

LAURA KEELEY AND
ROBERT J. KEELEY

Dear Parent

A Guide for Family Faith Formation





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Christian Reformed Church
**Faith Formation
Ministries**



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Foreword

Writing a book titled *Dear Parent* is a daunting task because we know that there are lots of times when we have made mistakes as parents. At first glance, this book might give the impression that we have it all together. That's pretty far from the truth. But, by the grace of God, we survived the process and now have four adult children who are on their own parenting journeys. In this book we tell many stories from our lives because these are the stories we know, not because we are such great examples. So please take these stories as an encouragement from two people who often needed encouraging.

We're grateful to our parents, Jerry and Marge VanderKooy and John and Ratie Keeley, who gave us good examples of Christian parenting. And we're grateful to our children (Bethany, Meredith, Bryan, and Lynnae) and their spouses (Justin, Micah, Melissa, and Andrew) for being great kids and great parents. We are exceedingly grateful for the gift of being grandparents to Joanna, Elouise, Clara, and Lucy.

Our colleagues at Faith Formation Ministries, Calvin College, and Calvin Theological Seminary have been very supportive of our work, especially those who have added their ideas and refinements to the Building Blocks of Faith concept. Our church, 14th Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, has served as a testing ground for many of our ideas. We appreciate the congregation for allowing us to minister there, and we thank our

pastors (Marv Hofman, David Bast, and Benj Petroelje), whose sermons have found their way into these chapters.

Laura Keeley and Robert J. Keeley

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CHAPTER 1

Growing Family Faith

Dear Parent,

For many Christian parents, the idea that part of our job is to nurture our children's faith is both encouraging and terrifying. It's encouraging because we want to help our kids know and love God. But it's terrifying because it can feel like so much is riding on our own flawed parenting, especially where faith formation is concerned.

It's tempting to leave faith formation to “the experts”—pastors, Sunday school teachers, Christian school teachers, youth group leaders, and others. But research studies by the Fuller Youth Institute and others show that parents are the most influential factor in faith formation.

Our goal in writing this book is to encourage you, to equip you, and to put to rest some of your fears as you help your children

- find their place in God's family,
- know God's story,
- live in hope,
- and discover their calling.

You Are Not Alone

Parenting is messy. It can feel as if you're being constantly tested. One Wednesday evening our family headed off to a church potluck dinner. When we arrived, we piled out of the car and gave each of the kids something to carry in. Eight-year-old Bryan got the pumpkin pie that was our main contribution to the meal. Then, about halfway between the car and the church building, we heard a SPLAT. The pie, lovingly prepared, was face-down in the parking lot.

That's what family life is like, isn't it? Kids spill milk, drop pies, and pitch fits in public. They forget to do their homework, stay out too late, and leave their coat or backpack at school. It's all part of the package.

Parenting can also be overwhelming. When we were living in Denver, far away from close family, our family grew quickly from one child to three when our twins were born. Laura's mom came to stay for a week to help out. One night, after we had given the babies baths and corralled our three-year-old into bed, Laura's mom looked at the two babies and said, "What a blessing!" Laura replied, "You know, right now all I see is a lot of work." That wasn't what we always saw, of course. But that night we were thinking about the two of us being on our own with three little kids, a full-time job, and graduate school.

There are some days when you can barely keep your head above water as a parent—days when you feel like you've accomplished a lot if your kids are fed and if most of them got out of their pajamas at some point.

If you're reading this book, though, you're also wondering about your role in helping your kids grow in faith. Maybe you're feeling the weight of that responsibility. Maybe you're worried you'll mess it up, or that your children's eternal destiny is in your hands. How can anybody carry that responsibility?

The good news—and it's VERY good news—is that it's not all on your shoulders.

Planting Faith Is God's Work

One of Bob's college students (we'll call her Kori), grew up with parents who were not Christians. When Kori was in high school, a friend invited her to church. Kori tried it, and she liked it.

The first Sunday after Kori got her driver's license, she got dressed for church and was ready to head out the door. When her parents asked what she was doing, she told them. They didn't like it. Her dad tried to stop her from leaving the house, but Kori was determined, and she went to church anyway. It stuck, and soon she was a fixture there. Upon graduation Kori decided to attend a Christian college, and now she is studying to be a youth pastor.

Third-grader Tess started to come to our church with her neighbor, Martha. Tess's mother didn't go to church, but Tess jumped at the invitation to go with Martha. Every Sunday she was dressed and ready to go to Sunday school at 9:15 and church at 10:30 with Martha. As a fifth grader, she requested her own mailbox at church. In sixth grade she started to bring food to church potlucks. When she was in eighth grade, Tess made profession of faith.

The only explanation for the faith that grew in Kori and Tess is that God was working in their hearts. Without the Holy Spirit moving them, Kori would not have faced down her dad and insisted that she was going to church. Tess would not have continued to show up at church and grow deeper in her faith.

God's movement and working are a mystery. It's something we can't control. As hard as we might work to give kids our faith, we can't. Faith is a gift from God.

Nurturing Faith Is Our Work

So, are parents off the hook, then? Can we just sit back and let the Holy Spirit do the work of growing faith in our kids?

Well, yes. And no. Even though what happens in a child's faith life is all up to God, God gives us an important role in helping to

shape that faith. Kori and Tess's faith was God's doing, but God used ordinary people doing ordinary things to bring God's Word to these girls.

A friend compares faith formation to sailing. If there is no wind, the boat won't go anywhere. Sailing is completely dependent on the wind. But a good captain makes sure the ship's sails are well tended and correctly positioned so that when the wind blows, the boat can catch it and move along in the water. Our job as parents (and as those who support parents) is to help the kids in our care be ready to feel the wind of the Holy Spirit in their lives whenever and wherever it blows.

Unfortunately, there are no perfect human models in the Bible for how to do that. It sure would be nice to open Scripture and find an example of a flawless family, wouldn't it? But that's not the book God gave us. Abraham, a man of faith, didn't trust God to give him a son, so he took his wife's handmaid and had a child with her (Gen. 16). Isaac wanted to give the birthright blessing to Esau, but his wife, Rebekah, wanted Jacob, her favorite, to receive it. So Rebekah and Jacob tricked Isaac into giving it to Jacob (Gen. 27). Later, Jacob clearly favored Joseph over his other children. That led to Joseph's being sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37).

There are lots of things those biblical parents got wrong. We make mistakes as parents too. But we also get lots of things right, and, despite our failings and imperfections, we can help our kids learn about God and their place in God's story.

Faith Forms in Everyday Moments

Kids, especially young kids, spend a lot of their time with their families. Families come in many shapes and sizes. Laura grew up with three siblings; Bob grew up with just one brother. Laura's grandparents lived hundreds of miles away; Bob's grandmother lived in his house. Maybe you're a single parent, or a grandparent

raising grandchildren. Regardless of what a family looks like, its adult members can have a big impact on the development of children's faith. And they do that primarily by modeling (or not modeling) faith in everyday moments.

What do those moments look like? They are amazingly ordinary. Holding hands, praying at the table, going to bed, playing with toys, driving a car pool, gaming together, raking a neighbor's leaves, talking about a bad day at school—those moments all have the potential to form faith. (So do the moments in which you yell at the driver who cut you off or get irritated because you had to wait in line at the grocery store again.) Thousands of these daily moments are the times in which we learn who we are, who God is, and what our relationship to God and others is.

Our daughter Meredith was reading a Bible story with our three-year-old granddaughter, Joanna. As Meredith read about how Jesus died on the cross, Joanna became more and more concerned. Meredith quickly moved on to explain that Jesus rose and is still alive in heaven making a place for us to be with him. Wide-eyed, Joanna asked, "I'm going to be with Jesus in heaven? Will they have *Frozen* toys there?"

At three years old, Joanna cannot really understand what heaven will be like. But she'll grow up and learn more about what it means to be a child of God. She'll learn what it means to accept the grace that is given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and what it means to live a life of gratitude and to try to be more like Jesus in all we do. But for now, we will just tell Joanna that heaven is full of good things, so yes—there are probably *Frozen* toys there.

Conversations like this happen in Christian homes every day. And that's where faith is formed. Let your family see that faith is part of your life. Faith formation is more about small moments that build up over time than it is about any one particular talk you have with your kids.

Faith Is Shaped in Community

As we've seen, faith is formed at home. But it's also formed in community.

Whether or not you grew up in a Christian community, take a few minutes to think back on all the people who have been instrumental in your own faith journey. Your parent(s) certainly had an influence one way or another, but there were probably also other people who played a role in your faith life: grandparents, pastors, teachers, friends. Some of these important people might have made an insightful comment here or there that helped you in one way or another. Others were in your life for the long haul, and their steady example and simple presence had a huge influence for good in your life. When you think back on these people, you can take comfort in the fact that you're not alone in shaping your child's faith.

When our son, Bryan, was offered a position as a youth pastor, his church held a session after worship on a Sunday morning so that the church could get to know the new guy. We went along to see what Bryan's new church was like—and what we saw surprised us. As the congregation asked Bryan questions about ministry and as he responded, we saw that he had absorbed a lot of the things that we thought were important and are at the heart of our own ministry. It turned out that, much to our surprise, Bryan had been paying attention!

But Bryan wasn't paying attention only to us. There were other adults who had helped to shape his life. A friend from church, some key teachers, and a few of his college professors had added their voices to ours to help him learn about faith and ministry. Your kids are paying attention too. They hear you and they see you as you walk your faith journey with them.

In addition to our families at home and our broader support systems, God has given us another family: the church. Just like our home families, the church is messed up and full of problems.

But, also just like our families, the church can be a place of grace and a place where God is at work in our lives. God has given you a community to walk along with you and your children. Make the most of them! As a parent, you can ask other adults to take an interest in your child's life. In fact, according to research by the Fuller Youth Institute, children and young people benefit immensely when they have at least five nonfamily adults who care about how their faith grows.

Your congregation is a great place to start as you think about who can support the faith formation of your children. Think about all the people who volunteer to work with kids in your church. In our congregation, there may be people who have been teaching Sunday school for 30 years. What a commitment to their church family! They speak into our kids' lives the same gospel that we do at home. But they do it in a way that we could not. So do pastors, youth leaders, and other church staff. But other people in your church can also support your child's faith in ordinary, everyday moments too.

There are people in your church who make a point of talking to young people after church on Sunday morning, whether it is about a ball game the night before or the latest book they have read. These people care about the child or teen's grades, their friendships, and their faith. These connections are meaningful and important, since they send a clear message that our children are valuable members of the congregation.

Faith Takes Practice

Music has been a big part of Bob's life and of our family life for a long time. A number of years ago Rod, a friend of ours, was at our house rehearsing to lead worship. He plays the trumpet, and as we were rehearsing, he said, "You know, maybe I should try playing bass. After all, it's only four strings. How hard can it be?"

So Bob handed an electric bass to Rod. Bob showed him which strings played which notes, explained that each fret represented a half-step, and told him to give it a try. Rod quickly realized that there is a huge difference between watching someone do something and actually doing it yourself.

We're all that way at times. It is easy to watch a pro quarterback throw a perfect spiral, but it's not so easy to do that yourself. We watch teachers teach, and we think it looks easy—until we actually have to be in charge of a classroom. Most of the time, we have to work at things to get better at them, and we usually need help to do it. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky called this the “Zone of Proximal Development.” This is the zone containing the knowledge that a person can learn when helped by or working with an adult or a peer who can already do it.

While “doing faith” looks a bit different from “learning French” or “practicing baseball,” providing opportunities for kids to learn and have experiences with faith practices is a great way to start them on their faith journey.

You don't have to be a theologian to help your family grow in faith. Start simple with things like prayer and Bible reading. For example, when you read from the Bible or a Bible storybook, don't just let the reading hang in the air. Say something about what you have read. Maybe it's something you wonder about. Maybe it's something that the passage reminded you of, or something that is especially meaningful to you, or a question you have. Talk about those things together. That's how faith grows!

More Than One Way

As a parent, you already know that raising each child is a unique experience. Each child has his or her own preferences and needs, and what works well for one child does not necessarily work well for others.

In the same way, helping kids learn what it means to accept God's gift of grace and to live lives of service is unique to each person. It is also not optional for Christian parents. As we noted before, our faith is being formed, whether we notice it or not. The books we read, the shows we watch, the games we play, and all the ways we spend our days are part of forming our faith.

But it is not a matter of just "do this" or "don't do that." Everyday life is messy. Spending time at the mall is a way to purchase clothes, but it also teaches us and entices us to view consumerism as a way of life. A walk in the mall can have us drooling with envy for things we or our kids don't need or for things that will use up our time. It is insidious the way the mall culture can enter our lives. We buy into it without even thinking about it.

We want to have our lives filled with moments, memories, and habits of faith. It seems hard to believe that faith is formed when we're teaching a child to tie a shoe or to pick up their pajamas from the floor. But faith is formed when we respond to our kids' mistakes and when we sit with them at the doctor's office. Faith is being formed all the time, whether we realize it or not.

Our daughter taught our granddaughter Joanna a sung prayer, to the tune of "Frère Jacques." The words are simple:

God our Father / God our Father
once again / once again
thank you for our blessings / thank you for our blessings
Amen / Amen

As a three-year-old, Joanna started leading us in this prayer. After her baby sister was born, she and Laura were holding little Clara together. Laura said, "You can talk to her. She knows your voice. Or you could sing to her." So there, as Joanna held and looked at her three-day-old sister and thought about what to sing, she sang the song she was used to singing: "God our Father. . . ." This prayer song first got into her head and on her lips. Then it worked its way into her heart. And that's how faith is formed!

DISCUSSION OR THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- What or who helped you grow in faith when you were a child or older?
- What are your hopes for your kids' spiritual life?
- What are your anxieties about helping your kids grow in faith?
- Does it help to know that your job is to nurture faith rather than produce it? How?
- What resources does your church provide to help families grow in faith?

LIVING IT OUT

- Spend some time in prayer, asking God to guide you as you help your children grow in faith and as you grow in your own faith too.
- Consider asking an older or more experienced parent to mentor you, meeting regularly to talk honestly about questions and concerns in your family's faith life.
- Identify the moments when you can most meaningfully weave faith into your daily routine. Maybe it's at bedtime, at mealtimes, or after school, when kids are often full of joys or woes. Maybe identifying a "family sabbath time" would work well. Experiment until you land on a pattern that works for you.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- *Everyday Family Faith* by Sandy Swartzentruber. This small pocket guide from Faith Formation Ministries helps your family build strong faith habits together

and make time for God in everyday life. For each day of the week, there are simple, creative ideas for exploring Bible verses, talking about faith in daily life, and praying together, as well as fun activities to do. (FaithAliveResources.org)

- *Home Grown Handbook for Christian Parenting* by Karen DeBoer. This handbook gives you practical, real-world advice about how to help your kids know and love God—and how to build a home where you can grow in faith together. It covers 111 common questions parents ask. (FaithAliveResources.org)
- *Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family* by Kara Powell. This book arises from the innovative, research-based, and extensively field-tested project known as “Sticky Faith,” designed to equip parents with insights and ideas for nurturing long-term faith in children and young people. It’s based on the Fuller Youth Institute’s six years of research with more than 500 young people, 100 churches, and 50 families. (Zondervan)
- *Teach Us to Pray: Scripture-Centered Family Worship Through the Year* by Lora Copley and Elizabeth Vander Haagen. This family devotional guide follows the lectionary, providing daily readings along with songs, prayers, and activities. (CICW Books; Amazon.com)

Dear Parent

Studies show that you are the most influential person in the faith formation of your children. For most of us, that's both exciting and terrifying.

It's exciting because we want our kids to know and love God and their neighbor. It's terrifying because it can feel like there's a lot riding on our flawed parenting. But faith is a gift from God, and you are not alone!

Using the framework of the Building Blocks of Faith, this book will encourage you as you help your children to

- find their place in God's family,
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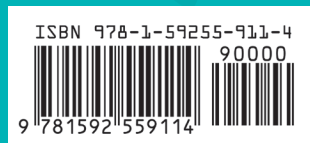
ROBERT J. KEELEY is professor of education at Calvin College and visiting professor of discipleship and faith formation and director of distance education at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Between the two of them, they have authored or edited *Celebrating the Milestones of Faith*, *The Church Staff Handbook*, *Helping Our Children Grow in Faith*, *Shaped by God*, and *Together We Worship*, as well as numerous articles, Christmas plays, church curriculum materials, and a pre-calculus textbook. Laura and Bob have four children and four grandchildren.



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