

## CHAPTER 8

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# FAMILIES AND THEIR FAITH<sup>1</sup>

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Congregations often look to social workers as staff members or consultants to provide leadership for congregational ministries with families (Garland, 1999). Goals for family ministry include helping families strengthen the faith dimension of their family life, participate in a community where they are supported and provide support and service to others, and develop strength and resilience in their relationships so that they can face life challenges. These goals are mutually reinforcing. A significant body of research has demonstrated that families that are strong, especially in the face of adversity, have an active spiritual dimension to their life together. They are involved in a community of faith (Brody, Stoneman, & McCrary, 1994; Call & Heaton, 1997; Deveaux, 1996; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; Walsh, 1999). For example, a group of researchers have discovered that regular attendance at religious services is inversely associated with domestic violence (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999).

The research thus far has not described the variables of faith and religion in family life sufficiently for congregations to know *how* they can strengthen this dimension of family life, however. This question is not only of interest to social workers in congregations, but also to social workers in all kinds of settings whose work includes both preventing family distress by helping families to develop strength and resilience, as well as helping families in distress find effective coping strategies. Every crisis in life is by definition at some level a crisis of faith. Spirituality is a dimension of life that needs attention whatever the problem or circumstance that brings a family to seek help.

From a social systems perspective, it is commonly accepted that families have shared beliefs, values, and practices, although these frameworks of meaning have not been called “family faith.” For example, Hamilton McCubbin and his colleagues studied the strength and resilience of families in many circumstances, including families in wartime who have lost loved ones or who have confronted the ongoing stressor of having a family member “missing in action.” McCubbin concluded that families have what he called “a family schema.” He defined a family schema as “a set of beliefs, values, goals, priorities, and expectations about themselves in re-

relationship to each other, and about their family in relationship to the community and the social system beyond its boundaries” (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993, p. 154). McCubbin has seen the family schema as relatively stable, “a point of reference, a guide or standard against which situational and stressor level appraisals are compared and shaped” (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1993, p. 154). McCubbin’s research describes families developing within the family unit a shared understanding, trust and acceptance, “usually with the assistance of their spiritual beliefs, thus making the difficulties comprehensible and meaningful” (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1986, p. 71). “Family faith” is an alternative definitional frame for studying family schema in religious families.

### **Biblical Narratives and Family Faith**

When working with a congregation, the effective church social worker draws the connections from the social science research and theory to the language and concerns of the church, sometimes by connecting current concerns with the biblical themes and narratives of Christian faith. Bible stories provide a shared spiritual heritage for the faith community; they are stories that shape our understanding of God and our world and ourselves. The meaning of biblical narratives is not always transparent or uni-dimensional, providing rich opportunity for community conversation, conflict, and deeper understanding over time. Biblical texts that address the role of faith and spirituality in families provide such a framework for conversation about social work research and practice with families in congregations. The story of Lydia provides a fascinating place to begin this connection from social science research today to stories now 2000 years old.

When the head of the household became a Christian in the church of the first century, so did everyone else in the household. Lydia, a business woman and a household head, must have been remarkable in her patriarchal first-century Roman world. When Paul and Silas showed up and preached where the women in town gathered by the river to pray, Lydia was there and experienced God “opening her heart.” In response, Lydia had the apostles baptize her whole household (Acts 16: 13-15). She then persuaded Paul and Silas to come eat and stay with her family.

Sometime later, Paul and Silas were arrested. While they were in prison, singing hymns and praying through the night, a violent earthquake shook the foundations of the prison and opened all the prison doors. The jailer, afraid that all the prisoners had escaped, prepared to run himself through with his sword, but Paul stopped him, shouting, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” (Acts 16:25-29). In response,

the jailer asked what he must do to be saved. Paul's response was "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:31). In response, the jailer and his family were baptized "immediately" (Acts 16:33). The story concludes, like the story of Lydia, with Paul and Silas going home with the jailer for a meal with the family, the jailer "filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family" (Acts 16:34; see also 1 Cor. 1:16).

In the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, deciding to take up one religion or another is largely a personal choice. If a husband or wife makes a decision to become a Christian, we don't round up their spouse, children, sisters and brothers, and anybody else living in the household, and dunk or sprinkle them with baptismal waters (depending on the baptismal traditions of the particular faith community). Did Lydia's family take a vote about whether or not they wanted to be baptized? The jailer's wife had not even been at the prison to hear the Paul and Silas' impromptu prayer meeting. Did her husband even ask her first if she wanted to be baptized? What is more, Paul told the jailer that if he believed in the Lord Jesus, he *and his household* would be saved.

Clearly, cultural differences create these questions for us. In the patriarchal Roman culture of the early church, householders controlled the religious expression of the household. Households had their own gods and their own altars, and joining a household meant joining that household's religious practices. Christians adopted this household model for the early churches. Churches did not have land and buildings; they met in private houses. The earliest missionaries tried to win over one household, which then became the base for reaching out to other households in the community (Lampe, 1992; Straughan, 2002). We do not have any way of knowing the extent to which all members of the household understood, much less chose, the faith they were adopting (Osiek, 1996).

It is too easy to dismiss the concept of faith belonging to the household or family as a first-century cultural artifact, however. In a research project studying the faith of families, I visited with 120 American families for about two hours each and learned about the faith of American families in four different regions of the country and in four different Protestant denominations: United Methodist, National Baptist, Presbyterian USA, and Southern Baptist (Garland, 2001; 2002a). The project used grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Weiss, 1994). The analysis of more than 240 hours of transcribed interviews has led to a model for understanding faith as a dimension of family life that has significance alongside and influencing the other dimensions of family life social workers consider in their assessment of families, such as communica-

tion, roles, power distribution, and subsystem boundaries. This model has grown from the study of Christian Protestant families and has yet to be explored with families belonging to other faith traditions.

### Religion, Spirituality, and Faith

The three terms religion, spirituality, and faith are interrelated but can be distinguished from one another. Religion refers to a *shared culture* of beliefs, values, and rules for behaving and relating to others and to God. Religion is thus an aspect of a group or a culture. Often that culture becomes formalized in organizations; in the Christian church, those organizations include congregations, denominations, and parachurch and ecumenical organizations.

Religious behaviors are often expressed in rituals that are rich with meaning because they express the beliefs and values shared by a people. The individual is not alone but is a part of and connected with a believing community that reinforces, challenges, and shapes individual faith. Prayers recited together, “passing the peace,” baptism, and partaking of communion together are rituals rich with meanings that connect us to God and to the community of faith. Religion is for a community or culture, then, what faith is for the individual, and it is also in dynamic interaction with individual faith when the individual is a part of a religious community or organization. For those persons who are a part of a religious group or community, religion thus provides an environment in which faith develops and is nurtured and challenged. But religious organizations and communities are not any person’s entire environment; many persons develop faith totally independent of and unrelated to formal religion. Even persons who are deeply religious—deeply committed to their church or religious traditions—are influenced by the other groups and cultures to which they belong. Faith develops in response to and in interaction with the person’s whole physical and interpersonal environment, not just those contexts that are overtly religious. The nature of the faith of those who are significant to one also has an enormous influence on the shape of one’s own faith.

Spirituality refers to the individual, interpersonal, and transcendental *behaviors and experiences* through which we express and develop faith. Spirituality, then, is the behavioral component, that which we do because of our beliefs and understanding of God or the power that transcends our own. Sometimes spirituality is overtly religious, such as in rituals, and sometimes it is not. Persons can be spiritual without being a part of a religious group or tradition. In Christian religion, spirituality is often expressed in what have been called “practices” or “spiritual

disciplines.” These practices include such activities as worship, prayer, meditation, study of Scripture, singing, confession of failures to others, forgiveness of others, listening compassionately to others, hospitality, giving of one’s financial and other resources, service to others, and working for social justice. (Anderson & Foley, 1998; Bass & Dykstra, 1997; Bender, 1995; Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, 1977; Dykstra, 1997; Foster, 1978; D. R. Garland, 2002b; Lee, 1990; Nelson, 1990).

Because of the interrelationship and sometimes overlapping nature of religion and spirituality, people often do not distinguish between them (Zinnbauer & al., 1997). In fact, Charles Joanide found that Christians are uncomfortable at trying to discuss spirituality and religion as though they are separate entities, insisting that they are profoundly interrelated; “religion is likened to ‘a bonding agent’ that connected them to God, their neighbor (neighbor referring to people in their social network) and to their cultural and ancestral past” (Joanides, 1997, p. 72). He concluded that “faith” is a term that communicates more effectively with persons who are Christians than either religion or spirituality. As we are using the term, “faith” includes the highly individualized and internalized beliefs, sense of trust, actions, and experiences of individuals. It can also refer to the shared beliefs and behaviors of a group of people (a family) or a whole community (a congregation).

### What is Faith?

David and Darlene have been married for ten years. They each brought a son and a different religious tradition to their marriage. David has continued to be involved in the Catholic church with his son Pete, and Darlene is active in the Presbyterian church with her son Paul. When I asked Darlene’s family what faith means to them, she answered, “I guess faith is the belief that Jesus was here and real and died for us and we have eternal life through Him.”

For Darlene, faith is *belief* about who God is and how God relates to persons. Faith has to do with the answers we have come to as we have wondered about the big questions of our lives. Faith is something that involves our minds, our thinking, our pondering and deciding on what we believe to be the truth.

Belief leads to *trust*, a second facet of faith. Another word for trust is *confidence*. The beliefs we hold increase our trust, our confidence that we can face life’s challenges. Shamika is a young wife and only child of her widowed African-American mother and her deceased Anglo-American father. She answered the same question, “what does the word faith mean to you?” by saying,

It seems like faith is so much a part of me, but it's not conscious. It's inside me. It's like a thread in fabric. It's a thread that runs all through that you don't see but if you pull it out all the other threads fall out. My faith doesn't really hold my family together but I think it's definitely something that holds me together. I rely on it and then I don't worry so much about things that I can't control. I believe in God—that He loves me; that I can't control everything. I can't do everything by myself. I think my faith makes me stronger for the rest of my family.

Shamika not only *believes in God*, but she believes that *God loves her and acts* on that love by making her strong. She trusts God to hold her together. Her faith does not keep her from worrying, but it keeps her from worrying “so much.” And it seems that it prepares her for the demands of family life. If belief has to do with our thoughts and minds, then trust has to do with our emotions, our heart.

Beth and Tom have been married 40 years. Their daughter Misty is 25 and has always lived with them; their two grown sons live in other cities in the state. Misty works full time in a hospital and also is the youth minister for the youth in their church. She is carrying on what she has watched her parents do all her life—work in the church. Beth told me, “Most of our activities have been in the church; that's where we've met people and had friends.” They have done renovation of the church building, carpentry and painting. And they have been leaders in various programs of their Methodist congregation, teaching adult Sunday School classes and leading children's groups. Misty said, “I can't remember ever a time in my life that the church was not there and a very active part of my life and our family's life.” Currently, however, Beth is discouraged and angry over a conflict in their congregation and has not been attending. “It's the most traumatic experience I've ever been through,” she said. Even so, they are still busy serving. Beth and Tom are running a food drive for an ecumenical community ministries agency. Tom repairs bicycles for the church to give to poor children. And they deliver Meals on Wheels. Here is how Beth defined faith for me:

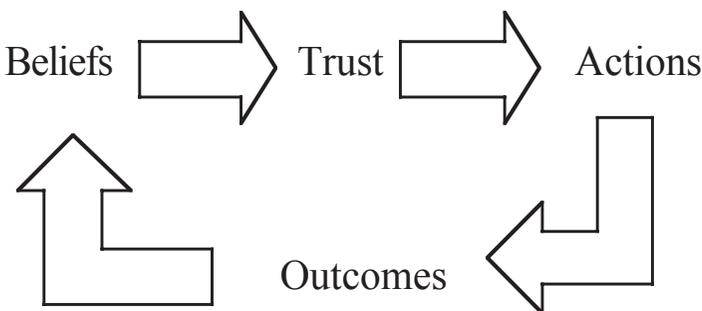
Two things best describe God. One of them is a quick story about a little boy and little girl, and I'm this way about my faith. They are late for school and the little boy says, ‘Let's stop and pray,’ and the little girl says, ‘Let's run and pray.’ That's kind of my faith. I've got a faith that God is there. I talk to Him. I pray for the guidance. ‘Just show me, guide me, and help me be aware that you are guiding me.’ The other thing is that I guess my faith is too simple. To me there are just two verses in the Bible that are

really important. “Love your neighbor as yourself” and “God so loved the world He gave his only son.” And the third one is where Jesus said, “In my father’s house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you.” That’s good enough for me.

Beth says her faith is “too simple;” she simply believes that God is there and listens to her prayers. She trusts that Heaven will be there and she does not have to worry about it. But she actually begins her definition of faith with action—she believes in running while she is praying. She does not simply leave it to God to work out problems. The three scriptures she refers to touch on three aspects of faith: belief (“God so loved the world.”), trust (“I go to prepare a place for you”), and action (“Love your neighbor as yourself”).

People’s actions flow from belief about what is real and what is important. Jesus taught us to be active, storing up treasures for ourselves in heaven, not on earth, where moth and rust destroy. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). We treasure that which we value. That treasure is what we give our hearts to, what we trust. In other words, action not only grows out of our faith, but action also turns around and shapes our faith. What happens if we believe that God answers prayers if we believe and trust in him, and we do believe and trust and still the sick child for whom we are praying so fervently and confidently dies? Sometimes the outcomes of our attempts to live faithfully deepen and confirm our faith. But other times, our faith is shaken and changed (Nelson, 1992). Faith is thus a cycle that begins with belief about God and our world and our place in it—the “meaning” of our lives and our experiences. Those beliefs lead to trust (or a lack of trust), which leads to actions, and the outcomes of those actions in turn have an impact on our understanding, our beliefs.

**Figure 1.** Faith as a dynamic cycle.



To truly understand a person's faith, we need to know more than a summary statement of beliefs, or even what that person values and trusts. We need to know how they are living their faith day by day in response to those beliefs. The stories of daily living are not simply illustrations; they *are* the embodied beliefs of persons, the lived experiences that are more than simple belief statements can say. Those actions are the person's identity as a person of faith. We need to know the stories of how they came to their beliefs, what they are committed to, and the stories of living those commitments. Craig Dykstra has argued that to study persons' faith, we need to look for the intentions that shape how they approach life. What are the person's life stories, the themes, events, and experiences that say "this is who I am?" Rather than assigning persons to stages of faith development, the approach James Fowler has taken (Fowler, 1981, 1991), this approach suggests that social workers need to learn about persons' faith biographies, the stories that represent persons' faith in all its complexity (Dykstra, 1986).

Faith is particularly significant in social work practice because of the profession's focus on person-in-environment. Faith points us to the client's ultimate environment (Fowler, 1981). It identifies the powers and influences on persons' behavior that otherwise might be hidden to us. Viktor Frankl pointed out, for example, the unseen powers of hope and faith and meaning-in-the-midst-of suffering that had a significant impact on the survival of some concentration camp prisoners during the Holocaust (Frankl, 1969). The beliefs derived from one's faith identify the meaning of experiences, a meaning quite unlike what others would experience in similar situations. Stories provide a medium through which families develop and share their faith in the telling of their own family stories. These stories often tell more than the words and events used to tell the story; underneath and carrying the words are the meaning and purpose of their shared lives, and the faith they have—in one another, in what they value together, in God. Stories say to others and to the family itself, "This is who we are." Because of that underlying melody of meaning, stories give families a sense of identity and of belonging (Garland, 2003).

### **Family as the Crucible for Our Personal Faith**

Family life provides a crucible for individuals to learn faith. For example, research has shown that parents directly and indirectly impact God-images in children. When parents are perceived as nurturing and powerful, especially when mother is perceived as powerful and father is perceived as nurturing, children perceive God as both nurturing and powerful (Dickie et al., 1997).

Adults, too, have their faith shaped by family life. Family experiences test, shape, and deepen our faith. A step-mother described faith to me this way:

Real issues of living a Christian life are more difficult in an intimate relationship with your family than they are with anybody else. I mean, people can go out and serve food in a soup kitchen and think they're doing this Christian deed and then not understand how to nurture or help somebody in their family who is starving for some other thing. I am not getting along with my step-daughter. Last Sunday, I sat in church and listened to the sermon and I just kept thinking, "This is horrible; I am not treating her in the way I would think of myself as a Christian." It tortured me to try to figure that out. I didn't get any further than that. A lot of people are looking for very simplistic guidance instead of having to suffer the pain of wrestling with things. The family represents a working path to get there.

### **Families Shape Personal Beliefs**

Conversations about faith in families commonly take place in response to family life events or discussion of ideas and experiences to which members are exposed. Shamika's father worked at an automobile factory when he and Sheryl married. Because he was White and marrying a Black woman, other men at the plant began to harass him, and this continued for more than a year, until after Shamika's birth. Sometimes he ignored the taunts and threats, but when it got to him, he would lash back. Shamika's father ended up dead, his murder still unsolved. Shamika said:

You never think that someone would be that prejudiced and that narrow minded that they would actually want to take another person's life. But it does happen. And it had happened in that town before. They knew of other cases where black men got together and killed a white person because they felt like you don't need to be with our women, or white men did it. It went both ways. When I was 13 or 14, it just hit me. I was looking through my photo albums one day. I don't know why, but I just couldn't handle it any more. I felt so alone. I was really depressed for a while, and my mom asked, "What's wrong?" I finally just broke down and started sobbing and she said, "You're not by yourself. Remember how I used to tell you when you were little that he's still watching you up there. He knows what's going on with you." She also told me that my dad was such a good person

that he was just too good for the world. When I got married it came back again because I thought, ‘Why can’t I have my dad walk me down the aisle?’ There are questions that come up that there is no answer for. There’s no why. It’s not something you can stop yourself from asking and it’s very difficult for me.

Shamika went on to say that faith has meant believing that she can leave justice in God’s hands, as her grandmother taught: “My grandmother always used to tell my mother, ‘What goes around comes around. Don’t worry about it. God sees it.’”

Instead of thinking about revenge, she believes that God will dispense judgment on those who take care of people who don’t do what they’re supposed to do.

It’s not up to me to decide it or find them or try and bring justice. That’s not my job. God takes care of people who do things right and who do things wrong and I have to believe that. I have to let my hands not touch that one. It’s almost evil hating something like that. I shouldn’t be this angry. It’s something I have to work through and I have to let it go and it’s very hard. I think if I didn’t have my faith, if I didn’t believe in God, I don’t think I would come out of it.

Growing up with the reality of her father’s murder has created significant challenges for Shamika’s beliefs about God and justice. The family has not just been the context for the challenge, however; it has also provided ways of thinking about it and emotional support for dealing with the challenge. Mother is there, sensitive enough to see through the moods of a 14-year-old that “something is wrong,” and then offering presence and a comforting belief that her father is still with her. Grandmother offers a belief system that there will be justice, that Shamika can put her trust in God.

### **Families Teach People to Trust—or Not**

Families also provide a context for persons—both children and adults—to learn to trust—trust one another and trust God. When family relationships are not trustworthy, then faith in God may also be shaken, for adults as well as for children. Erik Erikson describes the first task of human beings as the establishment of basic trust (Erikson, 1968). But this does not happen, if at all, merely once and for all (Parks, 1992). Persons repeatedly find anchors of trust shaken loose and then reestablished, often and especially in family relationships.

Jacob and Kate are parents of two sons David (age 9), and Douglas

(age 7). Twenty years ago, Jacob and Kate met in college, fell in love, and married when they graduated. Both parents sing in their church choir. Also, Jacob directs and Kate plays the piano for their children's choir in which David and Douglas sing enthusiastically. They all go to Sunday School and worship every Sunday. It all sounds so "John and Mary Church family," until they talk about the tragedy that has shaped their life together and their understanding of God's ways.

Kate grew up Catholic and Jacob grew up in a National Baptist church. Their different faith traditions were not important when they met and married, though, because church was not important to either of them. Kate remembers being one of only two African-American families in the church of her childhood, and how uncomfortable and unwelcome she felt there. Jacob became disillusioned with the church when his pastor's daughter became pregnant and, because of the pregnancy, the pastor refused to allow her a church wedding.

I thought to myself, "Here you're teaching us forgiveness. Are you really learning any of what you're telling us?" After a while I just found myself saying the heck with it. We'd read the paper in bed on Sunday mornings instead of getting up and going to church.

Their first son, Mark, was born when they had been married three years. Their lives revolved around him, a happy child with big smiles and dancing feet that entertained their extended family. He was the first grandchild. When Mark was three years old, Kate began having nightmares that something terrible was going to happen. "Does God send dreams?" she still wonders. Jacob describes what began as an average day, with Kate rushing to take Mark to the babysitter on her way to work.

I remember the expression on Mark's face. He had his coat on and he looked at me and said, "Bye!" and he had this expression on his face like, "See ya. Everything's fine." I often wonder if children communicate with God more than adults do. He came back and gave me a kiss good-bye. He hadn't done that in a while. I still remember.

While they were both working, Kate told me,

There was a fire at the babysitter's house and he died from acute carbon monoxide poisoning. The flames didn't get him...

Jacob interrupted her,

Smoke inhalation. He was asleep at the time. They said that it was painless. He probably just took a deep breath and never woke up. Our pain never stops.

Their world fell apart. Both of them were angry—at God, at one another, at the world in general—because the loss was so terribly painful. They struggled to hold on to one another. Two more sons were born. But they were growing apart in their search for meaning in the seeming senselessness of Mark's death. Kate was desperate:

I went to see spiritualists and they said, "You need to pray more." They gave me some suggestions and I went to the library and I was looking at different books. I came across the dream books and I came across meditation and one thing just led to another. I was into searching, so I looked at a lot of different things. Channeling, and all that. What is everything about? This was my thing. Strictly my thing. I tried to share it a little bit with Jacob, but he wasn't into it. I didn't want to impose.

As Jacob said, "We just took different paths." They occasionally visited churches together, because Jacob was looking for more "traditional" answers to his grief. No place felt right, and they never attended the same church twice. Seven years after their son's death, the pastor of a little Baptist church in their community came to visit them and said something they had never heard before from a church leader, "Is there anything we can do for you?" He held their hands and prayed with them, and they went to church with him to find a delightful mix of Anglo and African-American families worshipping together. They felt at home. The congregation did not try to salve their grief or tell them why their son had died but gave them a safe place to grieve and struggle together. It has been almost ten years since their son's death, and even today it is still difficult for them to talk about.

They still don't agree on what it means. Jacob believes that somehow God needed his son:

When Mark passed, I'd just get up every morning and think, 'Well, there's a plan out there. Nobody consulted me when He thought it up, but there must be a plan out there for something like this to happen.' He was three. At every family gathering he'd dance. And I just believe that there must be somebody out there that needed whatever that spirit could provide more than us. I have to think that there's a reason why. It's got to be because somebody else must have been going through some serious deprivation in their life and it was time for them to feel good too. I think I'm a much better parent now.

Kate disagrees.

I don't have the same feelings. Mark was an extremely intelligent little boy. I was just beginning to teach him to read and spell words and he could do it. I'll never forget that. I remember a couple of days before he passed away, I was bragging to somebody at work about how smart my boy was. It just blows me away. I think everybody is part of a plan. His death pushed me to grow spiritually. I don't know if he was still here if we would be going to church. I really don't know.

Jacob added,

I've never thought about that, but it's true.

Kate continued:

I like to think I would have. God doesn't give you burdens that you can't bear. It was real traumatic when that happened. We survived it. We've moved on. We've progressed. We did not go backwards.

Clearly, their faith has been shaped by their shared experience, and they both think they have grown spiritually as a consequence. The account of their son's death that they had shared earlier is a family story, told to me in the typical tag team story-telling of families. It is clear, however, that they have not talked much about their attempts to understand the *meaning* of their son's death, indicated when Jacob says, "I've never thought about that." They do agree about trusting that God allowed this tragedy to occur for a reason, though they do not agree on what that reason is. They both describe the resulting spiritual growth they have experienced, but they use the word "me" not "we." Although they do not necessarily agree on the meaning of their son's death, putting their lives together afterwards has clearly been a family experience. As Kate says, "We survived it. We did not go backwards."

With all their unanswered questions and even fundamental differences in their understanding of God's ways, they celebrate their survival. They had lived in their house three months when Mark died. For Jacob, the house has come to symbolize their life since his death:

I think this house pictures the way that things have been with us. It looks great now. But if you had seen what it was like before we got hold of it, you wouldn't have believed it. I put the floor down. Kate and I patched and sanded and primed and painted those walls. I put the moldings up. Whatever you see here is

because we did it. Sometimes people come in those rooms and say, “Oh this is beautiful!” and I feel like saying, “Do you want to see the scars? Do you want to see how it got to look beautiful?”

Their family is “beautiful” because they have survived. They may never agree on the meaning of their son’s death. Many in their church community probably would not agree with either one of them. Does God cause the death of children because their spirits are needed elsewhere? Or to shake their parents into a spiritual journey? Perhaps senseless, evil things happen outside of God’s control, and God grieves with us and is present to us as we grieve. But if God does not cause such things to happen, then is God not in control? Why do bad things happen?

No one who loves others is spared such questions. Every family has or will someday face life-shaking tragedy. Perhaps it will not be Kate and Jacob’s kind of tragedy, but it will be a tragedy nevertheless. In families, we confront the most fundamental issues of life and death and faith. We learn faith here, and we are shattered here, and we struggle—whether together or in isolation—to make sense of it all here. Often the families whom social workers serve are dealing with such fundamental issues; death, unemployment, disabling illness, addictions, and all the other crises of family life are fundamentally crises of life’s meaning and thus of faith. For Kate and Jacob, this has been a lonely path because they found different answers. And yet they did so in one another’s arms, and in the arms of a community of faith. They held on to one another, gave one another room to struggle and, at the same time, did not leave one another alone in the struggle. They remodeled their house—together.

### **Family as the Context for Action**

Families provide multiple opportunities in both the mundane and the extraordinary experiences of life for acting on faith. Parents overwhelmed by the responsibilities of parenting pray and find strength greater than what they believe they could muster without God’s help. The actions of reading the Bible and praying provide a sense of peace even in the most difficult of times. In a time of great financial crisis, the community of faith provides help that carries a family through and deepens their trust in God and the people of faith. At other times, however, the expected outcomes of their faith-based action are not forthcoming. Faith is challenged and sometimes reshaped. Corrine described the crisis of faith she experienced that began with a routine surgery on one of her sons shortly after her conversion.

I had my newborn faith. I felt like I had been born again and was

trying to be a little bit too rigid in my behavior. I thought, 'I'm not going to cuss and I'm not going to think bad thoughts.' I had my little checklist and thought if I did all these things I would be okay with God. And I prayed every day for 45 minutes for all these people on my list. I thought if I did this, I would be okay with God. Kurt (the younger son) had all these warts on his hand. They said they could remove them with laser surgery, and just give him a general anesthesia. That's pretty traumatic to give a little seven-year-old. So while Kurt was in recovery and I looked across the street and I saw the cross and I started praying. I said, 'God I know that this is a sign that everything is going to be just fine. Thank you Lord that you protected my child just like I had been praying so hard for. And thank you for letting him come out and they say everything will be fine.'

Everything was not fine, however. Her son developed a rare infection and almost died. Afterward he developed other major problems that have continued to threaten his health and have challenged his mother's faith:

Some churches teach that if you pray those prayers of protection and if you do everything right things will be right in your life. And I thought, "Why?" I even went to a Bible study called "Trusting God." My next-door neighbor took me. She said, "I think this will help you." It left me even more spiritually devastated because I felt like they were pointing a finger at me: "This must have happened for a reason. Did God do this to you to bring you closer to Him?" And I thought, "He would not use a child! These things don't happen to bring me or my husband to the Lord." I will never go back to that. I don't try to fit theology in little neat boxes any more. I just say that I don't understand. We're just supposed to help each other through it. I will never go back to those churches again. I love my church because they would soothe, they would comfort, but they weren't pushy like we had to get in and solve this today. They were just there.

This family experience challenged her beliefs about how God responds to faith practices. In fact, she rejected those beliefs. In the resulting crisis of faith, she sought out and joined a new faith community and, in the process, redefined her understanding of God. When the results of being faithful have are not what we expect, our beliefs often change and the cycle of belief, trust, behavior and outcomes continues.

Up to this point, we have been looking at ways that families provide

a context for shaping, challenging, and reshaping the faith of individuals. In addition, however, families have sacred stories that tell about their experiences *as a family*.

### Narratives of Family Faith

James and Marianne brought four children to their marriage from their previous marriages. James' son Corey has severe developmental and physical challenges and uses a wheel chair. Corey works part-time at a sheltered workshop. Marianne has two daughters, Sasha (16) and Sandi (11). Last year, the "ours" baby, Aria, was born. They live on the edge of poverty, both economically and physically. Both of them are working at low-wage jobs to support their four children. The two-story home they proudly own is located in the inner city on a quiet street but not far from the public housing projects where James works as a maintenance man. The area is inhabited by gangs and has a high rate of violence. James sees the projects as his mission field. Whenever he goes into an apartment to fix a leaky faucet or broken appliance, he prays. He doesn't pray for protection. He prays instead that he will care for the resident as he would care for Jesus. It is Marianne who is praying for protection for him!

It has not always been this way. Soon after their marriage, James became unemployed and, in discouragement, slipped into alcohol and drug abuse, sometimes not coming home at night. Marianne hung on, praying for God to help her husband. Now he is recovering and has had a profound conversion experience. They are proud that they are becoming an anchor family in their struggling community. James loves their congregation and their pastor, and he is in training to become a deacon. As we talked about their faith, Marianne told me that she identifies with Moses' wife:

She just stuck with him with him being gone up to the mountain and coming back down. That's how I look at myself. Through thick and thin. That's my husband. It got close, because I kept thinking when we were going through it, "I'm just going to tell him to get out, to leave." And then I thought, "No, because if I tell him that, he'll really do it. If I tell him to leave, he won't come home." Through all of what was happening, I kept praying and praying and praying. It just made me stronger. It was something that I needed to increase my faith and to make me strong.

Sandi, the eleven-year old, picked up on the earlier statement that her mother identifies with Moses' wife. Sandi said her favorite Bible story is of the boy David,

Because he fought Goliath with only five stones. And Goliath had a sword and shield, and David killed Goliath with just one stone. I think I'm as strong as David and I can do anything with Christ.

This is a story of strength, and a child learning strength from parents who have “been through” and persevered.

### **Family Belief and Trust**

Peggy and Bill are in their 70s, married more than 50 years. They raised four sons, and the story of their life that overshadows all others is that of losing Chris. Chris was in the military, stationed in Puerto Rico. They knew that Chris and his wife were have marital troubles, but they didn't know how serious. Chris became depressed. As they told the story to me, they interrupted and verbally tumbled over one another, both of them with tears in their eyes through most of the story. First, they received a call that Chris was “missing in action” from his military unit. During those same days, Bill's elderly mother became ill and died. The funerals were in the same week.

As Bill began to relate how, that same weekend, one of their grown sons came for a visit, Peggy interrupted “Let me tell this,” she said. “The Lord just takes care of you because Grant (oldest son) was here and the day that they came to tell us that Chris' body had washed ashore. Grant and his wife came.”

Bill picked up the story again,

Daddy we have some folks here.” It was about this time in the afternoon. He said, “We have some folks here that want to see you; are you up to seeing them?” I said, “Sure I want to see them.” He said, “They're from the military.” I said, “Are they here to tell me they found Chris' body?” He said, “Yes, sir.” I don't believe there is any way you can do something like this without the Lord. For three days, knowing your son is missing and not knowing where he is, all you do is pray and talk to God about it every waking minute and you wonder how you sleep but I slept like a baby.

Peggy interrupted him,

On Tuesday—that's the day that they came out to tell us that they had found his body—well, by that time all of us were getting anxious and didn't know what to do. Thousands of miles away and he's missing. So each one, Bill and all three of our other sons had gone to see their pastors.

Bill explained,

I went to talk to Brother Tim and said, “Preacher I don’t know how to take it.” I just told him about Chris being missing and I just talked to him about 30 minutes. Well, Grant in (another town) went and talked to his preacher that day, Marty in (another town) talked to his preacher that day and Bart over in (another state) went and talked to his preacher that day. All four of us talked to our preachers that day.

Peggy said,

A kind of peace came over me, and I just sort of relaxed and when they came and told us the news you know, I was still calm. I didn’t go to pieces or anything. I guess we had been prepared. Bill told me that he went and talked to his preacher and they mostly prayed for me. So I felt like that’s what happened.

Bill agreed,

A peace comes over you that is unexplainable. During this time we have a swing that is on the back lot and in the four days time—I wasn’t working because I had just had a heart attack—and I’d just sit in that swing and mope and dread and cry my heart out and talk to the Lord. In it I told the Lord that day if he’d help me find Chris (crying), I’d try to live my life to suit him. And I’m trying to do it.

Peggy went on with the story: “The lady that came from the base, she was a psychologist that came and talked to us. She had told us that if a storm had not come up his body would never have washed ashore.”

The details of Peggy and Bill’s story turn what seems like a senseless tragedy into a story of God at work in their lives during this terrible time. Their oldest son happened to be in their home because of his grandmother’s death when the news came of his brother’s body being found. Peggy cited this detail as evidence that “the Lord takes care of you”; Grant was there to support and comfort them. They credit Peggy’s sense of peace to the fact that the three remaining sons and Bill all independently consulted their pastors on the same day and prayed for her, and it was at that time that she found a new sense of peace in the midst of the crisis. The father had prayed for searchers to find his son, presumed dead by that point, pledging to live a more “suitable life” if God would help. When he adds, tears rolling down his face, that he’s “trying to do it,” his wife explains. A storm washed their son’s body ashore, or

he would never have been found. She implies that God sent the storm as an answer to the father's prayer. They have suffered tremendous grief. But the story is one that communicates not chaos and meaningless but quite the opposite. Through the presence of others orchestrated by God, and through a storm many miles away, they trace orderliness and experience these events as God's care for them. Together, telling the story confirms the meaning they have found together in these events.

You met Darlene and her second husband David earlier. They have two sons from previous marriages, his son Pete (age 14) and her son Paul (age 11). When were talking about what faith means to them, Paul said that for him,

Faith means living the life that I think God would want me to live and believing that He is our creator and nothing happens without God having a plan. I was talking to my mom about it in the car just a few days ago about how every bad thing ends up with a good thing. When my mom moved here, she probably thought it was going to be the end of the world because she didn't know anybody or about anything that goes on down here [in the Deep South]. But if she hadn't done that she wouldn't have met my dad and chances are she wouldn't have had me. And another example is if my mom hadn't gotten divorced, I wouldn't have Pete [stepbrother] or my Dad [stepdad].

Paul takes two crises in his mother's life—her move to the South and her divorce—and traces how God used them for good. These must be family stories he has been told, because all of this happened before he was born or can remember. He does not simply tell the story but further develops it, pointing out that without the move, she would not have met his father (and had him!), and without the divorce, he would not have his stepfather and stepbrother. Notice, too, that he had this conversation with his mother “in the car just a few days ago.” Conversation about faith and other matters of importance often come when families are on our way to somewhere else, not when they plan for them.

Family faith stories are not all sweetness and good feelings. Paul later recounts a rather frightening incident for him. I had asked the family if they had ever experienced a time when God seemed absent. Paul began hesitantly, casting his eyes at his parents,

Paul: I don't know if I should say this about this cause it was a real bad time.

Mom: Go for it. That you felt God's absence? When?!

Paul: Well I know He wasn't absent but I remember one time at our old house my mom had accidentally sat some of my dad's file papers next to the water, the sink and I think I might have bumped them into the sink and the water dripped all over them.

Dad (interrupting): At the old house?

Paul continues: And you got real mad cause your case was tomorrow.

Everyone began talking at once, and Paul said, louder than the others, "I remember this one."

Dad: Did they get really wet?

Paul: The ink went all over and you couldn't read anything.

Dad: (laughing) I don't remember this.

Paul pressed on: You thought Mama did it and she didn't and I kept trying to tell you that and you were so mad that you got Mamas' jewelry box and threw it out the door.

Pete: I remember that.

Mom: I don't remember this.

Pete: I remember that. I don't know if it was papers, though.

Paul, steadily eyeing his stepfather: I felt like, "God why didn't you." I tried to tell you that but you were too busy yelling at Mom.

The parents agree in not remembering this incident and seem to be considerably embarrassed at the telling of it. It is a poignant scene as the older stepbrother powerfully sides with the younger child by affirming over and over that he also remembers this event his parents claim to have forgotten, yet at the same time softening the tension of the moment just a bit by questioning one of the details of the story (whether or not it was papers that got wet). Paul frames his story as a time when he felt God's absence, even though he "knew" God was still there. His trust was shaken, even though his belief did not change. He had been through the divorce of his parents, although he did not remember it because he was a baby. But here is his step-father, the man he knows as father, throwing his mother's belongings out the back door, perhaps sending a frightening warning to him that his mom and he might also be thrown out of the family.

It is doubtful that the parents would have considered this to be a faith-shaping experience for their children. But now they cannot escape

it, because the story has been told, affirmed by the older step-brother and told in the context of the son's understanding of God. The story is now a part of the family's narrative about God and faith and themselves.

Stories often take on a life and develop meanings that were not apparent when they "actually" happened. In fact, they are continuing to "actually happen" as the family tells the story as an illustration of their life together. The story of the angry stepfather above is such a recollection. The story "happens" all over again as the 11-year-old links this memory to his understanding of God, bringing the past into the present as they process it together and frame it as a story of faith. As frightening as this event is, it is a story of faith and trust. The stepson feels secure and trusting enough to tell it these years later, with his mother's encouragement, and the family has survived what may have felt like a rending of relationships at the time. It was just a jewelry box after all. The family survived. And now they can laugh about it, although the parents are clearly unsettled at this revelation of what their children remember. Even so, what once felt so shaky is now secure, now trustworthy. What does that mean to this child's understanding of God?

### **Family Outcomes**

Families have stories of how "things work out"—or not—as a result of their shared faith. Jan and Harold live in the back of a very large old home in a downtown neighborhood in a Southern city. Their divorced daughter and their two grandsons live upstairs. They are not totally happy about this arrangement, but they are trying to help their daughter through some difficult times. They have a large sitting area and living space in their bedroom. These are their "private" quarters; the rest of the house is shared. Jan is a schoolteacher and takes care of her daughter's two sons in the after school hours. In addition, her elderly mother lives about three houses away. They also have three other grown children and several other grandchildren. Their son Martin has been a particular source of challenge and grief, having been involved with using and selling drugs for almost a decade. Their relationship with their son has been the most significant context in which their faith has been tested and shaped. Harold said,

I figured if I set him down and tried to talk to him the way you and I are talking, I could convince him. You can't do it. The drugs are stronger. Lying upstairs, I said my prayers, I said, "All right God, he's yours. I've done all I can do." God intervened. I had taken out a \$40 a month insurance policy on him, kept it for

a year and it paid \$12,000 for treatment. That took care of the whole thing for a while, then he got back into it and he disappeared. God intervened again. Martin went to the beach, found a friend, and the friend said, "If you stay drug-free, you can live with me until you get on your feet." He met his wife, and she straightened him out. God has come in so many times.

Jan added,

That's the only time we ever had results. It was when we told God that he was no longer ours anymore.

Harold went on,

Jan said he got a child on drugs and he was working right over there by the school. I wanted him in a pine box in the ground. (Their son sold drugs to a schoolchild, and Harold wanted him dead as a consequence.) We got to the point that, although we didn't plan the funeral, we knew that if it happened, we were all right. When I turned him over to God that night you cannot imagine the doors that started opening.

This story began as Harold's but quickly became a family story of faith as Jan added her thoughts. When Harold said, "I said my prayers, I said, "All right God, he's yours," Jan responded, "It was when we told God that he was no longer ours anymore." She has broadened the story; this is no longer simply the story of a grief-stricken father. This is *their* story. He is not alone in it. And he affirms what she has just said, by continuing, "We know." Undoubtedly, they have talked over these experiences many times before. Each of them has thought about it, trying to make sense of it. But they have also talked it over together, constructing this shared understanding of their experience. Even so, Harold ends this segment by returning to his private prayer, "And when I turned him over to God that night." The individual's faith experience is not lost in the family's experience. Rather, the two interact with one another.

## Implications for Social Work

Every family provides a context in which faith develops and is challenged. Family life may provide the context for the individual's faith experience, such as Shamika's struggle to trust God to deal justly with those who murdered her father. Both children and adults have their faith shaped in the transactional life of families, as these family stories demonstrate. The family's life offers multiple crises that challenge and/

or affirm the faith of family members. In turn, as these stories are told and retold, they become family stories, stories in which individuals participate in a story of faith that belongs to the family group, such as the story of Jan and Harold's wrestling with their son's drug addiction. As social workers listen to the stories of families who are wrestling with different life circumstances, they need to tune into how family's understand and find meaning in those experiences, what they believe to be "truth" and how they make sense of their life experiences both as individuals and as a family.

Belief and trust lead to actions based on faith, and those actions have consequences. In turn, the consequences give us more to ponder, confirming, challenging, and sometimes modifying beliefs and trust. When Corrine's prayers for her son's safety during minor surgery were met instead with life threatening illness that is still affecting his health, her beliefs and trust were thrown into disarray. When their infant son died in a fire, Jacob and Kate spent years struggling to find answers for themselves. Family life can be a safe haven, but it can also present faith-threatening challenges.

Social workers often find themselves thrust into the stream of client family's experiences and need to learn much more about that family than whether they are Catholic or Lutheran or Buddhist or Unitarian Universalist. They need to know the faith stories of their lives, and the crisis that concurrently confronts them in the context of that narrative. Even more significantly, families need to tell their stories to one another. Stories are how families say who they are; they deepen family celebrations; and give families ways to cling to one another in hard times. As important as it is to tell stories to one another in families, families also need to share their stories with others, to pass them on and share them and compare them with those of a larger community of people who confirm, challenge, and deepen the narratives of a family's faith journey, connecting the family's story to the great stories of religious faith. If a congregation is truly a community of faith, then it is a place where people and families know one another not just by name but also by their stories.

### Note

1 Adapted from Garland, D. (2003) *Sacred stories of ordinary families: Living the faith everyday*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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