

A NEW LOOK AT FAMILY DEVOTIONS

Do you struggle over family devotions?
Maybe some new ideas will help.

by Susan Christ

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When I told one of my now-grown daughters I was working on an article about family devotions, she asked, "Are you going to call it, 'How to Conquer Scowls and Crossed Arms?'"

Indeed, there were those days. (Actually, there still are those days, for I am now having devotions with my grandchildren.) Overshadowing those difficult times, however, were the moments when one of the girls rewarded my efforts with, "Mom, when can we have devotions again?"

Years ago, when I first started searching for family devotional material, I found resources for preschoolers, elementary-age children and teens, but it wasn't easy finding things that spanned the years, interests and abilities of my four daughters, one of whom is mentally retarded. So, gleaning what I could from all the materials I gathered, and employing the trial-and-error method, we began.

'A small beginning' (Zech. 4:10)

One of my favorite Bible verses is Zech. 4:10: "Do not despise this small beginning, for the eyes of the Lord rejoice to see the work begin." No matter how short our devotion times were, how infrequently they happened, or how little the girls participated, the Lord encouraged me with this verse.

My daughters enjoyed reading out loud, so we began by assigning a portion of that day's Bible reading to each child. Even my mentally retarded daughter wanted to help read. In the beginning, we helped her one word at a time. Now she can read several words on her own, especially the name "Jesus."

'Take a clay tablet... draw the city' (Ezek. 4:1)

I found that art sparked imaginations and got the children involved in the lesson we were studying. When they saw me prepared with colored markers, or crayons, and paper, they knew I would ask them to draw a picture portraying what they'd learned from the Bible story. After discussion, we taped their pictures to the wall or stuck them on the refrigerator to display.

When she was in middle school, one of my daughters became intrigued by the various shapes and forms the cross can take. After some research, she was ready to lead our devotion herself. She related the history of several styles of crosses and displayed drawings she had made of some of her favorites: the Lily Cross, the Anchor Cross, and the Jerusalem Cross.

‘Make music to him’ (Ps. 33:2)

No one in our family is very musically talented, but once the girls got involved in family devotion time, music grew out of the fun. We enjoyed singing with sign language. (We’d make up our own signs if we didn’t know the correct ones.) “Jesus Loves Me” and other Bible songs are easy to sign. We enjoyed “Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man” and “Build Your House on a Rock.”

Using a variety of songbooks and instruments, we’d try to find songs that fit whatever Scripture we were studying. Once we were reading in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus called the first disciples. When we read about Zebedee’s sons, my preschooler burst out singing, “Zippity doo dah, zippity ay!”

I could play simple tunes on the piano and “Jesus Loves Me” on the guitar, but the most fun was when the girls would get kazoos or raid the kitchen for pots and pans and utensils. We “made a joyful noise unto the Lord.”

‘She will pretend...’ (1 Kings 14:5)

Acting out Bible stories became a fun way to enjoy devotions. We found that, whenever necessary, one person could easily play more than one part.

When the girls learned how to make puppets in school, putting on puppet plays at home became a favorite pastime for them. By placing a blanket or sheet over a card table, they could keep all their characters and props hidden while their stories unfolded. It was a natural outcome to bring this interest to family devotions. We often used puppets made from socks or paper sacks to act out Bible stories. Sometimes our puppets were favorite stuffed animals and dolls.

The girls even produced special puppet plays for family gatherings. For example, they portrayed the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke while playing taped Christmas music in the back ground.

One Father’s Day, we wrote a play called “The Good Shepherd” for the girls’ father. The puppets portrayed characters from our family tree. The girls put the characters into some funny and impossible situations, and the story showed how The Good Shepherd cared for each one.

‘Celebrate your festivals’ (Nahum 1:15)

Obviously, the festivals of the Christian church year provide a wealth of starting points for family devotions. And these festivals needn’t just be the major ones of Christmas and Easter. Pentecost, Ascension, Reformation Day and others offer great opportunities for play-acting and other devotional formats favored by children.

At Christmastime, we used (actually, with my grandchildren, I still use) a variety of children's Christmas stories, poems and songs to go along with the traditional Advent Scriptures. During one Advent season, we created what we called a "Jesse tree" using the bare arms of a dogwood seedling. After reading the appropriate Scripture, we made and hung symbols of the members of the line of Jesse on the limbs.

Using an Advent wreath gave me the idea of bringing candles to our everyday devotion time. Candles help set an expectant mood, and the girls enjoyed taking turns blowing them out. Sometimes we lit one candle as we began, but special occasions prompted the use of multiple candles. For example, while my eldest daughters were planning their double wedding, we lit four candles, one for each bride and groom-to-be.

A longtime tradition in our family occurred on Christmas Eve. Just before bedtime, we read the Christmas story from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew with the light from the Advent wreath. As the story unfolded, one of the children quietly and carefully dramatized it with the appropriate pieces from a porcelain nativity set.

An extra special devotion time for us was the celebration of the girls' baptismal anniversaries. Some years we included a specially decorated cake, or small gifts such as a single rose bud or card.

'Pray in the Spirit on all occasions' (Eph. 6:18)

Prayer is an essential ingredient to family devotions. I pray for unlimited imagination, remembering that my desire to have fun with devotions comes from the very heart of God. He wants us to enjoy our relationship with Him and with each other.

I learned to keep my prayers simple and from the heart, and encouraged the girls to offer their own gradually. Before long the girls began to feel comfortable sharing their own prayer concerns, and together we would bring them before the Lord. The children also enjoyed—and the grandchildren continue to enjoy—singing prayer songs and reading children's prayers.

Another devotional custom still in force at my house involves the Christmas cards we receive each year. As the cards come in, the children place them in a basket or display them on a card tree. At the end of each devotional time, one of the children chooses a card. We pray for the people who sent us the card, then (when possible) recycle the cover into a postcard with a note on the back telling our friends that special prayers were offered for them.

'They will be in awe' (Jer. 33:9)

Sometimes, with my grandchildren, we pull out a Bible game to play such as "Bible Trivia," "Ten Commandments" or "Bibleopoly." We also read Christian books together. My daughters' favorite was, and now my grandchildren's favorite is, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

I learned to make the most of unusual times and places for devotions. Once, after I asked a question about Scripture that instigated an animated discussion with my girls at dinner, the oldest asked, “You sneaked devotions in, didn’t you, Mom?” Sometimes I get caught.

God loves to surprise us also. After I remarried, we had nine children in the house. One Sunday, while driving to the zoo for a family outing, I posed a question to my husband about a Scripture reading from church that morning. One of the children offered a response as well, and before you knew it, the issue had been thoroughly discussed with everyone participating. I asked my husband later, “Do you think they realize we just had family devotions?” It was totally unplanned. The experience reminded me to give God room to lead.

When our newly joined family of 11 struggled to blend together, my husband and I decided to use a devotion time to discuss the body of Christ and how it relates to our family. We cut a bigger than life-size outline of a person from a roll of newsprint. After reading 1 Cor. 12:27 (“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it”), we hung up the paper person and began to label the parts with each family member’s name. We showed where we felt everyone fit in the body of our family, emphasizing how we all needed to work together in order for the body to function properly.

Our goal is to have fun while learning about and sharing God’s love. After all, “A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones” (Prov. 15:30).

Our family, all three generations’ worth, still struggles with our devotions at times, but we continue experimenting and looking for new ways to enjoy each other and our loving Lord.

Susan Christ, a member of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Cassville, Mo., operates a cattle ranch with her husband.

Resources to Help You

Concordia Publishing House recently unveiled three new books to help Christian families with young children—as well as day-school and Sunday-school teachers—conduct devotions that are innovative and fun.

The three are:

Laugh & Tickle, Hug & Pray, by Julaine Kamrath. Fifty-two activities help families with 4- to 10-year-olds spend quality faith-time with each other. Item #12-3340; 176 pages; \$10.99.

A Young Child's Garden of Christian Virtues, by Susan Lawrence. One hundred hands-on devotions that plant the seed of Scripture and godly behavior in children ages 1 to 3. Item #12-3364; 112 pages; \$9.99.

A Family Garden of Christian Virtues, by Susan Lawrence. Devotions geared to children age 4 to 10. Each devotion involves a short object-lesson that teaches Bible passages and spiritual concepts to children while reinforcing them in adults. Item #12-3300; 112 pages; \$12.99.

In addition, CPH offers an earlier title, ***Little Visits for Families***, by Allan Hart Jahsmann and Martin P. Simon. These devotions, focusing on God's Word and its work in every day life, are geared for families with children age 7-10. Item #061305; 304 pages; \$10.99.

All of these products may be ordered over the phone toll free at 1-800-325-3040.

10 Ways to Help Children Pray

These tips, designed for use not just by parents but by grandparents, aunts, uncles and special friends as well, appear by permission of LCMS Family Connection.

- 1.** Let children see you praying.
- 2.** Before you take a trip or go on an outing, pause to pray together.
- 3.** The next time you're at the table together, hold hands when you pray.
- 4.** The next time a child tells a lie, ask him to pray with you. Pray that you both would always have the courage to tell the truth.
- 5.** The next time you and a child disagree over a major issue, ask her to pray about it and assure her you'll do the same.
- 6.** The next time you listen to the evening news with a child and hear something especially sad, ask him to pray with you about it.
- 7.** When a child faces a challenge in his life, encourage him to pray. You might use the first part of the common table prayer and then add an appropriate ending. For example: "Come, Lord Jesus, be my guest... as I take this test."
- 8.** Remember back when you were a child. What fears did you have? Were you frightened of bullies down the street? How did you feel if you were teased in school? Talk to children about some of their fears and then pray over them.
- 9.** Ask the children in your life to pray for you.
- 10.** If a child stays overnight, kneel down at the bedside and say your evening prayers together.
