This paper discusses the results of interviews with 110 families about their faith. These families represent the diversity of family structures present in 32 Christian congregations located in metropolitan areas in four geographic regions—the Southwest, the South, the Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest. The congregations identified themselves as Southern Baptist, National Baptist, United Methodist, and Presbyterian USA. These interviews explored the meaning and experience of faith for family life. The findings suggest dimensions of family faith experiences, and the transactional relationship between individual and family faith.

A diversity of research studies have found that families considered to be strong and well-functioning, even in the face of adversity, have an active spiritual dimension to their life together and involvement in a community of faith (Brody, Stoneman, and McCrary 1994; Call and Heaton, 1997; Deveaux 1996; McCubbin and McCubbin 1988; Walsh 1999). Family strength is often defined as stability (e.g., the absence of divorce), happiness or satisfaction of family members with their family relationships, and/or the absence of various interpersonal problems. For example, Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson (1999), using the 1987/88 National Survey of Families and Households, found that regular attendance at religious services is inversely associated with domestic violence.

Others have discovered the relationship between faith and family strength by first identifying families considered strong and then studying their characteristics. Spirituality and involvement in a faith community have consistently emerged in the lists of characteristics of strong families these researchers have composed. For example, Nick Stinnett and his colleagues (1999) asked key informants to identify families they considered strong based on three criteria: (1) they had happy marriages, (2) they had satisfying parent-child relationships, and (3) they met one another’s needs. From his subsequent surveying and interviewing of families so identified, he determined that spirituality and belief in a “higher power” was evident in all the strong families he studied. His initial research was conducted in rural Oklahoma, but it has been followed and replicated by national and international studies (e.g., Brigman, Schons, and Stinnett 1986; DeFrain, DeFrain, and Lepard 1994; Knaub, Hanna, and Stinnett 1984; Stinnett, Sanders, DeFrain, and Parkhurst 1982; Stinnett and Stinnett 1995).

The relationship between shared religious beliefs and involvement in a faith community with family strength encourages congregations to believe that they can make a positive difference in the lives of families. Nevertheless, 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’s lives. Several questions emerge: What charac-
terizes faith and spirituality in family life? In what way is family a context for individual faith? Do families themselves have a dimension to their life that we might identify as "faith" and, if so, what are its characteristics?

These questions are also of interest to family professionals 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. Helping professionals seeking greater understanding of family crisis, distress, and resiliency generated most of the research cited above. The helping professions are recognizing that spirituality is a dimension of life that needs attention whatever the problem or circumstance that brings a family to seek help. Herbert Anderson writes:

> People who seek therapy today have often lost the capacity to belong deeply to each other . . . . . . Understanding therapy from a spiritual perspective means that one aim is to enable individuals and families to fashion narratives that weave together human and divine realities in a single fabric (Anderson 1999: 160, 175).

**DEFINING FAITH**

James Fowler (1986) has been the most influential researcher and theorist in exploring faith. His definition of faith emphasizes cognitive processes—how persons understand their experiences and find meaning in them. He defines stages of faith that are congruent with human development theories, and that build on stage theories of cognitive and moral development. Fowler posits that there are universal stages of faith development, even though the content of faith varies greatly. In other words, all people have faith, because all people develop and revise frames of meaning, or ways of understanding their world.

Several theorists have challenged Fowler's theory of faith development. Craig Dykstra has suggested that faith should be defined not just as a system of knowing, but as a mode of life that is grounded in a more or less conscious and chosen responsiveness to the activity of God in the world (Dykstra 1986). Faith is what persons do based on their understanding of that which transcends themselves and their own ability to understand. Faith is not only what people put their faith in, and the process through which they developed that faith. It also involves the behavioral consequences of what persons believe.

Randolph Nelson (1990) has described faith first as knowledge that includes both the "facts" of the faith system as well as having encountered and knowing God. Second, faith is assent, acknowledging the truthfulness of the story of the religious tradition. Third, faith is trust, which Nelson calls the most significant element of faith. Others have focused more on the behavioral consequences of faith, the actions that are the expression of beliefs and of trust (Benson, Donahue, and Erickson 1993).

**FAMILIES AND FAITH**

Family is one of the contexts in which individuals develop and live their faith. Fowler describes families as "ecologies of faith consciousness" (1992b: 326). The term ecology implies transactional influence. Certainly, through the more or less consistent care of the primary adult figures in their lives, children learn to trust, and trust is often considered a necessary foundation for the emergence of faith. At the same time, children are highly influential participants in the faith-life of adults. Parents report that the birth and raising of chil-
dren profoundly influences their sense of meaning and purpose. For many parents, children are the impetus for returning to or seeking out participation in a faith community for the first time.

Craig Dykstra’s description of faith as a way of life lends itself to considering whether or not there may be a systemic characteristic of families that we can call “family faith.” Families, too, have meaning that shapes their common life together. In other words, perhaps faith is not only a dimension of individual cognition, values, and consequent behavior, but also a systemic characteristic of groups who participate in shared patterns of living. Fowler (1992b) has suggested that families can be the objects of faith, because families give worth and meaning to persons’ lives and are trusted to sustain their members. The question I am asking, however, is. Can a family be the subject of faith? Fowler (1990) acknowledges that there is nothing available that relates faith development theory to family systems theory. He therefore related his work with faith development to the systems theory of Murray Bowen, although acknowledging that this is a hypothetical theoretical construction, not based thus far on any research.

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 (1993) have 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 concludes that families have what he calls “a family schema.” He defines a family schema as “a set of beliefs, values, goals, priorities, and expectations about themselves in relationship to each other, and about their family in relationship to the community and the social system beyond its boundaries” (McCubbin, McCubbin, and Thompson 1993: 154). McCubbin sees 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 et al. 1993: 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 and McCubbin 1986: 71). Could “family faith” provide an alternative definition for studying family schema, at least in religious families? Access to family schema comes when families tell the stories of their lives. We rely on stories to explain things that we don’t have other ways of expressing.

**FAMILY FAITH NARRATIVES**

Faith experiences themselves cannot be explored directly in research, but rather only in later reflection that takes place in the telling about the experience. Moreover, it is in the telling of the experience that meaning is conveyed and may change over time with life experiences and in different contexts. Life meanings are told primarily in narratives by “configuring and reconfiguring past experiences in ongoing stories which have certain plots or directions and which guide the interpretation of those experiences” (Yamane 2000: 183). Three basic elements constitute narratives. First, persons must select a particular experience to tell about from the ongoing stream of life experiences. Second, the experience is told with a temporal order, a beginning, middle, and end. Finally, the narrative has an overarching theme, a moral ordering (Yamane 2000). These stories are not so much factually
accurate descriptions of events, but rather the attempt to make sense out of those experiences (Wuthnow 1997).

Elizabeth Stone conducted research into family stories with more than 100 persons through personal interviews. She found that family stories have collective meanings. Family members may have variations in their versions of the stories, but they were always compatible. Facts can be fashioned into a multitude of meanings, and the congruence of meaning families give their shared stories point to the significance of the stories’ meaning for them as a collective (Stone, 1988). According to Eileen Kindig,

*Every family story has two basic functions. The first is to illustrate all the glorious, crazy, eccentric, touching, wonderful ways that your family is different from every other family that is now, ever was, or ever will be. The second is to remind you of your spiritual connection with families everywhere, from Topeka to Timbuctu. Although family stories may also serve other valuable purposes simultaneously, sacred stories always accomplish these two goals (Kindig 1997: 31).*

Families use stories to communicate to shape a shared understanding of what is important and how to tell the difference between what is to be celebrated and what is to be feared. Stories remind families of who they are and whose they are in ways deeper than the words exchanged (Hughes 2000).

**DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

This project is a component of a larger study of family life in Protestant Christian congregations. (Garland & Yankeelov, 1998, forthcoming). The larger study involved surveys of 32 congregations in urban areas representing four geographic regions and four denominations: Southern Baptist (SBC), National Baptist (NBC), United Methodist, and Presbyterians (USA). I interviewed 110 families in these congregations about their family experiences and expressions of faith and spirituality. Either the pastor or a congregational committee helped select families for interview who represented both “peripheral” and “mainstay” members of the congregation. I also asked for families that represent the range of family types in their congregation (two parents with children, remarried families with children, single parents, single adults without children, childless couples, empty nest and senior adult singles and couples). When I called each home to schedule the interview, I explained the purpose of the interview and invited the individual to include “whoever your family is,” whether or not they live in the same household. The study has used a “functional” definition of family rather than a “structural” definition (Garland 1999). That is, family members are those persons who function as a family, who are “attached” to one another (Bowlby 1969, 1988).

The resulting sample of families interviewed included cohabiting heterosexual couples (n=5),4 roommates of the same gender (n=1), single parents and their children (n=11), adult siblings (n=2), an elderly parent and grown children (n=3), and single adults alone (n=13). The sample also included married couples with (n=48) and without (n=26) children, and in first (n=54) and later (n=20) marriages. Many families included other assorted relatives and non-relatives: exchange students, foster children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, and close friends (n=16). An average of 2.47 persons was present in each interview, with a
range of 1 to 6 persons. Eighty-three interviews (75%) consisted of at least two family members. The one pair of roommates in the sample were heterosexual females; to my knowledge, there were no families defined by a homosexual relationship in the sample.

Each interview lasted approximately two hours and usually took place in the family’s home. The questions used for the interview can be found in Appendix 1. Most of the questions attempted to elicit stories of family life rather than abstract principles or definitions. I was interested in knowing their principles and definitions of faith and how they would illustrate these principles and definitions with stories of family life. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in full. Only a portion of the findings from these interviews will be discussed below.

**FINDINGS**

Four categories emerged from the faith definitions and stories respondents told in response to my questions. According to these respondents, faith is (1) a set of beliefs about God and God’s relationship with persons; (2) a trust that comforts that the individual will be given strength and necessary resources for life’s challenges; and/or (3) actions based on their beliefs and trust. Clearly, their descriptions of faith were congruent with the definitions of those who have theorized about faith. In addition, however, many respondents also defined faith as (4) expectations concerning the outcomes of being faithful. Theorists have looked to the behavior of the believer as evidence of faith (e.g., Dykstra 1986; Benson, Donahue, and Erickson 1993). Some respondents took it another step, however, and added the response of God to their action as a dimension of their faith. Their experience of God’s intervention in their lives in response to their own action (or inaction) completed, confirmed, or revised their beliefs and their trust. Some respondents emphasized one or two of these four facets of faith. Others, however, saw all four of these facets of faith to be interrelated and transactional, each building on the other.

Respondents’ definitions of faith can be organized along a continuum of the degree to which the definition of faith belongs to the individual or to the family as a whole. This continuum applied to all the types of families interviewed in this study. I will explore four overlapping points along this continuum: (1) the individual’s faith definition that, if it involves the family at all, it is only peripherally; (2) the family as a context for the individual’s definition of faith; (3) the family as the shaping influence in the individual’s faith definition; and (4) the family faith narrative told and shaped by the family group.

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Respondents’ Definitions of Faith

Darlene is a social worker; her husband is a lawyer. When they married one another, each brought a teenage son from a previous marriage to their new household. All four family members were present for the interview. Darlene defined faith as follows:

I guess faith is the belief that Jesus was here and real and died for us and we have new life through Him and eternal life through Him.6

For her, faith is belief, assent to a knowledge about who God is and how God relates to persons.

Some respondents went on to describe how their belief had created a sense of trust, increasing their confidence in their ability to deal effectively with life’s challenges. Shamika is an office worker in the Midwest in her early 20’s. She is the only child of her widowed African-American mother and her deceased Anglo-American father. Shamika recently married an electrical technician. They have no children. Shamika’s mother goes with them to the Presbyterian church and spends considerable time with them. I talked with Shamika alone, and she defined faith as follows:

It seems like it’s so much a part of me in a way, but it’s not conscious. If I just stop in the middle of the day, I don’t really think of it. It’s inside me. It’s like a thread in fabric. It’s a thread that runs all through it that you don’t see but if you pull it out all the other threads fall out. You don’t really see it in there but you know it’s there. It’s holding it up and together. 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 it 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. Trusting God is the thread that holds her together. It 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. Trust is a receptive, emotive corollary to cognitive belief.

The Christian scriptures say, “faith, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17, NAS), and several respondents reflected this teaching in their definitions of faith. They described how belief and trust are the foundation for their own action. Beth participated in the interview with her husband of 25 years and their unmarried young adult daughter, who is a health professional and is also working as a leader for the youth in their church. They have been very active in church throughout their marriage, but currently, Beth is discouraged and angry over a conflict in the congregation and has not been attending. Here is how she defined faith:

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 guid-
ing me,” because sometimes we go ahead so long and don’t ever ask God for guidance. The other thing is that I guess my faith is too simple. On Sunday mornings you can hear from predominantly Baptists and some others, everybody’s painting a picture of what Heaven is like. Like if you had a choice you ain’t going? 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.

She describes her beliefs as “simple,” a belief that God is there and listens to her prayers. She trusts that Heaven will be there and she doesn’t have to worry about it. But she actually begins her definition with the active dimension—she believes in running while she is praying. She doesn’t 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).

**Family As The Context For Defining And Experiencing Faith**

Many respondents described how family life has been a context for shaping their beliefs.

**Family as the Context for Belief**

Shamika lives with anger over the unsolved murder of her father when she was a baby. She believes the crime was racially motivated, perpetrated by those who objected to a White man marrying a Black woman. For her, faith has meant believing that she can leave justice in God’s hands, as her grandmother taught:

> My grandmother was one of those nice old ladies that always had those little sayings. She 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 believed that the Lord will 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 her beliefs about God and justice. The family has not just presented her with the challenge, however; it has also been a web of relationships that give cognitive maps and emotional support for dealing with the challenge.

**Family as the Context for Trust**

Several participants made a connection between trust in God and faith in family members. It is not just infants who learn trust or mistrust from relationships with others to whom they are attached; this learning takes place throughout our lives. A mother of preschoolers defines her faith as trust:
That there's a higher power that's going to do what's best for you though you don't necessarily know what that is. You just have to have faith that it's going to work out the way it was meant to be and that our vision is so limited, our scope is so small compared to God's. It's similar to being a parent. I have to have faith that I'm doing the right thing for our children, that I'm feeding them the right thing and teaching them the right thing. They really don't have a whole lot of choices and so it's a trust issue. And to me it's the same relationship that you have with Christ.

She believes her children are learning faith by finding her faithful to take care of them. She connects their trust of her with her own trust that God is guiding her in “doing the right thing” for her children. In other words, their faith in her accentuates for her the role of faith in her own life. Her attachment to her children drives her to trust God for guidance. She and her husband had left the church as young adults but came back because they wanted to rear their children well. The challenges of parenting led them into an active religious life.

In contrast, when family relationships are not trustworthy, then faith in God may also be shaken, for adults as well as for children. Erik Erikson (1968) describes the first task of human beings as the establishment of basic trust. Sharon Parks (1986) has pointed out that this does not happen, if at all, merely once and for all. Human beings repeatedly undergo the coming apart and recomposing of their most cherished patterns of meaning and anchors of trust, often in the context of intimate relationships. For example, a young wife still wrestling with her feelings about her husband’s infidelity and physical violence sees a relationship between her ability to trust God and her ability to trust her husband:

It's like faith in my marriage. I have some faith, but I don't have a whole lot. I have troubles. But I used to have blind faith.

Family as the Context for Action based on Faith
Beverly and her husband had moved to another state shortly after their daughter Catherine, now a young adult, was born. Their marriage was characterized by ongoing conflict.

Finally, I left. I went back to my mother's. But down deep inside I knew I had learned one thing, that if you ever did get married that you were not to be apart. I knew that I could not leave him. When I was home with Catherine at my mother's house that week I said, "Well, Lord, I know I've got to go back." But I said, "You're going to have to take it and you're going to have to shape it and mold it because I can't do it." And I did go back. And that's not to say we didn't have conflicts later on.

For her, faith meant acting on the marriage commitment she had made, and believing that God would be at work changing her world in ways she could not.

Describing himself as a relatively new Christian (he recently converted from Catholicism), Stephan also has found family relationships to be the most important and challenging context for living his new faith. He and his girlfriend live in the same apartment complex, each with children and going through divorces from first marriages. She had been in a physically abusive relationship. They feel the heavy weight of others watching and, they believe,
depending on them to set a moral example for their small congregation. They have chosen to wait for sexual involvement until after their marriage as a result of their beliefs about what God wants for them.

*It's been really hard on us because we're fighting the moral ethics of what's right and wrong. We're a very special couple at church. Everybody knows what she's been through, and the change in her and what's happened to her and how she's just a totally different person. You wouldn't even recognize her. She's happy; she's smiling. But we've got to set this example. We can't move in together and people suspecting that we're doing all this stuff and going to get into trouble. And that's the hard part because it's been very difficult. When you love somebody as much as we love each other, it's very hard not to do things you know you're not supposed to do. It's been very difficult to not be sexually involved.*

These are radically different situations—a woman deciding to go back to her husband because she was committed to her marriage, and a couple struggling with delaying sexual intercourse until after they marry. Both, however, believe that their actions express their faith commitments, and that they receive strength from beyond themselves for doing what they otherwise believe would be impossible.

Respondents also told stories about the service they have committed themselves to that is the active expression of their faith. One senior adult man described how his wife had agreed to forego a vacation so they could support several youths from their church who wanted to go on a mission trip. Families serve meals at mission sites, bring furniture to the home of a church member that has had a house fire, mow the lawns of elderly neighbors, and collect food for hungry families.

Sometimes faith-based action is the quiet heroism of simply caring for one another in difficult circumstances. An African-American middle-aged woman, divorced when her children were young, describes the schedule she carried for years in order to support her children, working at night full time while they were sleeping, coming home to get them off to school in the morning, then working a full time day job. For seven years, she averaged two to three hours of sleep a day. When she began earning enough to quit one job, she enrolled in college and began carrying nine hours each semester to earn her bachelor’s degree. Now she is raising her 10-year-old niece. In response to how this was possible, she responded, “The Lord did it. I know I didn’t do it.” This theme was repeated over and over, as many respondents gave as their favorite Bible verse: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

*Family as the Context of Outcomes*

*Things work out.* Some said that faith means that “things work out for the best when you have faith.” Many persons described instances that they believe their fervent prayers caused God to act. Successful prayers included everything from praying for healing for a sick child to praying that God would send money or would cause someone to buy a house for sale. Several families living on the brink of poverty talked about God providing ways for them to buy or repair the car they needed, or checks coming in the mail they didn’t expect, enabling them to buy groceries to feed their children.
... if you have faith. Some were specific that it is faith and/or faithful living that leads to “things working out.” In other words, God only works things out for those who have faith, who pray, or who perform other faith disciplines. The outcome is thus the evidence of faithful beliefs and behavior. An adult daughter landed a job because her parents prayed. Critically ill children live because their devout grandmothers, parents, and congregations prayed for healing.

When things don’t work out. The belief that “things work out” for the faithful leads to disillusionment and doubt when life events do not seem to make sense. For example, Dorothy is a widow in her late 60’s, an African American National Baptist living in the suburbs of a Southern city with her adult daughter and her frail elderly mother. She moved with her husband from a northern city several states away, following his job. They did not know at the time that he had cancer, but he became ill and died only a couple of years after their move. Now she finds herself hundreds of miles from her closest friends. Things have not “worked out.” She expressed restlessness and a wish that God would hurry up and do something in her life. Based on our conversation to that point, I asked if she meant meeting a man:

Well, it’s not my goal, no. But I’m hoping that’s in the plan of the Lord. I would hate for Him to take my husband for nothing. I know all the widows feel the same way. I just feel that, “Why take him? I prayed hard for you to heal this cancer. You wouldn’t do it. You took him. Now what are you going to do for me? Give me a replacement?” Isn’t that horrible to think that way about the Lord? I’m like Job. There have been times when I thought, “Lord, I know you know all things but have you forgotten I’m sitting in this little town in Louisiana?” Sometimes I think, “Well, He doesn’t know I’m around anymore,” but I know better in my heart. That’s Satan putting those silly thoughts in my mind. I feel like I’ve been forgotten, and I feel like that nobody really cares for me anymore, especially a male. I keep praying that the Lord will send me a nice Christian man because I need someone. I get tired of cutting grass and hammering and fixing. And I also miss the companionship. The worst thing in the world about being alone is making decisions alone. I really miss him because we used to sit down and talk about every little thing and plan it out, and I don’t have that any more, and now when I make my decisions, if they turn out bad I don’t have anybody to blame. So, I pray a lot. “Lord you guide me and show me what I should be doing.” And so far, so good.

As mad as she is at God for depriving her of a man, as abandoned as she feels, she finds herself now relying on God to replace the man in her life to help her, albeit unhappily, and “so far, so good.”

God works through whatever happens. For some, God is working through whatever happens. For them, self is not the center and personal well-being is not the ultimate good. Catherine is a young divorced mother. Two decades before, she was the baby daughter who was carried by her mother “back home” to the maternal family, only for her mother to realize she was committed to her marriage and so returned to her husband. Catherine now has a child of her own, and her ex-husband is in prison. Talking about the rough edges of life she has experienced, she says that she does not exactly believe that God caused them, although she seems not to have finished working this out in her mind:
God may not have caused the bad things to happen, but I believe that He puts things in your life where you can learn that if you trust in Him. There’s a reason—maybe there’s a reason that Doug got put in prison, maybe that was his ticket out, and how he can turn his life around.

Maybe, she says. But she is not sure.

**Family as Shaper of Individual Faith**

Family members often pointed out that their families have not simply been the context for faith experience but often have also actively shaped their faith. A stepmother described the faith discipline of family life:

*I don’t know if I can express this, but I think this is really weird. 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 his daughter. Last Sunday, I sat in church and listened to the sermon and I just kept thinking, “This is horrible. I am not treating this person 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 the pain of wrestling with things. If you just want the simplistic answer, you’re still left with the unanswered questions. The family represents a working path to get there.*

This shaping is most pronounced as families confront crisis. Sometimes it is a crisis that has been generated from within; often it is a combination of both the family’s situation and their relational processes that shake and reform the faith of family members. Suzanna is a young Southern Baptist wife and mother of two-year-old Nathan. They live in a small city in the South. Nathan was born critically ill. Suzanna told me that faith meant believing that he could be healed: “God just kept proving to us that he was in charge. He was in control and was going to take care of us and he did.” According to Suzanna, God used the crisis of the baby’s illness to strengthen their marriage. “Things working out” is therefore not necessarily a simplistic belief; it can be wrestling with terrible circumstances and yet sensing divine presence and activity. This mother sensed this when her newborn baby was transported to the children’s hospital just hours after delivery and she and her husband spent the night crying and praying together. She believed that if the baby survived, it would be because God had intervened. And if the baby died, God would take care of them. For her, faith does not always bring about healing and working things out, but it does mean believing that God will be present even when things go badly.

**Families Shaping Belief**

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. For example, a college professor described such an impromptu parent-child conversation.
My son and I talked about the second coming of Christ because somebody told him that the end of the world is near. I reminded him that, "Only God knows when the end of the world is coming, that Christ said that neither He nor the angels or anybody but God knows. But you don’t have to take what people say. Read it. You don’t have to listen to hearsay." My son is the type that would prefer that somebody tell him and I’m trying to tell him that’s the slow way of learning.11

This father was concerned not only with using this opportunity to talk about the content of his son’s faith and his own, but also with shaping his son’s process of discerning what to believe.

Families Shaping Trust

Jacob and Kate are African-American; Jacob is Catholic and Kate is Baptist, and they are now actively involved in a Southern Baptist congregation in their Midwestern city. They have two school-age sons. They described the tragedy of the death ten years ago of their first son, Mark, in a fire at the home of a babysitter.

**Jacob:** 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:** 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 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:** I’ve never thought about that, but it’s true.

**Kate:** 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 it 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.” The shared theme is trust 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 neces-
sarily 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.”

Families Shaping Action

Families also profoundly shape individual behavior that expresses the faith of members. The shaping that goes on is often a transactional process; children shape the faith behaviors of parents just as parents shape the faith of children. Adults in this study often talked about their sense of responsibility for guiding their children toward faith. As they wrestle with this responsibility, they find themselves growing spiritually, seeking out a faith community for the sake of children, making decisions about the behavior and faith they want to model. Ben and Barb are in their first marriage and have three preschoolers. Ben describes how responsibility for their children led them to seek out a community of faith.

Ben: I always had too many bad habits to make a real commitment to Christ. Then I finally realized that I couldn’t wait until I was perfect, that I was going to have to leave it to Christ and then let Him make the changes. I finally figured that out. He finally showed me that. I think He used the boys. I knew that I was responsible for bringing the boys up in the ways of the Lord and so we both gradually committed our lives to God.

Barb: I feel that the Lord is with our children. They will say certain things that I know is a part of us teaching but I also think it is God working in their little minds, that they remember. I know God has answered prayers for us. There’s no other way that I guess certain things could have happened unless He did it. I was telling Ben the other night, and I don’t think I had ever told him before. Probably a year ago or more I would notice that the kids would do something and we would yell at them. And we would find ourselves constantly just going, “Stop doing that.”

Ben: Mainly me. I just rubbed off on her.

Barb: Instead of telling them to stop we would just yell at them and yell at them. I got so tired of being that way and I prayed a lot for God to give patience and understanding to me and to Ben. The other night, I said to myself, “Did you notice you have not yelled at these kids in probably two months?” And it’s not something I made a conscious effort to wake up every morning and say, “Okay, I’m not going to yell at the kids. I’m going to take time out and play with them and listen to them and read to them.” It’s not something I’ve done on my own. It just happened. It’s been a big change.12

Daily care of preschoolers both challenges every bit of energy and strength they have but also is the ground on which their faith and understanding of God’s working in their life is growing. Note, too, that this is the subject of conversation between them: “I was telling Ben the other night…”

Families Shaping the Interpretation of Outcomes

Families provide many experiences for faith crises, when the expected outcomes of their faith-based action are not forthcoming. A mother of three school-age and teenage boys describes 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 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 cause 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.13

The family challenged her beliefs about how God responds to faith practices. Consequently, she rejected those beliefs and, in the resulting crisis of faith, she sought out and joined a new faith community and, in the process, redefined her understanding of God. Unexpected outcomes of faith result in revising beliefs, and the interactive processes of belief, trust, behavior and outcomes continues.

**Family Faith Narratives**

A family narrative is one in which family members tell the story together, sometimes interrupting one another, affirming and sometimes modifying one another’s story-telling in tag team style. Consequently, the story does not belong to one person; it is a narrative they have shaped together. Families tell stories for a reason. The stories illustrate a family principle, define their identity as a family unit, or in some other way describe or underscore the meaning of family life. Sometimes the key that it is a family narrative is the simple affirmation by one family member of the story being told by another. Commonly, family faith narratives are notable for the involvement of everyone in telling the story, even if others simply provide a chorus that echoes and emphasizes what has been said.
Family Beliefs

A senior adult couple, Peggy and Bill, told the story of the terrible family crisis when their son was “missing in action” from his military unit, and then learning days later that he had committed suicide. During those same days, Bill’s elderly mother became ill and died. The funerals were in the same week. They told the long narrative together, each contributing a phrase to a maximum of four sentences before the other took over the story-telling. Most of the story had to do with how they received the news, how they coped waiting for further word, and how they all reacted. When he began to relate how, that same weekend, one of their grown sons came for a visit, Peggy interrupts with “Let me tell this.” She wanted to be a part of the telling, and the tag-team story continues:

Peggy: 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: He said “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: 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. Five thousand miles away and he’s missing. So each one, Bill and all three of our other sons had gone to see their pastors.

Bill: 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: 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: 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 around 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: 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 the story have meaning beyond merely communicating the sequence of events. The loss of their son appears to be senseless tragedy, and yet their story contains a theme of divine intervention. 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. His mother cites 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. 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 5000 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.

Darlene, the social worker, and her second husband David were introduced earlier. They have two sons from previous marriages, his son Pete (age 14) and her son Paul (age 12). The twelve-year-old begins the definition of faith:

Paul: **It 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—his mother’s 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.” The stepfather continues:

David: **I really don’t think about it a whole lot. It’s just something I’ve always lived my life on. I think something good’s going to come out of everything no matter how bad it is and I always feel like you’re not going to have too much thrown on you that you can’t handle. Especially when I was going through the divorce and I was taking care of Pete who was very young. I said, “There’s got to be a reason I’m going through this.” After going through that, I can handle anything.**

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Following his stepson’s comments, the stepfather describes difficult experiences in his own life that he perceives God has used for good. His narrative is somewhat more focused on trusting the bearable limits of trials—“you’re not going to have too much thrown on you that you can’t handle”—rather than the goodness of even bad circumstances. Like his stepson, however, he believes there is a purpose in what he has experienced—“there’s got to be a reason I’m going through this”—as well as his belief that he is better for what he has experienced.

Family stories were not all sweetness and good feelings. Paul later recounts a rather frightening incident for him, in response to my question, “Have you ever felt God’s absence?”

Paul: I don’t know if I should say this because it was a real bad time. Well I know God wasn’t absent but I remember one time my mom had accidentally put some of my dad’s file papers next to the sink. I think I might have bumped them into the sink and [looking at stepfather] you got real mad cause your case was tomorrow. The ink went all over and you couldn’t read anything. 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.

Darlene: I don’t remember this.

Pete: I remember that. I don’t know if it was a paper though.

Paul: I felt like, “God why didn’t you...” I tried to tell you that but you were too busy yelling at Mom.

David: I don’t remember this.

The parents say they do not remember the incident and seem to be considerably embarrassed at the telling of it. The stepfather defended himself with his lack of memory. It is a poignant scene as the older stepbrother powerfully sides with the younger child by affirming 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 paper that got wet). One of the interesting dimensions of this short narrative is that the child frames it as a story about feeling God’s absence even though he “knew” God was still there. His trust was shaken, even though his belief did not change. 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 sibling 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 sometimes become central to the family’s identity. As the family tells them, they 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 12-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 enough to tell it, and the family has survived what may have felt like a rending of relationships at the time.
Family Trust

Trust is clearly a theme in family narratives. A divorced Euro-American Baptist woman and her two school-age children told me the story of the extended illness of their old pet dog the year before, at the time that she and her husband were separating for a third and last time. The dog had become unable to stand to relieve himself and had to be carried outside and held up to urinate, as well as having to be spoon fed, but the eight-year-old son could not bear the thought of having the old dog put down. The two warring parents both intuitively that the son was struggling with grief over the divorce and that the loss of the dog was too much of an emotional burden for him at that point. Together, they worked out a plan for caring for the dog while the mother worked, because no babysitter was willing to do what the dog required. The husband came into the home to care for the dog while the wife worked (at night), and she cared for the dog during the day. Together, this divorcing couple cared for the dog until the son finally said to them that he believed that the dog was suffering too much and that he was ready to say goodbye.

This was obviously a family story with considerable meaning. Telling the story was a group project, with family members tearfully listening to, interrupting, and embellishing one another's pieces of the narrative. It seemed somehow to be a story of faithfulness, of strength, and of caregiving that provided a significant counterpoint to the more obvious story of the divorce, with attendant themes of breaking faith and weakening bonds. Perhaps the parents' patient caring for the dog symbolized for the boy—and for all of them—that they would be faithful to care for him, too, as long as they needed him, even though they were no longer husband and wife. This mother and her children told me this story, incidentally, as a way of answering my question, "What gives your life together meaning?"

Family Action

Luke and Laura have both been married before and have adult children from those marriages. Luke is African-American, and Laura is Anglo-American; they have a teenage son, John. They are deeply involved in the leadership of their Southern Baptist congregation, which they say is the center of their life. Luke is a deacon and they both teach Sunday School—together. Despite their heavy involvement in congregational activities, he also serves as a volunteer baseball and soccer coach. Here is how they responded to my question, "How does faith shape your life together?"

Laura: When John has overnight company, they know that they must bring clothes, because in the morning they're going to go to church. The one little boy has joined church with us. He had never been in a church before. We encourage all of John's friends to attend church. We're not to the point where we turn the kids off. One of the stipulations they all know, though, is that if they don't go to church another time in their life, they come here and spend Saturday night, Sunday morning it's church. And I think this is important to them.

Luke: I think some of them look forward to it. Being a coach is an expression of faith because I try to be a role model for the kids to see what I'm doing and how I am in my daily walks of life.

Laura: He doesn't ever berate a child. He never uses profanity.
For Luke and Laura, the hospitality to teenagers, the involvement of them in their faith community, and Luke’s positive style coaching are expressions of faith.

A Muslim father, an immigrant from the Middle-East, is married to an Anglo-American Methodist. He describes how raising their children “according to what God wants” is their contribution to the larger world.

Abdul: I really try to live according to what God wants. And I’m sure I have shortcomings and fail to do certain things according to the way He wants. He’s saying, “I give you health. I give you wealth. I give you knowledge. What have you done?” I will be questioned about that. “What have you done with your family? You took them to Beirut, to Cyprus, so what? That’s not what I was looking for. I was looking for a child to be raised to worship me.” Worship means everything from saying hello, to cleaning the area, or helping your parents, or being good to the neighbors. This is worship.

And a little later, his wife responded to my question about how they nurture their faith as a family:

Miriam: I was going to say the little things you can do as a family that we do. Like just making that quick family time or having our son see the newspaper that belongs to Miss Harris next door. And he can go pick that up and take it up to the top of her porch, which saves her a moment. It’s little things like that; being respectful of adults. Going to church and making sure that everybody has their bulletin, or helping at church with setting the table up for the buffet. Shining the forks and spoons when they come out of the dishwasher. It doesn’t have to be anything major. But they see their contribution.

They echoed one another, weaving together that which gives meaning and purpose to their lives. Clearly, this family is defining its faith in service to congregation, neighbor and community, both in the ways they described here as well as in the care of a little boy from overseas they were hosting in their home while he received skin grafts for burns. They intimated that they were in heated conflict about whether or not Abdul should take their son out of school on Friday to attend Muslim worship. They have many other differences in their faith and values, but they have sought and emphasized the common ground of service to community and nurture of faithful children as the centering purpose of their lives together.

Family Outcomes

Families told many stories together of how “things work out”—or not—as a result of faith. Jan and Harold are middle-aged adults, United Methodists who live in a large old home in a Southern city; their single daughter and her two sons live with them, and they provide a major amount of child care for their grandsons. Jan is a schoolteacher; Harold is an accountant. Their adult son lives in another city. He has been a 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 for living their faith, and where they have experienced evidence of God’s care:
Harold: 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. He 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: That’s the only time we ever had results. It was when we told God that he was no longer ours anymore.

Harold: 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 family narrative evolves from Harold’s story to it being a family story. That transformation begins when Harold says, “I said my prayers, I said, “All right God, he’s yours.” Jan comes back with, “It was when we told God that he was no longer ours anymore.” She has broadened the narrative; 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, shaping a set of beliefs and a narrative of faith that is their experience. Their beliefs have been shaped not only by the experience of this ongoing family crisis as each of them as individuals have tried to make sense out it, but also by their talking it over and constructing this shared interpretation of their experience. And yet he 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**

In understanding faith as a dimension of life in families, there appear to be overlapping categories along a continuum of narratives, from the individual’s definition of faith to the family story. The family’s 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. Clearly, the boundary is very fuzzy and perhaps nonexistent between the family being the context for individual faith and the family giving shape to individual faith. Both children and adults have their faith shaped in the transactional life of families, as so many of these family stories testify. 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.

A second characteristic of faith is the relationship of belief, trust, action, and consequences. At first, these appear to be linear—belief leads to trust, which leads to action,
which have expected (or unexpected) consequences. In fact, the consequences of action serve as a feedback loop that confirms, challenges, and sometimes modify beliefs and trust, and therefore future actions.

This research points to the importance the faith dimension can have in understanding the beliefs, commitments, actions, and expectations of families. It is a dimension of family life that is constantly changing in relationship to life experiences and discovering meaning of individual family members and of the family as a group.

This research was an exploration of faith as a dimension of family life. It is limited to the experience of these members in four denominations in four urban areas of the country. Despite these limitations, this research has practical implications for congregational leadership, at least in these faith traditions. Many of these respondents had never shared this kind of faith-talk with one another before. It took someone giving them a few questions and listening ears to begin to draw out the richness of their experiences, and for them to label those experiences “faith.” These interviews seem to be very positive experiences for families; many asked if I would come back, and several have written me letters and called to keep me updated on their lives. I found myself wishing that I could share the stories of family strength and faith with the leaders of their churches. Their congregations needed to know what I knew about their strengths and struggles in faith in order to minister most effectively with them. Perhaps one of the simplest and most important places to begin in ministry with families is to ask them to teach us about faith—and to hear for themselves the strength faith gives them for living.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

1. Adults: tell me about your families growing up, and how this family group got started.
2. Children: What are your first memories of this family. What happened after that?
3. Tell me about a typical day in your family now. A typical week.
4. Tell me about something in your family’s life—big or small—that pictures your family at its best.
5. What is most important for your family currently? What do you give a lot of attention to?
6. What gives your life together purpose and meaning? Tell me a story about that.
7. What are your family goals and dreams?
8. What does the word “faith” mean to you? (ask each family member)
9. When have you felt God especially close to your family? (ask for illustration)
10. Have you experienced God’s absence in your family’s life? (ask for illustration)
11. In what ways has your faith been influenced by living in this family? (both ways it has been strengthened and ways it may have been challenged or diminished)
12. Are there things you do together regularly—rituals or habits you share—that express your values as a family?
13. How has the role of faith in your life together changed over time, or has it?
14. Do you ever talk or share in other ways about these things with one another?
15. Are there ways you nurture your faith together, or does it just happen as a part of living?
16. What help do you get from outside your family in living out your commitments and faith?
17. What interferes with your family’s ability to live out its commitments and faith? Are these different for different family members?
18. What might help you as a family to live your faith together?
19. Tell me a favorite Bible story. What about this story speaks to you?

ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful for the support of this research by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary generously provided me with office resources and supportive colleagues. My appreciation goes especially to the many families who gave so freely of their time. As is customary in research such as this, however, I agreed with them that they and their congregations would remain anonymous. All names and other identifying information have been altered to protect their privacy.

2. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Midwestern and Southern urban areas selected for the project. The families represented the following regions: South (n = 52), Midwest (n = 51), Southwest (n = 5), and Pacific Northwest (n = 7). They represented their denominations as follows: Southern Baptists (n = 34), Presbyterians (n = 22), National Baptists (n = 19), and United Methodists (n = 35). The interviews took place over a two-year period, ending in 1997.

3. Often those persons who function as a family are also structurally defined as family members because of the legally and socially recognized roles they occupy—husband, wife, parent, child. But the functional definition also leaves open the possibility that persons who may not be legally or socially recognized as family may indeed function in that capacity. Every family had already participated in the congregational survey of family life that presents this definition of family, so this was not a new concept to them.

4. Number represents number of families of each type, not the number of individuals within those families.

5. The software FolioVIEWS was used to code the database, using a system of codes that grew throughout the analysis and that combined both content themes and interactional processes.

6. A social worker, Anglo-American Presbyterian, mother in a blending family in the South.

7. A church administrator in a Methodist church in the South, who is herself an Anglo-American Catholic, mother of preschoolers in her first marriage.
8. Anglo-American Southern Baptist in the South, living with her husband and two preschoolers and her unmarried sister and her two preschoolers.

9. An Anglo-American real estate agent, a Southern Baptist in the South, in her first marriage with grown children.

10. Southern Baptist in the Midwest


12. Anglo-American Southern Baptists in the Southwest, in their first marriage. He is a computer technician; she is a homemaker caring for two preschoolers and pregnant with a third.

13. Anglo-American, Presbyterian USA, in a Southern city.

14. Anglo-American Presbyterians, a blending family in the South, she is a social worker and he is a lawyer.

REFERENCES


