

Family affair: Rich Melheim on how faith is formed

Cover Story in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue



Above illustration by Dave Cutler. Below photo courtesy of Rich Melheim.

Rich Melheim was pastor of several Lutheran churches in Minnesota before starting Faith Inkubators, which produces materials designed to make the home the primary incubator of faith. He has written and produced books, songs and plays for children and youth, and he is a frequent consultant and speaker on faith formation and family ministries. In 2009, he launched the FAITH 5, an effort to get parents involved in their own kids' faith life every night.

You've stressed the importance of linking church and home in the work of Christian formation. What do you have in mind?

Right now I am testing a simple five-step process I call FAITH 5. I am asking parents and kids to commit themselves to five minutes a night of simple faith encounters. Families are asked to drop what they're doing as soon as the first kid is ready for bed and walk through these five steps: 1) share your highs and lows of the day; 2)

read a verse of scripture from Sunday's preaching or teaching text; 3) talk about how the highs and lows of the day relate to the scripture (is God actually saying something to you?); 4) pray for one another's highs and lows; and 5) bless one another before turning out the lights on the day.

Does this model assume a nuclear family at the center? Is that assumption warranted? Some kids get dropped off at church. How do we take them into account?

This model assumes that someone cares enough to want to make sure a kid knows he or she is loved. Peter Benson of Search Institute, who died in October, championed the idea of getting adults to surround kids with love, encouragement and faith. His 30 years of research showed that one mentor is better than none, two is better than one, and three are multiplicatively better than



Parents are usually the most influential and

important of all. Yes, some kids get dropped off at church, and we need to set up systems to encourage them. But letting parents off the hook and hiring a youth worker to do the parents' job is just plain stupid. Parents have been, are and always will be the most important faith guides, mentors and teachers a kid will ever have.

If you're a leader in the church today, you've got to be a systems thinker. It's idiotic to think that you can solve a systems problem by ignoring the most important part of the system. And parents are the most important part. Period.

Many parents feel like they aren't equipped to talk about faith. How do you alter that view? What do you say to them?

Parents will do things for their kids that they would never do for themselves. If you make it an expectation—rather than a request—that parents be in church and in Sunday school with their kids, you'll find out that it happens. However high you set the bar, that's where most people will end up. If you say, "Just drop 'em off and we'll take care of 'em," that's what most people will do. If you say, "Hey, you've got to drop 'em off, stay for the opening and you'll get the new Bible verse and story for your nightly faith encounter this week," that's what most people will do. If you say, "You have to pick them up, too, so why not come in for the closing prayers and hold their little bodies in your loving arms?" that's what most people will do.

If you say, "We don't have age-segregated Sunday school taught by volunteer teachers any more. We're all about helping you hold your family together in a world that can tear it apart, so we're canning Sunday school and doing edu-worship for families and those who love them. Come for the hour." (In a lot of churches, IHS stands for "one-hour service.") Within three years, you'll get most parents and kids worshipping and learning together.

Is there a need for educating parents in faith or Bible basics before they can effectively teach kids, or does everyone just dive in?

I like the learn-as-you-go plan. If the parents are there with the kids, they'll actually learn more than the kids. There's an old Chinese proverb: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." Who's more ready to talk about "honor your father and mother" or "daily bread" or "you shall not commit adultery"? The parent is the perfect student for remedial Christian education. We just have to be sneaky enough to get parents involved.

It's a truism that children model the faith they see. So what kind of faith do children see around them?

Is modeling important? It is the only thing that is important. It is the only way we learn. What kind of faith do children see around them? Now that's a topic for an article of its own.

How does your thinking about faith formation shape how you view what goes on during the worship hour? That is, what's your message to worship leaders?

Worship leaders have to ask themselves: What are we trying to accomplish in the

worship hour? Putting on a show just doesn't cut it in the post-television era. Providing one close encounter with God a week is OK, I suppose, but why settle for just that? What would happen if you reframed worship as the beginning point of a week of engagements with the text, the people's lives and prayer?

If people are turning off the TV and the computer and sharing highs and lows, reading God's word, applying it to their lives, holding one another's highs and lows up to God in prayer and sharing the blessing touch—that's liturgy. It may be more liturgy than liturgy is liturgy for most people. It is also worship. If Sunday can be the kickoff day for seven days of nightly worship for 100 families, you'll be multiplying the effectiveness of your ministry 700 times.

So you see worship connecting explicitly to the nightly activities?

Yes, I see Sunday worship integrating thematically with—and kicking off—themes for nightly faith encounters.

What tools do those who work in Christian education need to be successful?

A Bible. A story. The people's stories. And a system that connects text to context on a regular basis.

What's the biggest mistake churches make as they develop programs for children and youth?

The biggest mistake is that they're developing programs and trying to be program directors *for* kids and families instead of ministry encouragers *with* kids and families.

You started Faith Inkubaters in 1994. Have the social changes over the past two decades, in media or the family, caused you to think differently about faith formation? What have you learned in that time?

The last question is the easiest. I've learned that I'm not as smart as I thought I was 15 years ago. I've learned that the really brilliant people are those ministering in their contexts with passion and with their ears close to the culture and subcultures around them. I've learned that the real faith incubators aren't paid professional church staff but parents and guardians who make a point every night to turn off the computer, put down the newspaper, set the cell phone on silence and engage with the kids they love like they're the most precious people in the whole world.

The culture has changed dramatically when it comes to sex, drugs, media and economics, but a few things have stayed the same: Kids still need champions. Kids

still need encouragers. Kids still need someone in their face and in their faith. And parents are just big kids who need all that too.

Children and youth today live in a world saturated with media and technology. How do these tools need to be resisted or used by the church?

The year 2005 was a watershed year in the history of human technology, and yet it came and went without so much as a blip on the radar screen of the church. It was the year when the teenagers of America and much of the developed world started spending more time online than in front of the TV. They entered a world that Leonard Sweet calls EPIC (experiential, participatory, image-driven and connected). If your worship, your education, your youth ministry, your every encounter at church isn't engaging young people in experiences that touch them deeply, that they shape by being there, and that connects them with their friends and their God, you're trying to plug an AC model into a DC outlet. It's just not going to work.

For the past 50 years, churches have been living in a world in which I teach, you listen, and I try to be entertaining enough to keep your attention for seven and a half minutes (about the length of time before a television commercial comes up). That world is gone. If the kids aren't engaged from the get-go, if their input, their questions, their knowledge, their cares, their experience aren't at the core of the system you design, you've just decided to preach and teach to a congregation that doesn't exist.

Churches that have confirmation programs typically see a big dropoff in youth participation after the youth are confirmed. So what is the problem?

Why don't your kids don't come back after confirmation? It's because they were never there. Their bodies may have been sitting in your chairs, but their hearts and minds were far from you.

So how do you get them "there" when they are there?

We need to end the "class mentality"—offering classes—and start thinking about living out discipleship during the adolescent years. (Do this well and you'll be known as "the church with no class"!)

Jesus, who was a relatively old man in his day, probably got hold of his disciples when they were in their mid-teens. In his day, that was the time when people were supposed to get married, get a job and start contributing in a rather adult way. Those who took off to follow an itinerant rabbi for a few years had it pretty darn

good.

And how did Jesus take them from their nets and tables and homes and stables? He saw something in them and offered them a real calling: "Follow me and I'll teach you how to fish for people." And later: "Take up your cross."

Now that's a challenge for a young, hormonal, impetuous, idealistic change-the-world teenager if I ever heard one. Jesus' call was to do something impossible, difficult, challenging, but ultimately worth it. If you want to get them "there" when they're there, you've got to ask something great of them. Live where they live, love where they love, struggle where they struggle, and if you're really going to be like Jesus, don't forget to go fishing now and then. This requires a totally different mind-set than being a "sit still while I instill" sage on a stage.

How do you define a successful church program for high school-age youth?

The problems with that question have to do with three words: *program*, *for* and *success*. I define successful youth ministry as youth doing ministry, not youth doing programs. Most teens today don't have time for one more program. They're programmed out. If you are trying to put on a program for them, you'll be fighting a losing battle. They're overbooked, overstressed, overcommitted and overstimulated, and they are underimpressed by your programs. They don't need one more program. What they need is meaning.

Meaning comes about when a teen—or anyone, for that matter—has five things going on in their core community: 1) giving in a significant way; 2) receiving in a significant way; 3) a bite-sized ministry in an area of their gifts and passions; 4) intimacy; and 5) fun (it's not a four-letter word).

If your youth ministry allows them to do ministry where they are giving of themselves, getting a lot back, it isn't overtaxing, it's allowing them to know and be known at the depth of their being (thus the importance of small groups for care and prayer) and it's fun, you won't be able to keep them away.

What reading and research has inspired or challenged you lately?

The scariest youth ministry book I've read lately is Kenda Creasy Dean's *Almost Christian*. It's full of research about what's coming down the pike for the church. Not pretty.

The best blueprint for what to do about all this in the greater church is *Jesus Manifesto*, by Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola. It's all about getting back to Jesus and beyond institutions.

The best youth ministry book I've ever read, and the one must-read for anyone wanting to start a revolution in, with and under kids, is George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. In that story, what is the first thing the pigs do when they take over the farm? They kidnap the puppies, train them and bring them back as tough young dogs, ready to reinforce the revolution. If the church is going to have any future, we've got to kidnap the puppies.

The most useful article I've read lately is "Why would musical training benefit the neural encoding of speech? The OPERA hypothesis," by Aniruddh D. Patel (*Frontiers in Auditory Cognitive Neuroscience*). It's about how music creates overlap, precision, emotion, repetition and attention in the brain. I'm using this hypothesis to design a model for preschools. I aim to design a preschool of the performing arts that brings "access to excellence" to the poorest of the poor and then apply that model to church planting. (Don't start a church, start a preschool that happens to worship on Sundays.)

What's your ultimate goal in all this?

To bring Christ to families and families to Christ, every night in every home. To strengthen the church, one family at a time and one night at a time. To create a church where seven-eighths of the Bible study, prayer ministry and pastoral care is being done off-site every night. To hold families together in a world that could tear them apart. To see a shoot coming forth from the mainline stump of Jesse before the mainline becomes the flat line. And to let pastors go to sleep every night in peace, knowing they're part of a system that multiplies what they do.