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## **PLANNING FOR FAMILY MINISTRY: FAITH MILESTONES**

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It's the planning issue. It's springtime outside and planning time inside congregations. But, really, what does this have to do with family ministry? Can't we just have a few fun family events? Maybe even a retreat? We could throw in a service opportunity. How about a children's Christmas pageant? That gets families there. Okay, what's next?

Wait just a minute: that's not all there is to planning for ministry to, for and with families. Let's rewind and take it from the top.

### **FOR WHOM ARE WE PLANNING?**

That is the first – and formative - question. For whom? Families. What kind of families? Which ones?

Jesus defined family broadly in Mark 3:33-35.

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Paul and the other epistle writers picked up on Jesus' inclusive view of family. Should the church do any less? Aren't we, too, called to expand the circle to include all of the generations, families with children, families without children and singles? Can't we welcome families of all different sizes and descriptions? In ministry with children and youth in congregations, all of us have seen the kids who come by themselves, without the presence or support of those to whom they are related by birth, adoption, marriage or foster care. Can't we welcome all in Jesus' name and make room for them all in the family of God, the church?

That being said, is it all right to plan a class or a celebration event or a worship service for families whose infants are going to be baptized? Of course. But also invite the grandparents and godparents, aunts and uncles, the babysitter and neighbor, the family friends who love the baby and the baby's immediate family.

### **WHAT WILL WE DO?**

Let's plan to celebrate faith milestones! What is a milestone? A faith milestone is a marker along life's journey that says, “This is something important and God is here, too.” It is time to pause, to share the joys and sorrows, to give and receive support.

Who is in charge? Home? Or congregation? Yes! Households, families and friends are crucial; they are, after all, the domestic church. So, too, is the congregation; it is the public church. Need some help in this special ministry?

Most of us grew up in households and congregations that did not name faith milestones or mark them. Most of us marked some of them ... but we may not have looked for what God might be doing with us. We didn't see them all as markers on our faith journey. We can begin today being deliberate about looking for opportunities to name and claim God's presence in the new, the changing times in our lives.

What are some of the milestones on the lifelong faith journey? Look through this list and think about the ones you already celebrate in your congregation or in your home. What might be another one or two you'd like to mark in your congregation?

- BAPTISM
- BAPTISM BIRTHDAY
- LEARNING TO PRAY
- STARTING CHURCH SCHOOL
- STARTING NURSERY SCHOOL
- FRIENDSHIPS
- STARTING SCHOOL
- FIRST COMMUNION
- MOVING TO A NEW HOME
- GETTING A PET
- THE DEATH OF A PET
- ENTERING MIDDLE SCHOOL
- CONFIRMATION
- ENTERING HIGH SCHOOL
- GETTING A DRIVER'S LICENSE
- GRADUATION
- LEAVING HOME
- ENTERING COLLEGE
- BEGINNING THE "REAL" JOB
- MARRIAGE
- BIRTH OR ADOPTION OF A CHILD
- END OF A RELATIONSHIP
- CHRONIC OR ACUTE ILLNESS OR INJURY
- RECONCILIATION IN A RELATIONSHIP
- LEAVING A HOME
- ENTERING ASSISTED LIVING, LONG TERM CARE OR HOSPICE
- DEATH OF A LOVED ONE
- GRIEVING LOSSES
- And so many more

How might we mark those milestones? Of course, each will be unique, but here is a template of things to consider, including :

COME TOGETHER - We may come together in worship, congregational event, Christian education, the family table at a special meal, a party or two friends sitting together.

NAME THE MILESTONE – Give it a name and talk about what it means.

OFFER A BLESSING AND GIVE A MOMENTO – A simple prayer, a litany, a blessing given by one who cares and a small gift (candle, flower, book, ornament, or any small and tangible reminder) make this memorable.

SUPPORT THE MILESTONE WITH RESOURCES – Find an age appropriate book that helps us go deeper and understand how God is at work in this moment, this event.

## HOW WILL WE DO IT?

Let's use the Four Keys for Nurturing Faith. Let's Four Key everything! Anytime we gather as family or as the family of God to mark a milestone, we do most or all of the Four Keys:

- CARING CONVERSATION – There is always time to talk, time to listen. We are together, heart to heart.
- FAMILY DEVOTIONS (OR FINDING GOD IN THE EVERYDAY) – These are all opportunities to call on God's name, be in God's presence and invoke God's blessing.
- RITUALS AND TRADITIONS – That is what faith milestones are!
- FAMILY SERVICE – At each milestone, there are opportunities for serving – the one whose milestone is being marked or service to others as a way to commemorate the milestone.

## WHERE WILL WE DO IT?

Let's plan to do some of the family ministry of celebrating faith milestones in the home, some in the congregation, some in worship, some in fun and faith events, some in service sites, some on retreats or at camp. Hmmm ... maybe some could even be done in the car!

## WHO DOES THE PLANNING?

The usual answer is "the church professionals." And they could do it. But, think about how much more creative, expansive and innovative it would be to partner church professionals with families in ministry teams to do the planning. Not only does this keep busy church professionals from burnout or overload or having to postpone family ministry until there is more time, but families feel invested in this ministry. It is a win for everyone.

## WHEN DO WE PLAN?

Today is a great day to begin! If you haven't celebrated many of the faith milestones in your congregation, look carefully at the ones you do celebrate. What do people love about them? What is missing? What is one thing you might add to make it even more effective?

What is one faith milestone you'd like to add this year? Why would you do this one? What difference will it make? Who might like to join you in the planning and execution?

You're off and running. God's blessings to you as you celebrate faith milestones.

#### NEED MORE IDEAS AND RESOURCES?

TOGETHER IN FAITH is Sunday School curriculum, 2-3 sessions each year from age 3 –5<sup>th</sup> grade, celebrating a faith milestone for each age. It includes families and friends and all of the congregation. Everything you need – letters to invite the parents, publicity, lesson plans and handouts – are included.

MILESTONES MINISTRY MANUAL helps congregations become the training ground for all of the loving adults in the lives of children, giving them the skills and resources to nurture faith at all of the faith milestones in a young person's life. All 16 milestones have a litany and blessing for public worship; cross+generational education and experiences to teach about the milestone; and a Four Keyed sheet to take home, to extend the milestone celebration.

FOR EVERYTHING A SEASON: 75 BLESSING FOR DAILY LIFE is a compilation of blessings for seasons of the church year, seasons of our lives together, important experiences in daily life, and so many others. It includes blessings for a pregnancy or adoption, stillbirth or miscarriage, getting a new pet, the death of a pet, surgery, marriage, end of a relationship, new job, job loss ... all of those things that make up our daily lives.