

Home Visits:

Steps for Training a Milestones Visitation Team

By Dr. Dick Hardel

Over my many years in youth and family ministry I have often been asked, “Where do we start to reach families that are not well connected or have never been connected to the ministry of the congregation?” I joined friends with whom I worked in responding, “Milestones Ministry!”

A Milestones Visitation Team is one of the strategies of the conceptual model for discipleship in the 21st century (See *Passing On The Faith* by Strommen & Hardel, 2008 available at www.faithwellmt.com). The baptism milestone may be the first visit a congregation would focus upon. Some congregations may call the visitation teams Baptismal Visitation Team. The entire conceptual model is a way of tending the baptismal journey from pre-birth to the grave.

It is most important for the staff and lay leaders of the congregation to have a clear picture of the conceptual model of discipleship and evangelism for the 21st century. It is a partnership of the home and congregation in nurturing faith and passing on the faith. The home is the primary place to teach and nurture faith and the role of the congregation is to strengthen the home and equip the home to pass on the faith. A very helpful booklet to share this vision with the leadership team of the congregation is *Spiritual Leadership for Faith Formation* by Dr. Dick Hardel. The four imperatives are: **Strengthening Family Relationships, Faith-Focused Christian Education, Congregation As Family, and Developing A Christian Youth Subculture.** This resource is available at www.faithwellmt.com .

When I served as the executive director of The Youth & Family Institute, Dr. David Anderson developed Five Principles for Youth and Family Ministry and Four Keys for Nurturing Faith in the Home.

Five Principles for Youth and Family Ministry

1. Faith is formed by the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships—often, but not always in our own homes.
2. The Church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home.
3. Where Christ is present in faith, the home is Church, too.
4. Faith is caught more than it is taught.
5. If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults/parents.

Four Keys for Nurturing Faith in the Home

1. Caring Conversation

2. Family Devotions
3. Family Service
4. Family Rituals and Traditions

The conceptual model is a very helpful way to support families as they tend the baptismal journey from pre-birth to the grave. The congregation connects more family milestones with God; equips parents, relatives, and other care-giving adults to nurture faith; and provides resources for the home.

The giving of a FaithChest® at baptism (or confirmation, high school graduation, wedding, or in the last years of one's life) is a tool to connect the home and congregation. Since faith is formed by the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships, a most important aspect of Milestones Ministry is to develop a personal, trusted relationship with a person or a family. That is the purpose of developing Milestones Visitation Teams. You can download the plans for making a FaithChest® at www.faithwellmt.com.

I suggest that a Milestones Visitation Team be made up of two people—one over 65 years of age and a second, a 20 something or a 30 something. People over 65 years of age are the most church-ed generation in the USA. The combination of the two generations on a Milestones Visitation Team makes for a combination of faith, wisdom, vision, energy, and ministry. The Holy Spirit will cause a wonderful growth in the relationship of the members of each visitation team.

It is important for the congregation to support the parents so that they can better live out the promises made in baptism. A congregation cannot leave a family alone to nurture faith. In baptism the entire faith community commits to helping nurture faith throughout the life of the baptized person. The Milestones Visitation Team is just one way that a congregation becomes very intentional and active in supporting families to grow in Christ.

Recruitment and Commitment

If we value the Milestones Visitation Ministry, then we should always recruit people to be trained. Recruit people from at least three different generations who love the Lord, love people, and love to help people grow in Christ. A Milestones Visitation Team will commit to praying regularly for the family, visit the family in the home at four different milestones in the family's life, and stay in contact with the family. Each time the Milestones Visitation Team visits the family in the home, they bring gift for the family to help them nurture faith in the child or youth's life. They also bring an invitation to a corporate worship service designed around the milestone and another invitation to an intergenerational training event designed to teach the extended family a variety of ways to nurture faith at that milestone in the child's life.

Suggested Steps in Training

1. Each visitation team volunteer understands the congregation's commitment to support and tend the baptismal journey of a baptized

child, youth, or adult.

2. Instruct the volunteers on the theology of baptism, the meaning of the liturgy in worship, the traditions of the congregation, and the living out of the promises of baptism.
3. Teach the volunteers how to pray aloud for the baptized person and family. Impress upon them the necessity for regular and frequent prayer.
4. Teach the volunteer how to share their faith through telling their faith stories. The following resources are highly recommended: *FaithTalk® with Children*, *Taking Faith Home*, *Scripture Talk* or the Milestones Blessing Bowl. (*FaithTalk® With Children* is available at www.faithwellmt.com; *Scripture Talk* at www.peerministry.org; *Taking Faith Home* and the Milestones Blessing Bowl at www.milestonesministry.org).
5. Equip the volunteers with listening skills, care-giving skills, and relationship building conversation skills.
6. Instruct the volunteers on the meaning and the use of the gift that will be given by the congregation to the family. The volunteers should be very familiar with this resource. The giving of the resource can be the entry into talking about tending the baptismal journey.
7. Teach the volunteers how to invite a family to the baptismal counseling with the pastor or lay minister. The following might serve as an outline for a first visit to a family. A phone conversation with the pastor or lay leader has already confirmed this first visit. So the family expects the team.
 - A. Introduction of team members and learning the names of the members of the family. Share the joy of making such a visit.
 - B. Learning a little about the background and history of the family.
 - C. Present the gift and give a brief explanation of how the parents should use the gift. Inform the parents what it means to be a Milestones Visitation Team and how this congregation values baptism and understands they are called by God to help families tend the baptismal journey of their children.
 - D. Discuss and arrange for the date and time of the baptismal counseling.

The visitation team should volunteer to pick up the family and drive them to the pastor's office for the counseling. The visitation team should remain with them during the counseling and stand with the extending family during the baptism. The Milestones Visitation Team might take all the photographs

and/or video during the baptism so that all members of the family can fully participate in the baptism milestone. Following the actual baptismal rite is an excellent time for the pastor or lay leader to present the family with a FaithChest®. The meaning and purpose of the gift of the FaithChest® by the congregation should be shared. The Milestones Visitation Team should know about the congregation's history with making and presenting FaithChest®.

Instruct the volunteers on follow up by using email, postal services, and telephone. They should also become aware of other key milestones and choose which milestones they will use for the next home visit. It would be very helpful if the Milestones Visitation Team members experienced a corporate worship service designed around a specific milestone and an intergenerational event of the congregation before making their first visit. This should not be a requirement, but it would be very helpful. A Milestones Ministry Manual is available from www.milestonesministry.org to assist the congregation. The manual includes both milestone intergenerational enrichment events and milestone worship celebrations.

8. The congregation should have a prayer support team for each Milestones Visitation Team. The Visitation Team should be introduced to their prayer support team and instructed on how best to stay in communication. The congregations should use either staff personnel or trained lay volunteers who oversee and support the ministry of the Milestone Visitation Teams.

Conclusion

These are only suggestions to get you started with Milestones Visitation Team training. You should always discuss this with the pastor, staff, and/or other key lay leaders of the congregation so that everyone is clear on the purpose and direction of the ministry and the training. They will have valuable additions, adoptions, and suggestions as you develop the training model. A training setting that works very well is that of an over-night retreat. Otherwise you might use 4 two-hour classes. It is very difficult for volunteers to commit more time to training. There are a variety of settings and styles of the training that would work well. It is important that you consider what will work best for the volunteers and staff of your congregation. The greatest learning will happen by experiencing the visits.