

New life among us

Gathering to reflect on the changes parenting brings

Deborah Organ

IT WAS ANY NIGHT IN (ALMOST) ANY PARISH CHURCH. There was a group of people positioned in a circle, waiting for a meeting to begin, and exhibiting varying levels of interest. This is the first in a series of baptism preparation sessions, and here is a little bit of background on the people attending tonight:

Denise and John have been married for eight years, and have two children. They recently made the decision to have Denise stay home with the children. Denise just doesn't know where the time goes with an active three-year-old and an infant at home all day. She almost can't remember when she could drink a cup of coffee when she wanted to, or go to the bathroom alone. She is grateful to have the option of staying home with the children, but sometimes misses the stimulation of the workplace. Because the care of her children allows her to do very little else during the day, sometimes those days are long. She knows her identity is shifting to that of a stay-at-home mother, but, even though her husband is supportive, she struggles sometimes with who she is and who she would like to be for herself, her husband and her children.

Harry and Samantha are a professional couple who have wanted to have a baby for a long time. Finally, they have a little girl. They are ecstatic, but hadn't really been prepared for all the changes her advent would bring to their lives. Suddenly, they aren't able to be quite as focused on their work as they had been, and they worry constantly about whether their baby is in the right kind of childcare situation. They often wonder whether they are capable of being really good parents, and the guilt at leaving her in childcare gnaws at Samantha. They already notice a shift in some of their goals and their lives are centred on this little person. Due to sleep deprivation and the sheer number of

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commitments in their lives, they are not sure how to be together as a couple any more.

Tammy is a single mother of three children, ages seven, five and two. The father of the children left the family a couple of years ago, and Tammy is trying to build a life for her children. It is very difficult to make ends meet, especially with no child support. Tammy marvels at how important it is to her that the children have what they need. She remembers abuse and isolation as being present in her childhood, and vows to keep these elements out of her children's lives. This is challenging because of the hurt that Tammy still harbours. She feels more motivation than ever before to try and conquer some of her own fears for the sake and future of her children. She wants them to belong, and she looks for ways that they can become part of the larger community.

Chris and Julia have a six-month-old baby girl. Since her birth, they feel closer than ever and are joyfully noting each new aspect of her development. They are planning to baptize the baby mostly because their parents think that baptism is very important. Julia and Chris, while they consider themselves to be spiritual people, have seldom gone to church and do not see a need to at this time.

Sheila and Jack are parents of a little boy, five, and a little girl, nine months. Jack refused to come to the meeting because he had been drinking, and didn't think much of the church anyway. Sheila would like to create a stable environment for her children, and her faith has always meant a great deal to her. Life hadn't been so bad before the kids, but now she knows she has to make some hard choices.

Steve and Rachel are first-time parents of a baby boy. Steve has noticed that, lately, Rachel is not taking much of an interest in the baby and is spending a lot of time crying. He asks her what is wrong, but she just can't seem to put a finger on it. Steve is doing all of the housework and cooking, in addition to his full-time job. He worries sometimes about leaving Rachel and the baby alone when Rachel is so sad.

Jorge and Maria have four children, ten, eight, five and sixteen months. Their youngest child has Down's Syndrome, which came as a complete surprise to them. They deeply love all of their

children, and they are working as a family to adjust to the idea of having a special-needs child. It is difficult sometimes, as the reactions that they may get from people indicate the challenges that little Rosa has ahead of her in her life from people who don't understand. Most of their family is far away in Mexico, and they feel isolated as they struggle to meet this new challenge.

This is the group. This is a group that could probably come together in most parishes, and these people are certainly dealing with issues that are crucial, and common, in the lives of young families. Now I will explore their reasons for being here at this church, at this meeting, and the hopes and expectations that they bring with them. Then I will discuss possible ways that a parish community can respond to the needs and questions that many young families have.

Why are they here?

The people in this room, we assume, are here at least partly because they desire the sacrament of baptism for their children. Going a little deeper, however, we see that families seek this sacrament, and membership and participation in the Church itself, for many different reasons. Some of these reasons were alluded to in the introductions. There are some young families for whom the Church has always been a comfort and an inspiration, and they wish to offer this experience to their children. There are some people who have not had much direct experience with church themselves (at least for many years) but who promised themselves that they would get involved when they had children, in order to help set up a desirable set of values for their children. There are some people who have not had the experience, but still harbour an almost secret hope that the Church can fill a certain emptiness in their lives. Some of these families are deeply spiritual people who have, for whatever reason, lost confidence in the institutional Church yet still desire the sacrament for their children because of ingrained tradition. Still others are present, at least at the class, because of the desire of other family members (usually parents and grandparents) for baptism of the infant, though the parents themselves have no intention of participating in the life of the Church. This catalogue of reasons could go on and on. But here they are, and, regardless of their commitment or lack thereof to parish life, they come with many concerns.

What they carry with them

Some of the life-concerns of this group are mentioned in their introductions. Many of these concerns revolve around the forming of connections, with their children, their spouses, other family members and also with the larger community.

Forming connections in what is often a fragmented society can be challenging on many levels. Some parents, particularly those who are staying at home with their children, may face isolation from other adults during large parts of their days, though their rhythm of life and the needs of their children may make it difficult to find ways of connecting with other adults. Parents who work outside the home may see and deal with a lot of people, but in the quest to balance family and profession, sometimes it is hard to cultivate relationships below the surface level.

All of these families are seeking connection with the Church at this time, on whatever level. The presence of these families in the parish hall presents a very important pastoral challenge and opportunity to the Church of today.

Do we accept the challenge?

Despite the ever-growing number of young families in parish communities, service to young parents in the midst of their questions and concerns is a gap in the offerings of many churches. Many pastoral and educational resources are expended on their children, on older children, and on others who have specific needs. Perhaps this gap of services to young parents exists in part because service that would be meaningful to them in their life situations might not fit into traditional pastoral plans and resource allocations in church communities. Heavy attention to the pastoral and educational needs of children is justified by reminding us that we are forming the Church of tomorrow. The challenge I issue here is that we as church communities open our minds and hearts to focus on the Church of today, of which young parents are a part. I turn now to possible ways to begin doing this.

Beginning the dialogue

Back to our baptismal preparation group. Pastoral experience has shown me that baptism can be an important gateway in beginning to connect with young parents and learn what their needs and concerns are. Many parents approach the Church for baptism, for many reasons, as was previously stated. Baptism preparation can become a connection point for parents in three main ways. The first is to present the meaning

of baptism and its attending symbolism in a way that speaks to the experience and challenges of their lives. Second, the chances that a connection will form for any participant are greatly enhanced by structuring the sessions so that they provide a safe and nurturing environment in order for the participants' concerns to begin to surface. Third, once some connection is formed, the pastoral agent can introduce the other resources that the parish has to offer that may help these families in their lives and challenges.

The sacrament of baptism

Some people come to a baptism preparation session with an understanding, or at least a comfortable memory, of baptism and the symbols surrounding it. This may in fact be part of what draws some of these people to the Church at this time. For some these symbols may seem archaic, or at least without connection to what is important to them. The challenge, therefore, to the pastoral agent, is to present background to the sacrament in a relevant way that inspires reflection and dialogue.

Water as an agent of life

The nature of water itself is significant here. Water is an agent of life, and none of us can live without it. We acknowledge in baptism that it is God who gives us this life, and nurtures it in us. We remember that it is Jesus who died and rose so that we might live for ever. Water can also bring death and destruction. In baptism, we celebrate Jesus' promise of forgiveness, i.e. the death of our sins. Discussion of sin in the baptism preparation process can be very stimulating for people who are coming into an adult faith. I have found it helpful to introduce original sin as the general experience of the world being 'out of kilter'. All of us are born into a world in which there is a great deal of sin and we are also born with the potential within us to choose sin. Considering this can lead to a fruitful exploration of the manifestations of sin at the personal and communal levels.

Water as an agent of hope

The waters of baptism remind us that Jesus is stronger than sin, and that he promises to share his strength with us. We celebrate the call to community and the ability that we have to stand up to evil, both as it exists around us and within us. We celebrate the promise of forgiveness when we make the wrong choices, and the chance to try again. In baptism, we own both Jesus' strength and his forgiveness as symbolized by the water, and we celebrate his ultimate victory.

Woven through the discussion of this aspect of baptism are the struggles that the participants bring with them. The more specific and relevant the discussion is, the more strengthened the parents will feel.

Chrism: we are priests, prophets and kings

We anoint the newly baptized as priest, prophet and king along with Jesus. Looking at what each of these roles means can lead to interesting discussions of Christian commitment, what it means and what it costs, along with the mutual support of a community of faith that helps to witness these core aspects of Christian identity to the children.

We are anointed priests in the sense that we are called to service. This is a good opportunity to explore the action component of the Christian mission. Action and attitude are key here. Jesus perceived and responded to the needs of others with great passion and every fibre of his being. In baptism, we promise to do the same, and to teach our children to live in this way.

An in-depth look at chrism can make people see the nature of the sacrament of baptism in a different way. Baptism may become less of a social passage and more of a commitment on the part of parents to deepen their own faith. We are called to be prophets in the sense that we are called to speak the truth, even when it is uncomfortable and risky. Christians are called to speak the truth even when it is counter-cultural. Truth is a major issue in raising young children, as they go through stages of varying ability to distinguish between truth and fiction. Discussion of what the truths are that are worth standing up for can be valuable here, and also sharing of stories centred on the courage it takes to tell the truth can be valuable. This discussion of truth also may help someone like Sheila (whose husband has a drinking problem) to face her husband with the truth that his drinking is causing pain for the family, and ask him to get help.

We are anointed kings in the sense that there is the touch of the sacred in each one of us, that is never removed no matter what happens. Looking at the extent to which we have been able to preserve this sense of ourselves can lead to how to give children a sense of their identity as sacred and loved.

Candle: light in the darkness

Jesus as our light in darkness symbolized by the candle offers much scope for exploration of the manifestations of darkness in our lives and of the hope that is offered to us as people of God. I have found that this is when a number of painful issues can arise, as well as concerns about the many changes that child-rearing brings. Spoken of in a context of

honesty and hope, this can be the beginning of a nourishing and strengthening reflection that continues, and links daily experience of parents with their faith commitment.

Before moving on, I would like to make special note of the importance of good training for the pastoral agents and other facilitators of these groups. I often trained couples with children to be the main facilitators, and when choosing people I found it important to pick people with good listening skills and the ability to stimulate conversation. A focus on hospitality and the ability to exude that warmth and welcome are also crucial. These facilitators are often the first church people in a long time to address the people who are participating in these sessions. Also, many people come to church events with the expectation that they will be 'done unto' in the sense of being passive observers of what is going on. Thus, to some, the concept of participation at a church meeting is new and might be met with some resistance. The climate of trust should be established as much as possible to give people freedom to participate, while at the same time leaving room for those who need to hang back for a while. As a professional pastoral agent, I found it helpful to attend the sessions myself as well, both to welcome the participants, and also to gather important information about their concerns.

Back to the group. After initial introductions, a possible way to begin moving into the area of baptism would be for the facilitator to say something like this:

As your children are immersed in the waters of baptism, they are immersed in a lifestyle as part of a Christian community. God has always called human beings into community, and Jesus made communal life an important and clear part of his message. As parents, this message is even more crucial. We in the western world often seem to value the individual over the community. Jesus understood this differently, and called his followers together in community because he could see that they needed each other. Baptism reminds us that you and your children are clothed with dignity and love from the very beginning, and that we are invited to recognize, value and act on this dignity and love.

Questions such as 'Baptism is about connection – connection with God and with each other. When was a time when you really connected with someone? What was that like?' and 'What is there about life and the

values of our society that make it hard to connect with each other?' or 'Moments like baptism call to mind what is really important about our lives. What do you think is most important in your life and family?' or 'Have you ever made a choice that seemed to run counter to societal values? What was that like?' can be answered on many levels and can stimulate dialogue. This can be followed up with information on the history of baptism, the other symbols surrounding it, and specifics about that particular community's way of celebrating the sacrament.

This information, presented in pieces with discussion questions, can inform people and also let them know they are not alone in their concerns. The discussion may make some new connections for someone like Denise (the new stay-at-home mother), enabling her to see that, in her decision to stay home with her children, she is witnessing in a proactive way to her faith and values. This may help to sustain and affirm her in the process of adjusting to her new situation, and in the difficult moments when she wonders if she made the right decision.

The discussion itself, then, can be a good catalyst for bringing concerns to the surface and sometimes serves as a vehicle for people to begin to have some of their needs met. A feeling of solidarity often arises, especially when concerns shared by most parents (how to inculcate positive values in children, how to know when we are making the right choices for our children, etc.) surface in discussion. This, however, is only the beginning.

Making connections

We have established that baptism, in large part, is about connection. Once background and information on the sacrament have been presented in a relevant way, the work and challenge of helping to make this connection deeper and more authentic really begins. If the process of connection continues, the baptism might truly mark a new beginning for a family as a part of a community that cares about where they are coming from.

One way that the parish community can reach out to young families in a simple but meaningful way is to provide quality childcare at parish gatherings, Sunday services and meetings. This sends the message to families that their participation is valued, and implies some understanding of the needs and challenges faced by parents. Some people may choose not to use the service, so parishes need to be able to deal with the noise and rustling that even very well-behaved children bring

to any gathering! Welcoming small children makes parents feel welcome.

The surfacing of concerns, and the response of the Christian community

As part of a later baptism preparation session, once rapport has begun to be established, the focus can shift to dealing more directly with the participants' specific issues. This relates directly to baptism in that a concern of one member truly does affect all, and the goal of Christian community is to be present to and supportive of one another in the trials and joys of real, everyday life.

The pastoral agent might express the desire of the pastoral staff and community to better serve the needs of young families, and ask for help from the group in surfacing those needs. Here again it is important that the pastoral agent be well trained and able to recognize situations in which other professional help is indicated. For example, in the case of Rachel (the woman suffering from post-partum depression), gentle inquiries would need to be made to ascertain that she is getting the mental health care that she needs. In an ideal world, each parish community would have a mental health professional on staff to help people deal with this type of situation, but, failing that, it is important for the pastoral agent to have on hand a list of professionals that she knows to be competent in dealing with specific issues. The pastoral agent may need to give Rachel a referral (in private, after the meeting or at another time), but the Christian community can do more.

There are many women sitting in every congregation who have experienced post-partum depression. There is a program developed in some Catholic parishes in the United States that is called *Elizabeth Ministries*, where women are trained to walk with and mentor one to one a woman who is going through a crisis or life situation that the mentor herself has experienced. Thus, the woman mentored knows that she is not alone in her pain and is often able to make a strong connection, and the mentor has an important opportunity to share her gifts and her wisdom with the parish community. Issues that Elizabeth ministers are trained to deal with and have experienced include family-of-origin issues, rape, stillbirth, miscarriage, depression, adjusting to a newborn baby and many more.

An Elizabeth Ministries programme would probably be helpful to Tammy (the single mother of three) as well. Another single mother to walk with her from time to time could help Tammy to really focus on her goals and feel valued, understood and supported. As she deals with

her past issues and pain, she might need a gentle referral to a professional counsellor as well.

Another example of a relatively simple way that parish communities can reach out to people in a specific situation is to offer space to and even form Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon (for close companions of alcoholics) groups. This could be very helpful to someone like Sheila (the woman whose husband has an alcohol problem). Most congregations are of a size sufficient to find quite a few people with these concerns. Frequently people do not expect to find help of this kind at church, and this is where good community building and pastoral work in situations such as the baptism class come into play. When people begin to see that Christian community is about rubbing through life the best we can together with the help of God and each other, the concerns and possibilities surface more rapidly.

A reality that more and more parishes are confronting is the fact that, in many instances, our congregations are made up of people from varied cultural and racial backgrounds. All too often people who are not members of the dominant culture of the community are pushed to the edge, and may feel isolated (as in the case of Jorge and Maria from Mexico, the parents of the special-needs child). Integrating and celebrating different cultures is a pastoral challenge that is crucial to the development of Christian community. We need to remember that the world is bigger than our parish, and to recognize the existence of a global family, whose anguish and whose varied giftedness touches us in the depths of what it means to be human and Christian. Learning from each other is good for everybody, and everyone must be invited to share who they are. For Jorge and Maria, this could take place in the context of a group organized at the parish for the parents of special-needs children, where they could share their parenting challenges, and aspects of their cultural reality including their faith and spirituality.

Small groups

It is not difficult to establish small groups around specific interest areas. Groups might also be established for stay-at-home mothers. An excellent resource for such a group is *Mom to mom: moving from unspoken questions to quiet confidence* by Elisa Morgan (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan), which has a spiritual base and is refreshingly practical. There are many groups of people who might benefit from small-group situations with a spiritual base, such as single parents and new parents over forty – it all depends on the

concerns surfaced in any given Christian community. These groups need trained, competent and warm facilitators to lead them.

Other small-group experiences in which parents can be invited to participate might include people with other life experiences as well, allowing opportunities for mutually enriching dialogue. For example, a younger couple like Harry and Samantha (the professionals struggling for balance) could really benefit from hearing about the experiences of an older couple who have had to figure out how to be a couple through many changes and transitions over the years. This is a part of the richness that a varied parish community has to offer.

There are a number of resources that are available that can keep nourishing discussion going for groups of parents. These resources most often help people to strengthen their adult faith, create stronger links to the parish and wider community, and integrate their faith with their daily life experience. One family-centred model is called *F.I.R.E.: a way of being church*, by Kathleen O'Connell Chesto (Liguori Publications, Spring 2000). This model is multi-generational, so that all members of the family can explore and learn together. This approach nourishes adult faith, while at the same time creating an environment where children and adults of all ages can learn and grow together.

Another approach

Although participation in a small group is a very effective way to connect on a deep level with others in the community, there are many people who need to connect but feel that they do not have the time to devote to regular participation in a group. There are ways to reach out to these people as well. Once or twice a year, a parish could hold a 'This Is Our Life' night that would include mini-sessions on concerns surfaced throughout the parish community, e.g. parenting, keeping marriage alive, ageing, grieving, depression, remaining or becoming centred in a hassled world, etc. The experience could begin with a well-planned prayer experience, and end with a social (such as a meal or a snack). This could touch people who are not interested in intense, regular involvement, but who need to connect occasionally. Good pastoral work in bringing concerns to the surface, inspiring interest and delegating responsibilities would be essential for this to work.

There are many creative ways to reach out to young families in congregations today, and they do not need to be limited to activities outside church services. Ministers who do the preaching on Sundays must be aware of the issues on the minds of the congregation – and the concerns of young families form part of this reality. I, and other

ministers besides myself, have attended small-group meetings as part of sermon preparation, so that the Word we preach will touch the lived reality of the congregation.

As in the case of other members of the congregation, young parents' voices must be heard and responded to. We must make them a pastoral priority, and an environment of trust needs to be established in settings such as the baptism preparation session in order for the discernment of pastoral strategies to be on target. If our communities can open ourselves enough to communicate effectively the reality that the gospel is lived out in none other than the lives of those in the pews on Sundays, the possibilities are many. If we can help one another to realize that our lives are sacred, that our struggles matter and that our choices make a difference in our community, then the possibilities are endless.

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OTHER RESOURCES

Family prayer for family times by Kathleen O'Connell Chesto (Twenty-Third Publications). Less formal practices to encourage family (or couple) faith-sharing include simply reflecting together on those who need the family's prayers, events for which members of the family are grateful, signs of Christ that the family has seen, and things for which the members of the family need forgiveness.

Yes, I can believe: discovering the treasure of the Catholic faith by Frank DeSiano CSP (Paulist National Evangelization Association, 1994). A basic introduction to the faith which can be used for individual reflection or as a focus for small-group discussions.

Reconstructing Catholicism: for a new generation by Robert Ludwig (Crossroad, 1995). This is a look at Catholicism that attempts to attend to the needs and searching of young adults. Good basic material.

WHEN I WAS A JESUIT NOVICE IN SOUTH AFRICA I met Stephen and Mary-Anne, a married couple with three children. Vulnerable because living in a poor area, they were once robbed at gunpoint in their home. Courageously they elected not to move away. Stephen was a doctor, whilst Mary-Anne ran various local projects.

I sometimes visited for dinner. After the children had gone to bed, we would chat and pray together. One evening I was asked to lead the prayer. I talked about Jesus' raising of Lazarus, a story which means a lot to me. It is often assumed that, when Jesus weeps, it is because his friend Lazarus is dead. But did he not know Lazarus was to be raised? In fact, Jesus is deeply moved upon seeing the distress of Mary: an image for me of God who knows our suffering.

I was shocked by Stephen's angry reaction. Daily confronted by cases of physical and mental suffering, and often powerless to help, he was furious with God who seemed to have abandoned these people.

His reaction led me to question myself. Was my statement 'God is with us when we suffer' inspired by genuine faith, or due to a failure to face the apparent absence of God in situations of human misery?

I believe that, faced with the problem of suffering, Christian hope steers us between pessimism on the one hand and a too-cheap optimism on the other. Such hope is founded upon the resurrection, implying a recognition of the cross.

Stephen questioned whether God is close to the poor. Yet he struggled to believe. And for me he reflected Christ who, as in the story of Lazarus, meets people in their suffering and is a source of hope.

Nicholas Austin SJ