment.

Individual choices have consequences on the whole family—even the choice to withhold forgiveness. For example, one person's decision to not speak to another family member creates a ripple effect, forcing other family members to choose sides, walk on eggshells, and treat one another differently.

An individual's positive decision can also impact the whole family; this especially includes the choice to be the first to apologize regardless of who started it. One family member—whether the oldest, youngest, or somewhere in between—can take the opportunity to teach others how to resolve conflict, heal, and move forward together. Just like an infection, the sooner the conflict is resolved, the easier the path toward healing.

How do we begin this path toward healing? Hergenrader puts it simply: “Face-to-face (not Facebook-to-Facebook).”<sup>6</sup> Consider the number of family conflicts that could be resolved more quickly (or never started in the first place) if those in conflict

would first speak directly to their offender in-person—not through a familial game of telephone, trite Facebook comments, or the silent treatment.

Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18 on how Christians should resolve conflict applies to families too. He makes clear that whenever appropriate and safe to do so, conflicts are to be addressed one-on-one, face-to-face, and alone. And “if he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15). Imagine the benefits you'd discover talking face-to-face first versus talking about the situation with everyone in the family except for the person in conflict.

If the conflict continues, then a trusted mediator, perhaps a pastor, church worker, or counselor, can help facilitate the conversation (Matthew 18:16). If resolution still doesn't occur, then it can be brought to the family (Matthew 18:17). Above all, God's grace and forgiveness are waiting to be shared.

Family conflict. While anyone who thinks his or her family doesn't have conflict is in denial, anyone who thinks his or her family is beyond the hope of conflict resolution is also short-sighted. The healing power of Christ's forgiveness is a balm stronger than any disease; it binds people together in perfect harmony and brings peace and thankfulness (Colossians 3:13–15). Even in your family. Even for you. †

<sup>4</sup> Christina Hergenrader, *Family Trees and Olive Branches* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 124.

<sup>5</sup> Hergenrader, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Hergenrader, 74.

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## FAMILY TREES AND OLIVE BRANCHES



Families can be difficult, especially if they hold conflict against one another. But families can also be wonderful together if they can learn to forgive with the same forgiveness God shows His creation. Learn how to repair your family relationships with author Christina Hergenrader. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/llresources](http://cph.org/llresources).



## OUR MISSION

THE SHEPHERD'S CANYON RETREAT MINISTRY IS COMMITTED TO PROVIDING SPIRITUAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALING TO CLERGY, OTHER CHURCH WORKERS AND THEIR SPOUSES WHO ARE IN THE MIDST OF VARIOUS STAGES OF BURNOUT, DEPRESSION, COMPASSION FATIGUE, AND CONFLICTS OF ALL TYPES, OFFERING THE HOPE AND RENEWAL FOUND THROUGH THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD AND THE HOLY SPIRIT.

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“WHEN I ARRIVED AT SHEPHERD'S CANYON RETREAT (SCR), I DIDN'T KNOW IF I WOULD EVER STEP BEHIND A PULPIT AGAIN. I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IF MY MARRIAGE WOULD BE RESTORED. I WAS IN A VERY DARK PLACE, SUFFERING FROM BURNOUT AND DEPRESSION. I HAD FALLEN DEEP INTO A TRAP OF LIES THAT I WAS A FAILURE, THAT MY PAST GUILT AND SHAME DEFINED WHO I WAS AND HOW EVERYONE SAW ME. MY PERSONALITY HAD BECOME ONE OF CRITICISM, CONTEMPT AND DEFENSIVENESS. AFTER SPENDING A WEEK WITH THE COUNSELORS AND FELLOW PARTICIPANTS OF SCR, I REALIZED THAT I WAS NOT ALONE IN THIS DARK PLACE.

I CONTINUE TO HEAR THE LIES, BUT THANKS TO SCR AND THE TOOLS I RECEIVED, I NO LONGER LISTEN. WHILE I STILL HAVE THE DIAGNOSIS OF DEPRESSION, I AM MANAGING IT MUCH BETTER THROUGH CONTINUED COUNSELING AND MEDICATION. MY MARRIAGE IS FAR BETTER THAN IT HAS EVER BEEN. ALL THANKS TO GOD.

SINCE BEING A RETREAT PARTICIPANT, I HAVE SERVED AS A CHAPLAIN AT RETREATS AND SERVE ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS. I AM SO THANKFUL FOR THE MINISTRY WE HAVE AT STANDING STONES AND LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING HOW GOD WILL CONTINUE TO USE IT AS A PLACE OF HOPE AND HEALING FOR MANY MORE YEARS.

”  
- Rich Steenyma



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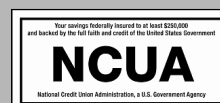
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# KEEPING CHRIST AT THE CENTER OF YOUR FAMILY

Martin Luther boldly states that of all the goals and accomplishments we can strive after in life, the greatest is to raise children in the faith. During a time when it was considered noble to abandon family responsibilities to become a monk or nun, Luther plainly stated that the holiest vocation for a parent is to, in fact, be a parent. Today, very few moms and dads leave their families to join holy orders, but the sentiment remains: keeping Christ at the center of our families is the most important work we can do.

In fact, the spiritual care of the family—especially children—is the very reason Martin Luther penned the Small Catechism. Its primary purpose was not for church workers to use during confirmation class but for the heads of households to teach within their homes.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century, when research conducted by LCMS Research and LCMS Youth Ministry confirms the importance of keeping Christ as the center of families. Extensive surveys of Millennials who grew up in the LCMS found that three out of four young adults who are still active in their faith today listed a parent as one of the most influential persons in their faith life.<sup>7</sup> The role of parents and other influential family members greatly impacts the spiritual life of children.

Parental involvement in teaching children the faith isn't a novel idea. In his Small Catechism Table of Duties, Luther quoted the apostle Paul's instructions to parents: "Do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4) Indeed, from the beginning, God's command to His people has been for families to play the primary role in their children's faith formation. Moses relayed God's instructions in this regard:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down,

and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6–9)

God's plan for family-based catechesis is comprehensive, appealing to all learning styles: talk and write about it, discuss it while being active together, weave it into your normal routines, and have visual reminders around your house, even wearing it on your person. What might this look like for your family's rhythms and routines?

Perhaps it's making intentional use of your time together in the car or before bedtime. Family meals can be an ideal setting for strengthening family relationships, reading Scripture, and having faith-based conversations. Regularly praying together helps join your hearts together before God in adoration, supplication, thanksgiving, and confession. And attending church together renews and strengthens your family's faith.

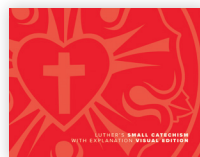
Looking for easy ways to incorporate Scripture, prayer, and Christ-centered conversation into your family's daily routine? Check out CPH's free **Everyday Faith Calendar** at [cph.org/everydayfaith](http://cph.org/everydayfaith).<sup>†</sup>

<sup>7</sup> youthESource, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Youth Ministry Office, 2017), "Healthy Congregations Have Supportive Adults."

<sup>8</sup> Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), § 3010.

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## VISUAL EDITION OF LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM



Teach Luther's Small Catechism in a brand-new format with the visual edition. Each section of the Catechism is paired with a graphic that allows for a higher level of engagement from all types of learners. More fun ways to teach the Catechism are also coming later this year! Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/lresources](http://cph.org/lresources).



THE NOBLEST AND GREATEST WORK  
AND THE MOST IMPORTANT SERVICE WE  
CAN PERFORM FOR GOD ON EARTH IS

*bringing other people*

AND ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE  
ENTRUSTED TO US,

*to the knowledge of  
God by the holy  
Gospel.<sup>8</sup>*

—MARTIN LUTHER



# Family Wellness: What Is Your Family's Fragrance?

BY JOHN D. ECKRICH, MD



When God places a child in your life—whether as family or friend, but especially as parent, grandparent, or godparent—you are being called to a vocation of loving leadership. The Holy Spirit gives you the desire and ability to live joyfully with the child enveloped in the arms of the Savior, here and into eternity. By grace, the Holy Spirit instills a “fragrance” to your family: “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:15).

This day, how does your family smell?

As a loving Christian family leader, you strive to instruct and model faith to this child, accompanied by values and thankful stewardship behaviors centered in God’s will. This will help the child become a fruitful, respectful, perseverant, moral, compassionate, and Christ-purposed citizen of the family, faith community, and civic community. This is, indeed, a daunting task in a society characterized by rapid change, high anxiety, myriad unhealthy and self-harming choice options, and the breakdown of the family unit as the foundation of safety, stability, and faith formation.

To define our family wellness dilemma more succinctly, contemporary families are struggling to emit a Christ-like aroma of meaning and purpose in an environment focused on spewing forth what is best for *me* as an individual rather than what is best for *we* as a healthy personal, faith, or civic family. A healthy family remains the finest sustainable workshop for learning to build and refine God-pleasing relationships; God designed us this way. God calls us His children through Baptism. He nurtures His relationship with us through the Word and Sacraments. He gifts us His Spirit to help our relationship with Him grow and mature. And His Son, our brother, Jesus, will return on the Last Day to bring wellness and wholeness not just to *we* His children but also to *all* of creation. God so loves His family and desires us to live sweetly with Him.

This day, how does your family smell?

In a stinky human neighborhood scented by a self-centered, sinful focus on *me*, how does a healthy Christian family build caring, outward-serving, Christ-fragranced, *we* relationships? “How did our parents do it?” I asked a wise Lutheran pastor friend a few years back, and he had an assured answer: “We ate twenty-one meals a week together. We prayed together before and after

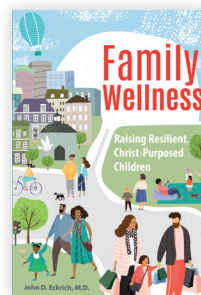
each meal, and we had family devotions every evening. We worked out our smelly struggles together around the kitchen table.”

While that may seem like a nearly impossible task in the twenty-first century, family mealtime remains the perfect method and ingredient for building and deepening relational *we* living and serving. Children do not merely hear how their parents and siblings treat and talk with one another; they also observe how those closest to them deal with people outside the immediate family. Children are remarkable sponges, especially as their bodies are being refueled. Remember, in the family, we have an opportunity to nurture not just their physical beings with healthy nutrition, exercise, and rest but also their minds, emotions, and spirits with loving communication. Particularly around the dinner table, we can share and instruct them in God’s Word. Surely, the Holy Spirit is amid this holy gathering time of family.

Occasionally, mealtime togetherness may not be available to provide a wellness pause-point; but there is always bedtime to settle your child into restoring rest. Moments of closeness at the end of the day are unique times for unpacking the day’s burdens in conversation with each other and with our heavenly Father in prayer. With the Spirit’s presence, we can perfume our child’s soul in Jesus, who has kept us this day, who hears our cries for the forgiveness of our sins, and who will surely keep us this night. As loving family leaders and as young ones, we sleep every night, God willing. This, indeed, is a sweet-smelling wellness fragrance for life and service together. †

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## FAMILY WELLNESS



A well family is more than just physically healthy; it’s mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy as well. Find out how to implement things that encourage this all-encompassing wellness with Dr. John D. Eckrich by using the five core value sets and God’s Word. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/lresources](http://cph.org/lresources).

# 7 WAYS TO Keep the Connection

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced families to find creative ways to keep connected. Between Zoom hangouts and drive-by birthday parties, we've found ways to show the love we feel for our family members who aren't in our homes. The connection challenge gets more complicated when we have a family member in a care facility. With shifting visitation rules and varying levels of technology in facilities, it can be difficult to keep connected with those we love.

As Christians, we know how important it is to gather as a faith community and to nurture faith in our homes. Here are seven ways that you can strengthen your family faith connection with those who are in an assisted-living or long-term care facility.

**1. Write it on your calendar.** We all have the best intentions to give a family member a call. We think about it, but often we forget to follow through. Putting your connection time on your home calendar elevates this from a nice idea to a top priority. You may want to get together with your siblings or other family members and make a schedule to check on your loved one. How often you call is up to you, and availability will be different for each family. With that said, the general rule would be the more communication, the better. With care facilities having fewer social gatherings and visitations, residents need more calls and connections.

**2. Don't know what to say? Write it down.** Come up with a list of "What was \_\_\_\_\_ like when you were a child?" questions. School-age children are great at coming up with these questions, and they're also great at asking them. Grandparents have a wealth of knowledge and experience. The stories that children will hear from older family members are priceless gems. More senior family members can also point our younger children to the bigger picture of God's work in their lives and show us that we will be on the other side of our current struggles, even if we don't know when.



**3. Make a photo album.** Get your family to print off photos of what's been going on with each family member over the past year. Label each photo with names and the event. When you call, you'll have something that you can refer to when you bring up stories. You can also make pages dedicated to sharing favorite Bible verses and words of encouragement. Make sure to check with the care facility first to see what kind of gifts can be received.

**4. Watch an online service together.** Most churches are now offering some type of online service. Make a date to watch the service at the same time and then connect after for a virtual coffee hour. Take notes during the sermon or highlight a favorite hymn you sang, and then take time to share.

**5. Read a devotion together.** Find a daily devotion that you can follow together as a family. The day you call to connect, ask about the devotion for the day. Be ready to share your thoughts and to listen to their insights on the Scripture.

**6. Make art.** Design something as a family that can hang on a wall or sit on a table where your loved one can remember how much you care. This could be a canvas everyone puts a handprint on with a Bible verse in the center or a digital piece of art using a beautiful stock photo and a favorite Christian quote. Consider the living space and where the piece of art could be placed.

**7. Send it slow.** Who doesn't love receiving a handwritten letter? Consider giving younger children a writing assignment to describe something that's going on in their lives. Ask plenty of questions in the letter so that your loved one has something to respond to. If your older family member is unable to write, ask the care facility if there's a staff member who could assist in writing replies.

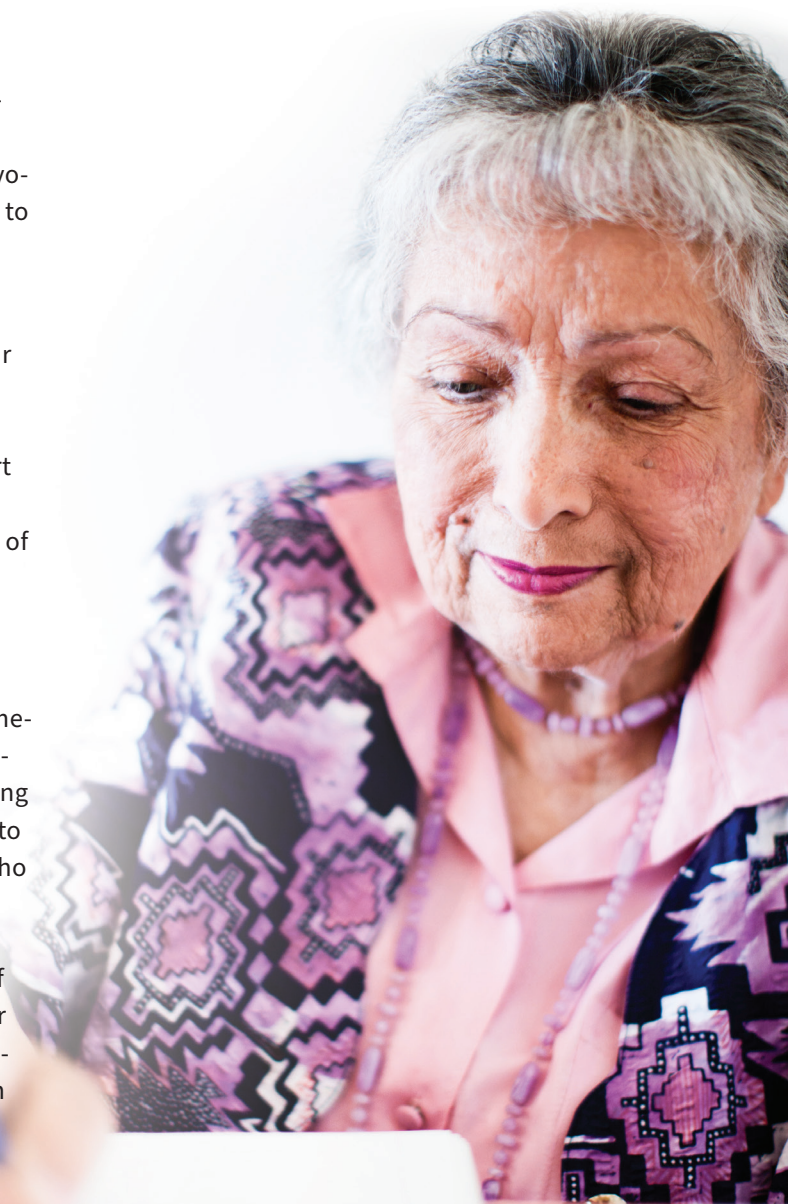
This list is certainly not exhaustive. Talk with the staff at your loved one's care facility to find out what other families have done to stay connected. Also, get clarification on the rules for visitation and gifts. Check with the care facility on the availability of a chaplain or pastor who may be able to visit with your loved one.

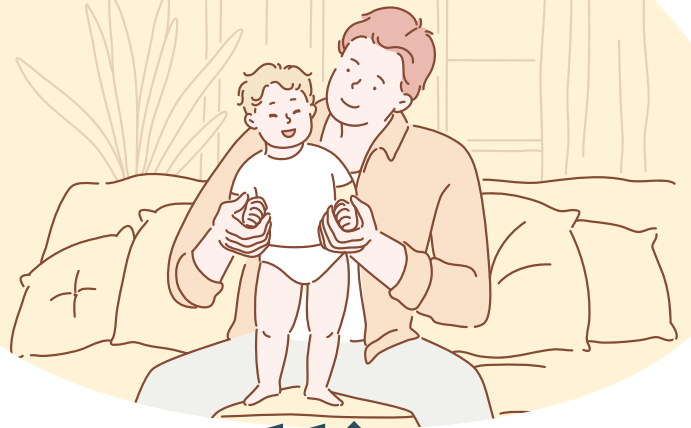
Though it may seem difficult to do, the need is stronger than ever to keep connected. Study after study is showing that those in assisted living and care facilities are

feeling more isolated than ever during this pandemic. Yet, there is hope. In Christ, we have a connection that will never fade, one that will always last. ‡

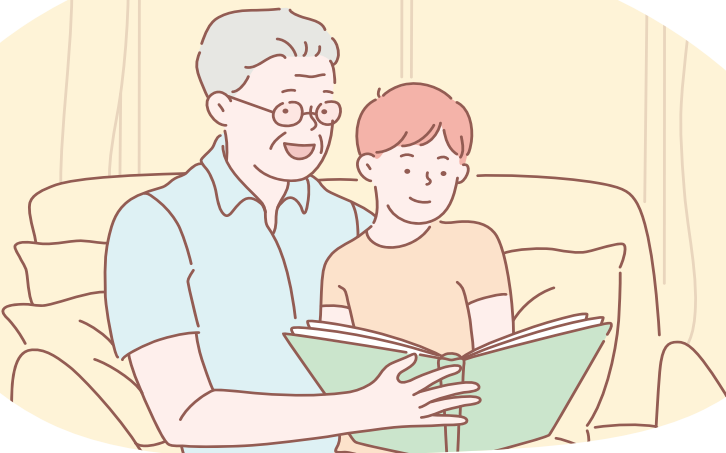
### About the Author

Thomas Moll is content manager at Worship Anew, a media ministry based in Fort Wayne, IN. Thomas collaborates with church workers and mental health professionals to develop resources to support individuals and churches centered around their mission of sharing Christ's love. Learn more at [worshipanew.org](http://worshipanew.org).

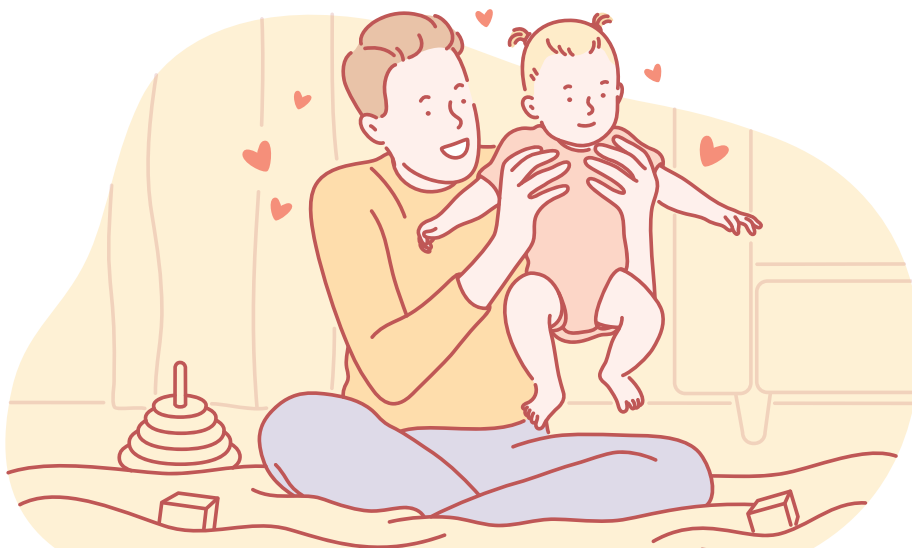




# Embracing Callings



## within a Family





My family recently welcomed the birth of a new baby, my nephew. There's been great rejoicing as we "ooh" and "aah" over his twinkling eyes and button-size nose, wondering which parent he most looks like and dreaming of what he'll become when he grows up. What will he be interested in? What gifts and abilities will God grow in him? What will be his calling in life?

These questions often follow us from childhood into adulthood. Who are we? What purposes has God set before us? Teenagers grapple with these questions as they consider their steps after high school. Midlife crises are birthed from reevaluating these questions of purpose and meaning. Even retirees ask these questions anew as they discern God's will for their lives in a new season.

Author Jeffrey Leininger begins his book *Callings for Life* with these wise words: "Our calling in life is better understood in the plural rather than the singular."<sup>9</sup> Rather than fixating on a singular purpose for life, we become all who God created us to be when we recognize that any way we "love and serve our neighbor by God's grace and with Christ's forgiveness is to do His will and accomplish His purposes."<sup>10</sup>

We don't need to wait for God to profoundly announce a specific calling over us, or assume we're too young or too old to be used by God. Rather, we need to recognize that to be in our calling is to recognize all the opportunities we have right in front of us to love and serve those around us.

Who's around us? Our family! Before we explore the world "out there," we live in our family units right here. We have endless opportunities to carry out the calling of loving and serving others right in our own living room with the people we live with. There are dishes to wash and clothes to fold, hugs to offer and cries to share, forgiveness to give and grace to receive. There are lessons to teach and lessons to learn, responsibilities to embrace, and Christlike servanthood to model.

We'll never run out of work to accomplish through our familial callings. Leininger quotes Luther, who said, "Yea if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for your task."<sup>11</sup> This is not just true for grown-ups.

My nephew doesn't have a calling *just* in the future. Rather, each family member has a calling in the present. Leininger writes, "Because of the work of Christ

Jesus—and *solely* because of His work—the people in your life do not simply have potential value. They have *full value* right now, as forgiven and redeemed children of God. Their *present* matters, and their *presence* matters."<sup>12</sup>

To embrace vocations within a family is to first and foremost celebrate family members for who they are—children of God—above and beyond what they can do or contribute. In doing so, we can learn to love our family as Jesus loves us: unconditionally and undeservedly. People's identity "does not stem from how many souls they might save . . . or what great job they'll land . . . or whom they might marry, where they might live, and how much money they'll make."<sup>13</sup> While we can look forward to seeing the path God has for each person, the reason we value family is purely out of love—love we first received from Christ when we were unworthy of it and love we now freely give in response to Christ. We seek to love and serve our family because that's what it means to follow Jesus. That's what it means to have a noble calling. †

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Leininger, *Callings for Life: God's Plan, Your Purpose* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Leininger, 6; emphasis in original.

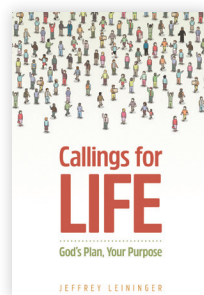
<sup>11</sup> Leininger, 7–8, quoted from *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. John Lenker, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1905), 242, and reprinted in *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 242.

<sup>12</sup> Leininger, 46; emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> Leininger, 46.

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## CALLINGS FOR LIFE



God calls you to more than one "big thing" in your life. Rather, He calls you to multiple vocations of all varieties, big and small! Broaden your view of the vocations God has called you to in *Callings for Life*. Find this title and others listed in this magazine at [cph.org/llresources](http://cph.org/llresources).

# The Finan

Being a pastor, teacher, director of Christian education (DCE), missionary, or other rostered church worker is not for the faint of heart. Church workers often are expected to fill a variety of roles and perform various duties that place heavy demands on their time and energy. However, while the demands of the office are substantial, the pay is not, often resulting in financial stress. According to a 2017 survey of worker wellness by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), 55 percent of all LCMS church workers have experienced stress due to financial concerns.<sup>1</sup> A 2011 survey of LCMS pastors and teachers by the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) also found that, due to financial pressures based on education debt, a full third (34 percent) of respondents felt a personal sense of failure or shame,<sup>2</sup> and more than half of all respondents (51 percent) reported that such debt negatively affects their ability to support healthy stewardship principles in the congregations they serve.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, 15 percent of LCMS church workers considered leaving their ministry work due to financial concerns, a figure that increased to 60 percent of the identified at-risk group populations, including newer and younger workers.<sup>4</sup> These financial pressures lead to or exacerbate burnout issues, marital problems, addictions, misconduct,<sup>5</sup> and a decreased focus on ministry. Ultimately, then, financial health is a key ingredient not only for family wellness but also for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deeds. It is an issue not primarily about money but about ministry.

Recognizing the impact of debt on wellness and ministry, a group of then-students from the 2015 graduating class of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, established MinistryFocus, a Recognized Service Organization of the LCMS that provides loan repayment assistance grants to rostered church workers. Funds for the grants come from individuals, congregations, and even a couple of LCMS districts. Each year MinistryFocus assembles a grants panel to review applications that require both quantitative and qualitative information and make grant decisions. As noted by MinistryFocus chair and president Rev. Ken Krueger, “I’ve shed more than a few tears over the years while reading the applications. Some workers and their families are in great need of assistance due to the educational debt they have incurred in order to serve as church workers.”

In January 2021, MinistryFocus announced the awarding of loan repayment assistance grants to fifty-four

LCMS rostered church workers from twenty-one states. Of the fifty-four, thirty-three are pastors, twenty are teachers, and one is a DCE. Each grant is worth \$2,500 for the year—an amount specifically targeted at helping the recipients with their educational loan payments. In response to learning about the grant, one recipient wrote, “THANK YOU. This grant has offered my family and me the opportunity to make payments with less stress and to continue on in Lutheran ministry. We are blessed—thank you!”

In total, MinistryFocus now has awarded 186 grants since 2015. Krueger notes, “As more and more people recognize the negative impact of debt on ministry, MinistryFocus has grown. We praise God for His grace and the generosity of His people! But we also know that the need is great. We are not able to award grants to everyone who needs one, so we pray for more people to support our workers in this way, so that they remain focused on serving God and not mammon.” ‡

<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, January 2019 supplement to *Reporter*, <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=FuZVw3mg3UNazFnx3Q8jy1bi4TFuq7Qy>.

<sup>2</sup> Behavior Research Center, Inc. for Lutheran Church Extension Fund, “Rostered Church Worker Survey,” April 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Weaver, K. J. Flannelly, D. B. Larson, C. L. Stapleton, and H. G. Koenig, “Mental Health Issues Among Clergy and Other Religious Professionals: A Review of Research,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Winter 2002, vol. 56, no. 4.



# cially Well Family



Additional information on MinistryFocus is available at  
[MinistryFocus.org](http://MinistryFocus.org).

Krueger, who also serves as CEO of the Lutheran Federal  
Credit Union, can be reached at [ken@ministryfocus.org](mailto:ken@ministryfocus.org).

# Q&A

## with Brenda Jank

Brenda Jank knows firsthand that every family is different. She and her husband, Tim, are the parents of five children, three of whom were adopted. When her children were young, Brenda wrote the children's book *God's Gift of Family* to celebrate that not every family is created the same way but every family is created by God to be unique, diverse, and loved. Here Brenda shares the grace-filled wisdom she has learned about God's gift of family.

**Q: How do you define the word *family*?**

**A:** There are many ways to define family. But for me, a family is made up of the people God places under one roof with the mission to love and be loved—to know and be known through thick and thin.

**Q: You often say that “families are miracles.” What makes them miracles? And how can recognizing family as a miracle impact the way we interact with our family members?**

**A:** We know and hear, again and again, that each individual soul is a miracle, God's gift of life, and this is worth celebrating at every turn. But families are also miracles, stunning in design. Even though husbands and wives choose each other, God sets into motion the creation of a family through their marriage, birth, adoption, guardianship, foster care, and other adventures. Family is a collection of people God ordains to share the same address.

Doing life together is the most important, and often the hardest, work of our lives. It takes grit, determination, stamina, and intimacy with God. Family is where God has done His finest work shaping me into who He wants me to be by revealing (up close and personally) my faults, failures, and misaligned priorities. Here

Jesus meets me with His cross and forever changes each step of my way. I am a work in progress. So is the crew I live with.

**Q: Having five children, you know there's no single cookie-cutter approach to teaching and parenting. When it comes to teaching the faith to children with different learning styles, interests, and abilities, what should parents (and teachers of the faith) keep in mind?**

**A:** Bottom line: more is caught than taught. The number one thing we need to do is fall in love with Jesus and do what we need to do to personally create a hunger for His Word. Write in your Bible. Include prayer requests and dates and highlights. These notes become river rocks (Joshua 4:4–9) that will allow you a lifetime of sharing with your kids all the Lord has done in your life. Also, pray with your children and over your children every night.

**Q: You said your two biological children were surprise miracles. What words of comfort would you give to couples who've been unable to conceive?**

**A:** Wrestling with infertility is difficult on good days and brutal on the hardest days. My ache drove me into the arms of God and the Book of Psalms. Many pages of my Bible are wrinkled with my tears. A great, comforting



verse is Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” We may not understand God’s plans, but we can take comfort that God knows our pain and is doing what is best for us.

**Q: You’ve shared that your children have taught you how to love unconditionally and how to rest well. What does it look like to rest well while seeking to love unconditionally? Have you any practical tips or examples—especially for new parents or the parents of kids with special needs?**

**A:** Visit this page on my website: [runhardrestwell.org/2020-vision-covid-19/](http://runhardrestwell.org/2020-vision-covid-19/). The section titled “Parents” has four articles you can peek at.

Here’s an excerpt from one, entitled “Mom’s Guide to Sabbath Rest”:

Find a body—any BODY warm enough and safe enough to keep your kids from “broken bones, blood, fire and flood” and then run.

RUN! Far away if necessary.

Sometimes I just hid in a bedroom or on the front porch, but I often slipped out of the house to a “quieter” corner somewhere close to home . . . Dairy Queen, coffee shop, a park or a friend’s back porch.

And once there, I reminded myself to breathe.

One hour. Two. Sometimes three.

It was a weekly gift, a treasure beyond compare.

How?

If you have a willing spouse, tag team! That’s what Tim and I did.

If you have an amiable neighbor or grandparent—ask!

If you have a friend with small children, swap “kid care” every other week for each other.

Hands down, this weekly (or bi-monthly) get-away was my sanity.

I knew I had two hours of calm and quiet coming my way every Sunday. For 120 minutes, I did not have to poke, prod or produce anything for anyone. I was off the hook, free—momentarily—of all responsibility.

**Q: You and your husband always knew you wanted to adopt—and you’ve adopted three children! Please share your heart for adoption and perhaps an exhortation to the Church about caring for kids without parents.**

**A:** Allow the things that break the heart of God to break our hearts, O Lord. That’s our prayer. There are 107,918 children and teens waiting to be adopted in the US. I can’t write this without my eyes stinging with tears. To be unwanted is a crushing blow.

We can never be guilted into adoption, but we must position ourselves to listen well. We don’t want to miss the call if Jesus is calling. If He does not call, be quick, available, and open to support families who adopt high-needs kiddos. It is a full-time job and then some. Biggest on the list: provide meals and help with shopping or respite care.

Tim and I often say our crew keeps us on our knees and on our toes. We still have three young adults at home full-time. Parenting high-needs children is the hardest, holiest work God has given us to do, but it keeps us surrendered and reliant. There is no other way. †

## About This Issue’s Authors



**Amy Bird** is a child of God and wife of Aaron. She holds an MA in systematic theology from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.



**Brian Davies** serves as pastor of Lord of Glory Lutheran Church in Grayslake, Illinois. He is chaplain for the Grayslake Fire Department, author, husband to Beth, and dad to Kate, Megan, and Luke.



**John D. Eckrich, MD**, is a board-certified internist and gastroenterologist and founded Grace Place Wellness Ministries, a retreat-based RSO designed to inspire healthy lives in LCMS professional church workers and their families.



**Rev. Mark R. Kiessling** serves as the director of LCMS Youth Ministry. In that role, he supports the leadership, service, resourcing, and networking functions of LCMS Youth Ministry.



## TESTIMONIALS

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WE ARE HUMBLLED AND BLESSED TO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE SEPTEMBER 2020 SHEPHERD'S CANYON RETREAT. WE WERE SPOILED BY THE GENEROUS VOLUNTEERS AND PROFESSIONALLY CARED FOR BY SKILLED COUNSELORS AND A CHAPLAIN, ALLOWING US TO FOCUS ON GROWING IN OUR FAITH AND CLOSENESS TO OUR LORD AND TO EACH OTHER. WE WERE EXPERIENCING CHALLENGES IMPACTING OUR PERSONAL LIVES AND MINISTRY, AND HINDERING OUR ABILITY TO SERVE OUR LORD, EACH OTHER AND OUR CONGREGATION. WHILE THE RETREAT WAS NOT INTENDED TO FIX OUR PROBLEMS OR CHALLENGES, IT PROVIDED US WITH TIME AND RESOURCES TO STOP AND LISTEN TO OUR LORD, OURSELVES AND OTHERS AS WE LEARNED SOME EXCELLENT TOOLS TO HELP US CONTINUE OUR JOURNEY OF GROWTH AND LOVE NOW THAT WE HAVE RETURNED HOME.”

– Steve and Wendy De Santo



“

AS AN ORDAINED LC-MS ACTIVE DUTY NAVY CHAPLAIN FOR 17 YEARS — SPENDING MOST OF THE LAST 15 YEARS AWAY FROM LOVED ONES TRAINING AND DEPLOYED — I BOTTLED UP FEELINGS FROM EXPERIENCES DURING COMBAT DEPLOYMENTS WITH MY MARINE INFANTRY UNITS. I WAS DEPLETED OF MUCH OF MY ABILITY TO FUNCTION AS A CHAPLAIN WITH GOOD MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH.

ALL OF MY CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGED IN A SHEPHERD'S CANYON RETREAT — I EXPERIENCED GOD'S GRACE AND HEALING IN A MIRACULOUS WAY! THE CHRISTIAN THERAPISTS WHO LED US OFFERED GENUINE LOVING CARE IN THEIR ONE-ON-ONE, COUPLE AND SMALL GROUP SESSIONS WHEREIN I RECEIVED PRACTICAL TOOLS TO APPLY AFTER LEAVING. THE CULMINATING CEREMONY IN THE PRAYER GARDEN OF THE LAYING AND CASTING OF STONES WAS THE MOST MOVING — CEMENTING THE GOOD WORK BEING DONE WITH A VISUAL REMINDER OF WHAT WE WERE LEAVING AT STANDING STONES AND TAKING AWAY WITH US FOR OUR GOOD.

I RETURNED TO MY MINISTRY AFTER THE RETREAT REFRESHED SPIRITUALLY TO GIVE AS NEEDED TO THOSE I AM ASSIGNED TO SHEPHERD. MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY WIFE WAS ALSO STRENGTHENED WITH A REVITALIZED AND GROWING LOVE! MOST IMPORTANT, MY RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS — MY FRIEND AND LORD — IS DEEPER AND STRONGER THAN EVER BEFORE. JESUS, BEING MY SOURCE FROM WHICH I LOVE MY WIFE AND MINISTER TO THOSE HE PROVIDENTIALLY ASSIGNS TO ME, NOW MORE EFFECTIVELY REACHES AND BENEFITS OTHERS THROUGH ME AS HIS VESSEL.”

– Rev. Marc DiConti

“

WHEN I ARRIVED AT SHEPHERD'S CANYON RETREAT (SCR), I DIDN'T KNOW IF I WOULD EVER STEP BEHIND A PULPIT AGAIN. I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IF MY MARRIAGE WOULD BE RESTORED. I WAS IN A VERY DARK PLACE, SUFFERING FROM BURNOUT AND DEPRESSION. I HAD FALLEN DEEP INTO A TRAP OF LIES THAT I WAS A FAILURE, THAT MY PAST GUILT AND SHAME DEFINED WHO I WAS AND HOW EVERYONE SAW ME. MY PERSONALITY HAD BECOME ONE OF CRITICISM, CONTEMPT AND DEFENSIVENESS. AFTER SPENDING A WEEK WITH THE COUNSELORS AND FELLOW PARTICIPANTS OF SCR, I REALIZED THAT I WAS NOT ALONE IN THIS DARK PLACE.

I CONTINUE TO HEAR THE LIES, BUT THANKS TO SCR AND THE TOOLS I RECEIVED, I NO LONGER LISTEN. WHILE I STILL HAVE THE DIAGNOSIS OF DEPRESSION, I AM MANAGING IT MUCH BETTER THROUGH CONTINUED COUNSELING AND MEDICATION. MY MARRIAGE IS FAR BETTER THAN IT HAS EVER BEEN. ALL THANKS TO GOD.

SINCE BEING A RETREAT PARTICIPANT, I HAVE SERVED AS A CHAPLAIN AT RETREATS AND SERVE ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS. I AM SO THANKFUL FOR THE MINISTRY WE HAVE AT STANDING STONES AND LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING HOW GOD WILL CONTINUE TO USE IT AS A PLACE OF HOPE AND HEALING FOR MANY MORE YEARS.

– Rich Steensma





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Scan for a 30-second video  
about Dakota Boys and  
Girls Ranch -->

<http://bit.ly/DakotaRanch>



Thank You for your prayers and financial support for the amazing children at Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch, a Recognized Service Organization of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Most of the children who come to the Ranch have little to no background of faith. The Ranch is often the only place they hear about Jesus. Grants from the LCMS and Lutheran Women's Missionary League districts, and gifts from individual members of LCMS congregations, give these precious, hurting children the chance to meet Jesus and discover how His love, grace, and peace can transform them.



## Sierra's story:

An overcomer who has known incredible pain

Fifteen-year-old Sierra endured a long history of trauma in her home. She's one of the few children we've worked with where the word "torture" was used to describe the extent of the abuse she suffered. She was removed from her mother's home at age 5. Since that time, Sierra has been in 15 foster care placements. She was fortunate enough to be adopted by a loving family. But the adoption began to unravel shortly after because of "acting out," which stems from an inability to develop close relationships, even with people who love her deeply.

Having run out of options, Sierra's family came to the Ranch for help. We immediately jumped in with comprehensive care that included therapy, a specially tailored school curriculum, and individualized strategies for healing her deep pain—all built on a foundation of faith. Though she has been through the worst that life can offer, Sierra demonstrates astounding resilience. She is an overcomer. A survivor. And she turns to God for protection. Sierra said, "I look to God and pray to God because I now know that I can't do everything, and I can't handle everything, no matter how much I may want to. I can't because I wasn't meant to. I was meant to go to God and let Him help me."



Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch is a Recognized Service Organization of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).

LCMS churches, organizations, and members make it possible for the Ranch to be a place of true healing for kids—a unique combination of ministry, therapy, and education. Thank you. Please continue to pray for our children and staff. If you would like to bless the children at Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch through your financial support, go to: [DakotaRanch.org/LCMS](http://DakotaRanch.org/LCMS)





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