

Family Discipleship with Christ | Endorsements

Rev. Dr. Mart Thompson does a masterful job with *Family Discipleship with Christ: A Map of God's Promises for Congregations and Families*. He weaves personal insights, learnings, and reflections well into this Map. He takes the reader on a journey, helping us to envision what God's good life is for us and the families of those in the church. This work is a blessing to the church and for the work of family discipleship.

—REV. ANDY BECKER, DIRECTOR OF FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP,
LCMS FAMILY MINISTRY, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Dr. Thompson's New Creational Wisdom approach to family discipleship brings the power of the Christian Gospel to bear on this crucial topic. The illustration of the Map and Compass powerfully conveys the importance of homes and congregations uniting to form lifelong disciples of Jesus who are prepared to navigate the challenges and reap the blessings of a life lived through and for Jesus Christ. Those who draw on Thompson's wise insights will be well prepared to guide their own family and all the families they serve down the narrow path that leads to eternal life with Christ.

—REV. DR. TODD A. BIERMANN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
CONCORDIA CENTER FOR THE FAMILY, ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

Raising children is a journey full of hard questions. Dr. Mart Thompson takes on the question asked by countless Christian parents and trusted adults: "How do I raise a child in the faith?" Family discipleship with Christ orients families and congregations to the compass provided by God's Holy Word and draws a map for the discipleship journey. Every Christian adult interacting with a child should read this book and tell the next generation about Jesus Christ.

—DEACONESS DR. TIFFANY MANOR, MANAGING DIRECTOR,
LCMS NATIONAL MISSION, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Dr. Mart Thompson has written a book long overdue within the Lutheran Church that is distilled from the wisdom that comes from long service in the church as pastor and seminary professor. But it is his experiences as husband and father that shine through in this volume, which seeks to make accessible to the average layman a map and guidance for implementing a biblical plan to disciple and raise the next generation of faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Thompson expertly helps congregations and families work together for the benefit of each in making disciples for life. I can summarize his book with his own words: "Parenting demands much, but in Christ, God always has more grace."

—REV. DR. GARY W. ZIEROTH, PASTOR, ASCENSION LUTHERAN CHURCH,
FORT WAYNE, INDIANA; ADJUNCT PROFESSOR, CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY, FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

Writing as a pastor, professor, and parent, Dr. W. Mart Thompson provides a distinctly Lutheran map to help guide Christian homes and congregations in their shared quest to raise children in the faith. More than a mere law-based how-to book, Thompson's work highlights the importance of core Lutheran doctrines, such as vocation, Creational Wisdom, and baptismal identity, and most important, the Gospel of Christ—all in service to family discipleship. As families and churches navigate raising faithful children, Thompson equips them with an accessible map to “train up a child in the way he should go” (Proverbs 22:6).

As pastor at a Lutheran school with an ethnically diverse student body, I greatly appreciate the inclusion of a chapter dedicated to family discipleship specifically in multiethnic settings. In a shifting cultural landscape, opportunities for discipleship among new Americans continue to grow. As we seek to make disciples of all nations, Dr. W. Mart Thompson, along with Dr. Ely Prieto, provides an essential map for schools and congregations to journey with families in a way that is both doctrinally faithful and culturally aware in their shared quest for raising children in Christ.

—REV. DR. MATTHEW CLARK, SENIOR PASTOR, ASCENSION LUTHERAN CHURCH AND WORD OF LIFE LUTHERAN SCHOOL, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Family ministry is a tricky concept. People often try to solve the problem of family ministry with either a program or a product. Counter to these (often frustrating) options, Dr. Thompson proposes something different: Family ministry is a journey. If this ministry is indeed a quest, then teachers, leaders, and parents must see their roles as mountaineers, guides, and facilitators of learning rather than simply teachers. This book outlines a biblically rooted map for the process of family ministry that adds a distinct and much-needed voice to this ongoing yet critical conversation.

—REV. DR. PETE JURCHEN, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF LUTHERAN EDUCATION AND FAITH FORMATION, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, NEBRASKA

It's a fact that “you can't do what you don't know how to do.” Many parents and pastors, seeking to guide their child from birth to faithful maturity, could ask, “Is there a road map for this?” Rev. Dr. Mart Thompson provides both the big picture and practical practices for growing in faith at home with the support of the congregation. The stories, research, biblical insights, and helpful strategies included in this book provide the know-how we need.

—DCE PAM NUMMELA, MISSOURI DISTRICT FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP LEAD FACILITATOR, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Mart Thompson writes with the credibility of a father and a pastor and professor in the church. He understands the questions and challenges of raising children in the faith, as well as the realities congregations face when traditional models of children's and youth ministry fall short.

In this work, Thompson invites us to reimagine ministry not as separate programs but as a shared calling between church and home. With clarity and conviction, he shows that lasting discipleship is formed through intentional partnership between parents and congregations.

His thoughtful framework, shaped by New Creational Wisdom, provides practical guidance for families and churches seeking to nurture enduring faith in the next generation.

**—REV. DR. MICHAEL NIELSEN, PASTOR,
ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, NORTH PRAIRIE, WISCONSIN**

Mart Thompson shares his journey through parenthood as he purposefully set out to teach his own children about faith. Like so many parents, he was looking for the tools to help build lifelong spiritual habits. With honest reflection about the ups and downs of his journey, he sets out to provide ideas and techniques, along with the theological background, as others look to disciple families, youth, and children in an ever-changing world.

**—JEN ROETTJER, DIRECTOR OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION,
GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH, HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA**

Family Discipleship with Christ by Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson provides a clear explanation of the unique gifts and responsibilities God has given to parents and to congregations as they guide children toward lifelong faith.

Mart's concept of New Creational Wisdom has transformed my discipleship philosophy. As a young mother and as a church worker, this book helped me refocus on the eternal goal of parenting and ministry. It also reminded me of God's grace when I fail or feel overwhelmed.

Mart's Map for Family Discipleship is clear and practical with simple steps to implement right away. I believe this book will stand the test of time because it relies on God's unchanging promises.

**—HANNAH L. KNEHANS, DIRECTOR OF FAMILY LIFE MINISTRY,
TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI**

FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP
WITH CHRIST

A Map of God's Promises
for Congregations and Families

W. Mart Thompson



Published by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

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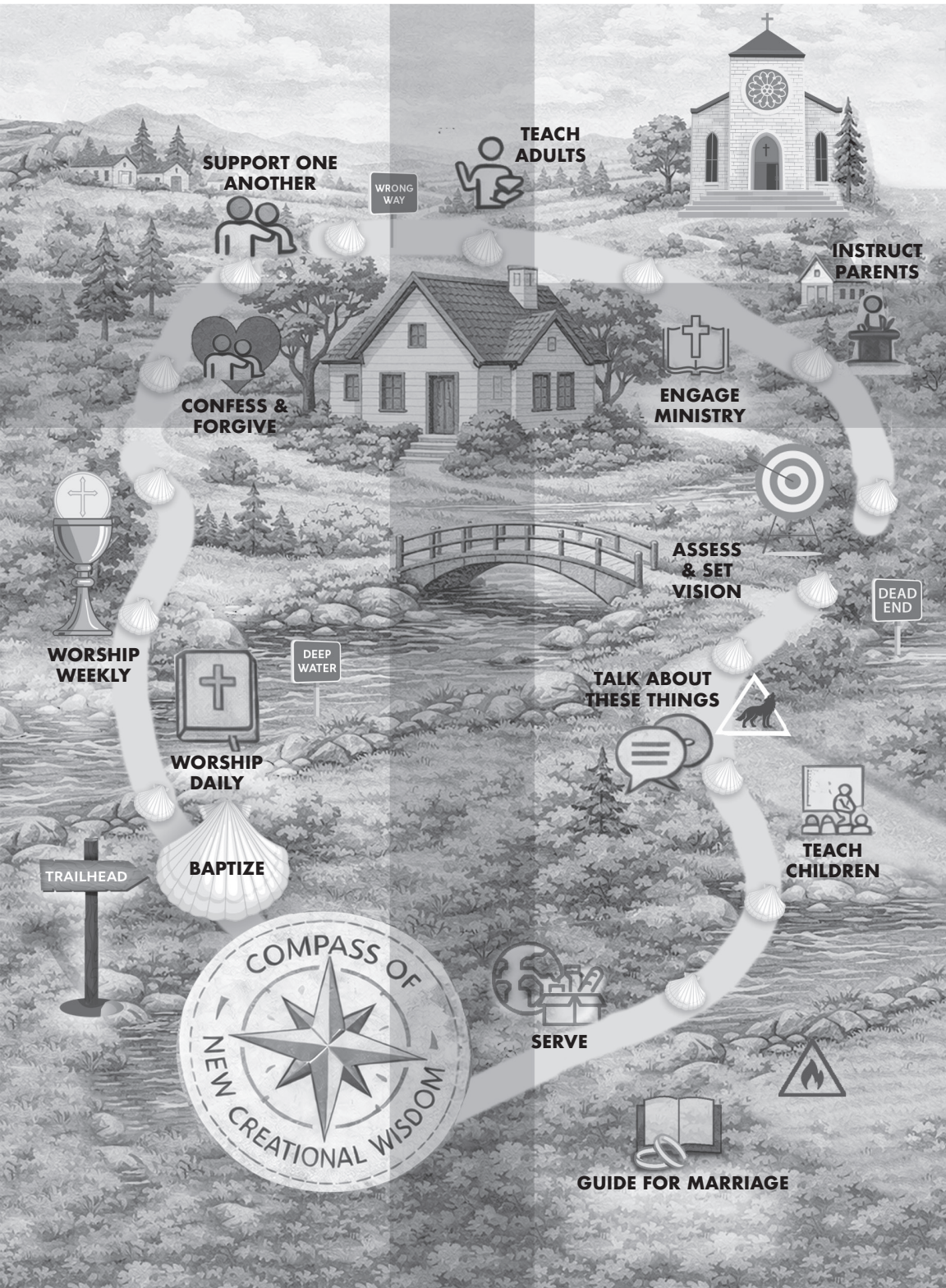
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Manufactured in the United States of America

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35 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26

MAP FOR FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP



SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER



WRONG WAY

TEACH ADULTS



INSTRUCT PARENTS



CONFESS & FORGIVE



ENGAGE MINISTRY



ASSESS & SET VISION

DEAD END



WORSHIP WEEKLY



WORSHIP DAILY

DEEP WATER

TALK ABOUT THESE THINGS



TEACH CHILDREN

TRAILHEAD

BAPTIZE



SERVE



GUIDE FOR MARRIAGE



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FOREWORD



REV. DR. ROBERT KOLB

“He’s a chip off the old block.” “She’s the picture of her father.” “He’s the spitting image of his mother.” Countless are the ways, in one language or another, to express the common sense observation that parents shape the way their children live. Examples abound, showing that children reflect—for better and for worse—the nature and the actions of the adults who raise them.

Children eat what their parents eat—sometimes reluctantly, sometimes selectively—but their dietary habits arise out of the foundations set by Mom, Dad, or other parental figures. Children walk and talk like their parental figures; my mother claimed that my grandfather’s gait became mine. In the first few years of life, parents, grandparents, and other parental figures shape a child’s initial, fundamental, and, in many ways, lasting framework for viewing reality and defining the good in life. Even children in revolt are molded by what their parents have modeled.

At a more fundamental level, the psychiatrist and psychological philosopher Erik H. Erikson perceptively argued that parents, particularly mothers, lay the groundwork for their children’s personhood and personality in their children’s first two years of life. They do so by cultivating attitudes of trust or mistrust toward whatever the children will encounter in life.¹ Erikson’s insights match the view of human life put forth by all the biblical writers. God’s faithfulness to His people and to His promise of new life in Christ draws out of His human creatures

¹ See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed. (Norton, 1963), 247–51, and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (Norton, 1968), 82, 102–4.

trust in Him and His Word. That trust constitutes the core and bedrock of human life, as Martin Luther taught in his Small and Large Catechisms: God is the one whom humans are to “fear, love, and trust.”² “A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. . . . Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your god.”³ The adults in children’s lives foster more than just the psychological disposition to trust or mistrust, however. The example of their interaction with the God of Scripture or some other objects of their ultimate trust teaches children what they should regard as their haven in time of need and their source of all good, as Luther defined the object of our ultimate trust. A child’s faith is often a spitting image of his or her parent’s faith, even though it may later grow in different ways.

God’s people have always recognized the vital role parents play in forming their children’s faith in God, which becomes the foundation for their lives. In Deuteronomy 6, God commands the people of Israel to impress upon their children the commands that He had given them through Moses. The Israelites are instructed to do this by talking about these words from God as they sit at home and as they go for walks, by speaking them at bedtime and when they get up in the morning. God’s people are to wear His Word and post its message to be read within their dwelling places (Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:7–9). Paul had experienced such cultivation of the faith himself, for he admonishes the readers of his letter to the Ephesians to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4), and he reminds Timothy of his childhood absorption of the biblical message (2 Timothy 3:14–15).

Children learn how important God is in their lives from their parents. Both my father and my mother read me Bible stories and then helped me learn and understand Luther’s Small Cat-

2 SC, The First Commandment, 2; K-W, 351.

3 LC I 2, 3; K-W, 386.

echism. Their involvement in our congregation and their way of treating me, my brother, each other, and other people taught me how believers in Christ live in love and desire to be of help to others. Parental figures who seldom speak of their Creator and Savior or who rarely show thankfulness for the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives are modeling a false kind of faith in whatever they seem to treasure most. They are teaching their children that whatever gives them a sense of ultimate identity, security, and meaning for life deserves to become the center of their lives. Christian children develop a relationship to the God who speaks from Scripture and who wants to be in conversation with them through Bible hearing and prayer early in life. In the several stages of development into adulthood, parental figures, biological and relational, maintain strong roles in giving form to children's perceptions of the world and of themselves. The actions and words of adults foster attitudes and values that accompany children through life, as these adults shape the contours within which all is well for the child. Children find the configuration of their lives, as parents and other adults incorporate them into the story of their families, including the family of God beginning at Baptism. As they hear the accounts of Abraham and Sarah, of Mary and Joseph, of grandparents and aunts and uncles who live in Christ, children set their paths and parameters toward continuing the narrative of walking and talking with their Lord and Savior.

Telling children about Jesus and what He does for us is a two-way street. Cultivating faith in Christ in children provides adult believers an adventure in encountering the Word of the Lord. Andrea Schulte, a professor of religious education at the University of Erfurt, studied the conversations about the faith between parents and young children. She noted that children force parents and other teachers to reflect on the core of their own relationship with God. By moving into the concrete world of children, adults are invited, or compelled, to translate what is most valuable in their relationship with Christ into their children's structure of perceiving the good and the bad. Not only do children learn from their parents and other adults, but their

parents and teachers also gain new perceptions of the biblical message through the eyes and reactions of their children.⁴ Conversations about Jesus provoke adult thinking by posing critical questions regarding their own translation of the faith from adult abstractions into the concrete world of their children. Based on the impressions we are leaving in the minds of our little conversation partners, our children give us new insights into the faith through the “sermons” they preach to us.

Families have always come in different shapes and sizes. Infant mortality affected more families in earlier times. (Today it affects some cultures more profoundly than it affects North American society.) But adult mortality has created single-parent families in every age. Widows and widowers as well as the divorced and deserted struggled to raise their children in the past even as they do today. The adage that it takes a village to raise a child arose out of such situations, and this phrase remains true today.

The dialogue about God between adults and children and the way parental figures model trust in Christ take place beyond the family circle—in contacts of various kinds with Christian friends and others. These things also take place in the family’s congregation. Christians recognize that the coordination of the most intimate family circle, whether of two people or twelve, with the larger community of believers is crucial for the enjoyment of God’s calling to parents, children, and the circle of friends and fellow Christians that surround them. My own faith was shaped profoundly not only by parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, but also by friends of my parents, Dorothy and Bob Theiss, who successively were my Sunday School teachers and friends. They not only explained Bible texts on Sunday morning; their entire lives demonstrated that the Bible accounts they recounted offered guidance for life. The pastor who confirmed me and nursed my desire to enter the pastoral ministry, Lothar Braeunig, not only catechized me well but also set in my mind a firm pattern for Christian living and service.

4 See Michael P. DeJonge and Christiane Tietz, eds., *Translating Religion: What Is Lost and Gained?* (Routledge, 2015), 70–84.

The Holy Spirit brings people to faith in Christ in many ways; His Word creates faith in many settings. However, when the foundation of the faith has been laid at home, those in the congregation of God's people will have much less of an uphill struggle to cultivate trust in Christ in children. If those dedicated to the teaching ministry of the church are not providing what they are called to do and not competent enough to contribute to the growth of the Word in the congregation, parents on their own will be missing vital support for bringing up children in the joy and peace that Christ gives His people. Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, and pastors connect children with the Lord Jesus in professional ways and as adult friends, for they not only instruct but also provide images of the life of faith that are critical for the maturing of the faith of young people. Each person in a congregation is supporting others in their journey on the pilgrimage through life here to live with Jesus forever.

This volume is dedicated to exploring the ways in which such family units of whatever size or shape and the single believers who worship and fellowship with them regularly can serve one another and model and convey faith in Christ. They do this in partnership with the ministry of the congregation. For as part of the community of those who worship Him and trust in His saving work through the death and resurrection of Jesus, all have the opportunity to serve the young in faith.

Readers will profit from the thematic spread that W. Mart Thompson offers in this book as he leads them in exploring how families and congregations work together to raise children in faith in Jesus Christ. His proposals offer solid insights into the biblical design for human life, building on perspectives from past and present thinkers. To aid readers in the challenges faced by those involved in passing on this biblical way of life to the next generation, the author marshals not only scriptural principles but also discernment based on his own experience and current psychological and sociological research and thinking. Thus, this volume serves to enliven and enrich life at home and in church for adults and children alike.

INTRODUCTION



PARENTING DEMANDS MUCH, BUT GOD GIVES MORE GRACE IN JESUS

The house is a mess. When the girls don't behave, I lose my temper and yell at them. I love them. But I often find myself not acting very loving. I'm afraid of how they will turn out. My poor parenting could hurt them, stunt their growth. Maybe they won't even stay Christians because of my bad example.

Abby told me this when I first met her. She was raising two daughters. Alex was eight years old, and Eileen was six years old. She did her best to attend worship and bring them to our small Sunday School class. But life at home was difficult. Abby often felt she was inadequately raising her children.

Fears and frustrations vary in every home, but parents are called to do a job that reveals limitations and failures. Paul describes this function of God's Law: "Through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). God's calling to raise their children in the Christian faith often produces guilt in parents and the "knowledge" that they may have missed the mark God set for them.

Right after this verse, however, Paul adds a very big "but!" "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (vv. 21–23).

This is the message Abby needed to hear. As a friend and pastor, I shared the Gospel with her:

To your confession of losing your temper, being unloving, and failing to be a good example, Jesus says, “I forgive you. I died to pay the price for your sin and rose from the dead to give you life in My name. In your Baptism, I promised you My peace and a hope-filled future in My grace.”

This message brought comfort and confidence by focusing on her core identity instead of her actions. This good news was also why she wanted Alex and Eileen to know Jesus! That is why she had them baptized and brought them to church and Sunday School. Could she have done more with the resources she had? Maybe. Yet the most important lesson she could teach her children was not being a perfect parent through her actions but being a *Christian* parent who trusted in Jesus’ forgiveness. She, too, was God’s child as she raised God’s children in her home in the Christian faith. They were all learning to trust in Jesus.

I begin with this story because much of the guidance about raising children in the faith focuses on the efforts of parents and church workers. I want to focus on the gifts of Jesus. While we are charged with raising up children in the faith, the work is ultimately God’s in Christ. This points children and their parents to the Lord Jesus Christ to receive His forgiveness and hope. Will there be arguing? Will parents lose their temper? Yes; sinful humanity is there. But so is Jesus. He changes everything. God promises His forgiveness through His Word: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18). Jesus’ grace promises a better life. Now, they live by faith in that promise and by a certain hope, knowing that He will come back to fully restore their lives. Christian parents learn to rejoice in His comfort and hope—and to pass it on to their children.

Parenting demands much, but in Christ, God always has more grace. Throughout this book, we will discern God's direction for family discipleship. In doing so, we will continually look to God's grace in Jesus that comforts, empowers, and delivers a hope that does not disappoint (see Romans 5:5).

A MAP FOR FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP

This book will orient family discipleship for raising children in the faith. It will serve homes and congregations like Abby's and many others. It will use the image of a map to do so. My own personal quest to discover tools of navigation begins in what I call my quest for family discipleship.

One maps a quest to discover how to reach a destination. Christian homes and congregations need a guide or map to help them raise their children in the faith. The destination for the quest is this: children raised up to remain Christians throughout their lives, trusting the promise that when they are old, they will not depart from it (see Proverbs 22:6). This book is designed to provide church leaders with a map that guides a partnership between homes and the congregation.

Christian parents like Abby look for help for this challenging work. Pastors, youth leaders, and all Christians need to be ready to offer help. That help can be found first and foremost in the comfort of Christ. As a young parent and pastor, I also sought this help. I have been on this quest for decades. I am inviting pastors and congregational leaders to join me in this work as they serve the families and children in their midst. My hope is that this book will prove helpful to parents and caregivers and the congregations supporting them in their callings.

What does it mean to map out a quest? Back in 1979, I was in high school and charged with being crew leader of a contingent of boys on a trek through the mountains in northern New Mexico. We were at Philmont Scout Ranch, the largest youth backpacking camp in the world. Before we headed to the back

country, I met with our crew's ranger to plan the itinerary and map out our hikes. At the table in the logistics room, there was a large map of the 214-square-mile Scout ranch. We marked each night's destination on the map. We drew lines along trails over mountain peaks, through valleys, and across streams. For the next ten days, this map, along with a compass, would guide us on an adventure we would remember for the rest of our lives.

This book maps a quest for family discipleship to prepare parents and pastors, youth leaders and grandparents, and whomever is part of the faith life of children for an adventure that they will remember and rejoice in for all time.

Family discipleship is the term I will use to describe homes and congregations working together to raise children in faith in Jesus Christ. It can be defined this way:

**Family discipleship is Christ's gifts
nurturing faith in God's children
through the partnership of home and
congregation.¹**

This definition, drawn from Matthew 28:18–20, connects family discipleship to the mission of the church to make disciples of Christ.² The church does this through Christ's gifts of Word and Sacrament, which create and nurture faith in His saving work. Family discipleship highlights a partnership between the ministry of congregations and the vocations of caregivers in Christian homes. This partnership is designed to help foster the faith formation of children.

A Map for Family Discipleship comes from the Word of God, which guides this work in our daily lives. It enlightens and empowers Christians in their various vocations, including the calling to raise children in the faith.

1 See Concordia Center for the Family's definition at <https://concordiafamily.org/mission-vision>. It is the meaning envisioned throughout *Family Discipleship with Christ*.

2 The meaning of *church* used in *Family Discipleship with Christ* is the creedal definition: "the holy catholic (Christian) church" (Apostles' Creed). Luther: "The church is holy believers and 'the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd'" (SA III XII 2; K-W, 324–25).

Why would I write a book to orient family discipleship? Don't Christian congregations and homes already know how to do this? The reality is that the cultural landscape has shifted. The old maps fail to direct travelers on this changing landscape.

In recent history, the church's approach centered the activity of raising children in the faith in the church's ministry. The emphasis on the home's part was to support that work. Now, however, a new approach, or map, is needed for homes and congregations because of a new and very challenging cultural topography. This is similar to new road maps accounting for changes due to fires, floods, and earthquakes. The way homes and congregations transmit faith to children in a culture that used to regularly support faith practices will need rerouting in a society with institutions that are no longer supportive.³ In the past, parents looked primarily to Sunday Schools, confirmation classes, and youth ministry programs to raise their children in the faith. But today, many youth who grew up with and were part of those programs fall away from the faith in high school or college. New maps are needed for faith formation today.

NAVIGATING FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP ON A DIVERSE AND CHANGING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Mapping this quest today happens in a diverse landscape. Each family is different. Many are like Abby's. Many are not. Families vary in size, leadership, finances, and social life. Parents come from diverse backgrounds with differing expectations. Some parents send their children to religious schools, others send their children to public schools, and some choose to homeschool their children. Plus, every congregation is different. Some are large, and some are much smaller. Some have relied heavily on professional youth ministry staff and programs; others have functioned like an extended family with few programs. Some have parochial schools, and others do not. An

3 Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (IVP, 2018), describes how Christian ministries in the twenty-first century must address the changing cultural landscape we live in.

approach to guide the varieties of home life and congregational ministries must be determined to reach the ultimate goal of forming the faith of children.

Even though families and congregations are diverse, the Bible teaches universal principles for family discipleship. This book is focused on principles that provide core truths to address challenges in faith transmission in a post-Christian culture.⁴ These principles help church workers determine when new approaches are needed, when traditional ones are serving families well, and how to curate a multitude of family ministry resources. Discerning these principles begins with faithful biblical exegesis of texts on raising children in the faith. It also looks to lived experiences and sociological studies that attend to the changing culture.

THE COMPASS OF NEW CREATIONAL WISDOM

My approach to orienting family discipleship functions within a particular theological framework I am calling New Creational Wisdom. New Creational Wisdom is like a compass that guides family discipleship on its path both at home and in the congregation. The Map describes the where and what of family discipleship. The Compass provides the how that guides parents and pastors. New Creational Wisdom has three elements:

1. God's original design and will for His creation
 2. Creation's fall into sin
 3. Christ, our Savior, renewing creation
1. God's original design and will for His creation

⁴ *Post-Christian* will be used in this book to describe how American and Western culture is no longer being strongly influenced by a Judeo-Christian ethic that encouraged the practice of religion and participation in church life generally.

God created marriage to provide the best environment for childrearing. He reveals in His Word how a husband, a wife, and their children are to live together. This includes His will for parents—regardless of whether they are married, single parents, or grandparents—to raise their children in faith in God with Creational Wisdom, which looks to God’s Law and the wisdom of His revealed will to guide His people to live according to His creational design for their lives. It is seen in the Ten Commandments and other passages in both the Old and New Testaments. Its wisdom is also reflected in the experiences of life. Studies, which will be highlighted below, show that people who live in sync with the design of their Creator are blessed.

2. Creation’s fall into sin

Parents and children are sinners in a broken world. God’s Law and biblical wisdom provide guidance for our lives in God’s original creation. But its effect on our relationship with God condemns us as sinners, who fail to perfectly follow His will. Books and resources on raising children in the faith often appeal to the multitude of passages that give divine direction to parents and children on how to live. But if the emphasis remains only on our Creator’s will, then Creational Wisdom only produces guilt in the end because we all sin in a broken, fallen creation and fail to measure up to God’s holy will.

3. Christ, our Savior, renewing creation

Christ’s gifts renew and guide Christian homes in a life of repentance, faith, and Christian living. They also help us look forward to eternal life and the Last Day, when Christ will return to renew all things. God sent His Son into the world to redeem His broken people. He came to redeem those who are under the curse of the Law, who are condemned for falling short of following God’s will, which is the wisdom of our Creator. Jesus became flesh and lived a perfect and holy life, always following the will of His Father. But He was crucified to pay the penalty of our sin. He rose from the dead to redeem the world.

Christ's redemption, therefore, brings New Creational Wisdom to the calling of raising children in faith. New Creational Wisdom is the true north of the compass that orients family discipleship. New Creational Wisdom renews sinful parents and children through faith in Christ, freeing them from condemnation. New Creational Wisdom enables parents and children to see God's will and His Creational Wisdom as a good guide for raising children and honoring parents while revealing that Jesus provides forgiveness whenever we fall short. New Creational Wisdom not only delivers blessings from our Creator in this life, but it ultimately points to a hope beyond this life—the redemption of Christ for eternal life. The ultimate goal of family discipleship is for both parents and children to live in that hope and live in God's new creation when Christ returns on the Last Day.

The way Christ's saving and renewing work provides New Creational Wisdom was illustrated in Abby's story. She sought to follow God's creational will for raising her daughters but was convicted by the Law for her failure to measure up as a parent. Feeling such guilt is common for parents. But New Creational Wisdom tells parents that Jesus has redeemed them before God. Parents are freed from all condemnation by His grace and freed to do their job as Christian parents.

New Creational Wisdom not only applies to the home but also to congregational ministry. As a parent, I can relate to Abby's story. At times, I felt I was falling short and needed the comfort of the Gospel. I also experienced this as a pastor. Like parenting, the ministry is a demanding and humbling vocation. The demands of God's Law reveal a pastor's limitations and inadequacies. Christ's forgiveness is the ultimate source of comfort and encouragement for me. Baptism into Christ, not accomplishments in ministry, gives pastors hope.

At the close of each chapter, I will reflect on how New Creational Wisdom supports families and church workers regarding the themes presented.

A POSTMORTEM FOR THE QUEST

In the pages ahead, I will include how I sought to raise my children in the faith. I will also share how I sought to support homes in congregations I served as pastor. Upon reflection, I have come to see this as my quest for family discipleship. These accounts are a sort of postmortem that looks back at what God did in my home and the congregations I served. My reflections consider what served well and what didn't. My reflections engage God's Word and research findings to help guide family discipleship today.

My wife, Cheryl, and I were simply trying to figure out how to raise our children in the Christian faith. We followed various paths and tried different things. Greater than our attempts, however, was God providing for us, often without us realizing it in the moment.

This also shows that God works through the vocations He has given us. Our only hope, then and now, continues to be in the undeserved grace in Christ promised to Cheryl and me when our own parents brought us to the waters of Holy Baptism as helpless babies. It is that grace that we wanted to pass on to the children God put in our care.

The background of the page is a light gray topographic map. It features several concentric contour lines of varying thicknesses, representing different elevations. A dashed gray line winds across the map, suggesting a path or route. Two large, bold, gray 'X' marks are placed on the map, one in the upper-middle section and another in the lower-middle section. The overall aesthetic is clean and technical, reminiscent of a navigation or planning tool.

PART I:

ORIENTING THE HOME FOR FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP

CHAPTER 1



A QUEST BEGINS AT HOME

“THAT IS A GOOD QUESTION”

In his gravelly voice, the seminary professor responded, “I’m sorry, Mart. That is a good question, but I can’t help you. I don’t know of any books on raising PKs.”

One day after class, I had asked my pastoral theology teacher about resources for raising PKs—pastor’s kids. It was the fall of 1987 at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Our daughter, Marie, had been born the prior February during my vicarage in Minnesota. She was baptized shortly thereafter by my home pastor in Missouri. I was now in my final year of preparation to serve in the ministry. So, we were parents, and I would be a pastor. To me, those two statements added up to potential trouble. I had known some pastors’ kids growing up. Some really struggled! At Marie’s Baptism, my wife, Cheryl, and I had been reminded of our responsibility to raise her in the faith. Hence, the question, How do we raise a pastor’s kid? was now pressing on our minds.

My professor was the type of person who cut straight to the point when he was asked a question. He could be quite blunt, which made him a little intimidating. But students knew he cared. He knew a great deal about a lot of subjects. Two years prior, I had attended a youth ministry workshop during which he presented at The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s International Center in St. Louis. Thinking he must know something about raising pastors’ kids, I mustered the courage to ask him our pressing question when we were back at Concordia Seminary. I can still see him standing there as the room in

Wyneken Hall emptied out. His arms were folded, and he looked me straight in the eyes. Attentive to my question, his response was clear. He had no answer for me.

I was disappointed that he couldn't point me to any resources, but his honest manner encouraged and challenged me. It led me to keep looking. I had been moved to ask an important question. It set me on a quest: I needed to learn more about how Cheryl and I could raise up our children in the faith. And even though it didn't occur to me then, this quest would later expand. When I became a pastor, I would also be helping the parents in my congregations learn how to raise their children in the faith.

A QUEST BEFORE THE QUEST

My initial question about how to raise my daughter in the faith was important to me because, in the prior few years, an earlier quest led me to grow in my own faith. As a young adult, I came to understand the Christian faith I had been baptized into as a child. In fact, I was moved to go to seminary because of this quest. As I wrestled with doubts and struggled to understand faith and science, I eventually came to embrace the teachings of God's grace in Christ for me, a sinner. It was a long road driven by the tough questions children often ask.

My first clear memories of this were in third grade. I was not able to sleep some nights. After staring into the dark night, I would finally get up and go downstairs, where my mother was sewing and watching late-night TV. This happened several times. I would appear, and she would ask me what was wrong. She never told me to just go back to bed. Rather, she engaged me in conversation until I finally told her, "I'm afraid to go to sleep because I'm afraid I could die and go to hell." I can recall her telling me then, and on many occasions later, that God loved me, that Jesus died to save me. She would often quote John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have

eternal life.” At the time and for many years after, I struggled to believe it. But she kept saying it. And this is no small thing: I knew she believed it! Over the years, I came to see just how dependent she was on the faith in Jesus that God had given her.

Another memory of my quest of faith involved struggles with science classes. They taught me the theory of evolution, but it was typically not taught as a theory. Or if it was, I still took it to mean that this is the way educated people believe that life began. I struggled to reconcile that with what I was taught about creation in Sunday School. My mother and father were faithful churchgoers and made sure my siblings and I went to Sunday School and later to confirmation class. What I was taught about evolution all through my years in public school continued to raise questions about my faith in God. When I voiced my doubts to my parents in grade school, they set up times for me to visit with my pastor and ask him these questions. He sent me to a respected church member who was also a biology professor. Unfortunately, he didn’t help me address my struggle. He told me he believed in evolution and simply said you can believe the Bible and believe in evolution. My doubts persisted.

My family’s faithful church life meant that I would continue to be brought to church and participate in children’s and youth ministries. In our house, there was no other option. I appreciate that as I look back on my life. My father was a great example of the life of faith. He loved to go to church, and he loved Lutheran preaching. Later, when I went to seminary, he began reading my seminary books and relished the insights he was gaining. He modeled a life of faith through his words and actions.

What happened for me as a young adult in college was an extension of the faith struggle I had as a child. I participated in church life through a campus ministry but struggled with my faith because of contrary teachings in school. I went to the local university in my hometown. I had aptitude for science and

started as a premed student, majoring in biology and chemistry. In science courses, such as comparative anatomy, professors taught a scientific view of life, rooted in evolutionary theory. At the same time, my church life also continued. At my parents' urging, I became part of the Lutheran Student Center (LSC). They did not force me to go to the LSC. They simply told me to give it a try. These Christian college students won me over with their hospitality. This rich community of faith made a great impact on me. There I found help with my doubts and grew in faith. I also met a young lady who would later become my wife and coparent on this quest, one Cheryl Spellmeyer.

The faith I came to own as a young adult matured at that time. The particular questions I was trying to sort out finally found resolution through extended spiritual conversations with my campus pastor at the LSC. When I shared my conflict over faith and science, he listened and let me talk. He listened to my questions and affirmed them, but then he pointed me to Scripture. He read texts that spoke to my need to see God's wisdom as higher than man's theories, His Word as the source of all life and truth. I was convicted as a sinner who thought humankind knew everything and was comforted by a God who saw our human ignorance and waywardness and still sent His Son to save us. I know I had heard similar things many times in the past, but the Holy Spirit, through God's Word, helped me recognize at that time that my own ideas, and any human idea for that matter, were not as wise as God's truth. I heard Jesus come through in the message of the John 3:16 passage my mother had so often shared with me. Before, I had been focused on *my* efforts to believe, but the Holy Spirit showed me that "by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my LORD, or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith."¹

This important conversation was over Christmas break during my sophomore year. As I look back, I describe it as "let-

1 SC, Creed, Third Article; K-W p. 355.

ting God out of a box.” Through more Bible study and conversations with my campus pastor, the Holy Spirit worked to further address my reason-centered outlook and strengthened my faith in the promises of Jesus Christ. I could still use my reason to understand life, but it was now in service to the deeper meaning of life revealed in God’s Word.

This was an adult owning of my Christian beliefs. My home life growing up, however, also served to impart faith, as I have shared. The same was true for Cheryl. We were blessed by journeys begun in church-centered Lutheran homes in the 1960s and 1970s. Going to church, praying before meals and before going to bed, and having periodic family devotions were consistent practices in our respective homes. We both attended public schools through college. But we were both involved in church ministries at home and at college. Those ministries helped us grow as Christians as we reached young adulthood. They helped us commit to marriage with confidence. My decision to go to seminary to study theology was further influenced by my spiritual growth at that time. When we moved to St. Louis after I enrolled at Concordia Seminary, we continued to grow in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE QUEST CONTINUED WITH OUR NEWBORN

Therefore, we wanted to share this life of faith with our daughter! We brought Marie to receive God’s promise in the waters of Holy Baptism. Jesus’ mandate was also to teach her all that He commanded. We wanted her to be taught God’s Word and know Jesus as her Lord and Savior from her earliest days. We desired to raise her to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and grow into a mature faith. We wanted her to enjoy eternal life with Jesus!

It was natural to desire this because we so loved Marie. It is uncanny how two grown adults who had so many plans and goals for their lives could become so captivated by the needs of a new little human in their care. Cheryl is more attentive to

the needs of others. Yet even I found myself, like many fathers, not minding when I had to wipe poop off her bottom, change my shirt because of spit-up, or get up in the middle of the night to help with her feedings. Marie slowed me down and made me think of her needs more than mine. She, and our other children, changed my desires.

Cheryl and I were now on a quest to learn whatever we could about raising our baptized children in the Christian faith. I kept my eyes and ears open for guidance and direction, even as Cheryl and I navigated many new and exciting ventures at this time in our life together. We were moving to Minnesota to a dual call at Campus Lutheran Chapel in Mankato, where I had served as a vicar and was now to be the campus pastor at Minnesota State University. I would also become pastor of St. John Lutheran Church in the village of Rapidan, a small rural congregation that we would soon grow to cherish. It was there that our quest of raising our PKs continued in earnest.

CONNECTING THE QUEST AND THE MAP FOR FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP

My quest for raising our daughter in the faith, as I reflect on it now, helped me discern what would become the Map for Family Discipleship. The influence of both the Christian home and congregational (and campus) ministry working in tandem became an essential feature of the Map.

The beginning of my quest for raising our daughter in the faith connects with these key influences. There was a natural love that led my wife and me to want the best for our daughter. This is an important insight for pastors and youth ministry workers seeking to support parents in the faith formation of children. Further, our story reveals that we were a family made up of a mother and father with their children. But is that the only type of family God calls to raise children in the faith? That, too, is an important question to explore for the family side of the Map. Also, Cheryl and I desired help for this task because

we didn't feel confident that we could do a good enough job, which is a common concern of young parents. How can church workers help parents realize their capability? But also, when should we point them to the church part of the Map?

As I share my quest, this book will take up these and other questions to help professional church workers guide families and congregations to navigate this Map for Family Discipleship.

DO PARENTS WANT THE BEST FOR THEIR CHILDREN?

This question seems to have an obvious answer. And yes, generally speaking, they do.² God has created a special relationship between parents and children in which parents naturally desire the best for their children. Raising Marie in the faith grew out of our desire to give her the most important gift we had: saving faith in Jesus Christ.

If this is obvious, why ask it? Because acknowledging this establishes important common ground between the parents and their pastors and youth leaders, between the values of their family members and their congregation's ministry priorities. No matter what the practices of parents and the habits of their home life are, no matter whether they regularly attend church, bring their child to Sunday School, go to Bible classes, participate in youth group, or participate in any other church activity, as a pastor, I can assume they want the best for their children. That means if they prioritize sports over confirmation class, claim they don't have time for family devotions, or reveal by their sporadic attendance that weekly worship is not at a top priority, I should *still* assume they want the best for their children.

It is important to realize that in a different era, Christian families would have likely attended church weekly. Is weekly

² Parents do not always act in the best interest of their children. There are also more extreme cases where parents show little sign of having any love for their children. I will address some of those below. What I have in view here is parents caring for their children, which should generally be true in Christian homes.

better than monthly? Yes. But did parents in the past necessarily care more about their children? No. The cultural expectations then influenced their attendance patterns in a different way than they do today. That presents new challenges for homes in a post-Christian culture.

How can I make such a bold claim as to assume that most Christian parents want the best for their children even when I disagree with their actions? Consider what Paul says in Romans 7:19–20: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Paul confesses that his wants and his actions do not line up because of sin. Paul, the Christian, shares this personal confession of sin, which we can all make. He also shares a confession of faith that gives us comfort. He writes at the end of the chapter, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (vv. 24–25). As the Holy Spirit moves us to desire good for our children, we do so by trusting the grace of Christ. That grace delivers us from judgment on actions that fall short of God’s will. Martin Luther described this as being sinner and saint at the same time. We acknowledge the sin but trust in the sanctifying work of “Jesus Christ our Lord!” This is true of Christian parents, pastors, and other church workers.

What about cases of abuse and neglect among Christian parents? Do they want the best for their children? In this fallen world, the sins of the parents get inflicted on their children and often passed down to the next generation. When we seek to navigate the Map for Family Discipleship, we must always orient the work through the Compass of New Creational Wisdom. It acknowledges that God’s good creation is broken. Jesus must bring forgiveness and healing to broken people in this fallen world. That includes parents who inflict pain and suffering on their children. Even if we must report parents or caregivers to child protective services, we can still believe that they have a Spirit-inspired desire to want the best for their children. Some