

**Grace and Vocation:  
Claimed and Called**  
*Worked out in*  
**Family Affinity Groups**

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***Introduction***

Westwood Lutheran Church, a first ring suburban congregation of Minneapolis, has been on a journey to more fully understand and engage God's claim and call of God's people. As one aspect of this journey, we have reoriented confirmation and catechesis with our young people and their families. In this reconstruction of the confirmation programming and Children Youth and Family ministries, we have changed the format of learning for our teenagers, invited the congregation to leading from their sense of God's claim and call, reoriented our formal learning to include parents, and introduced Family Affinity Groups...the focus of this article.

***Little Understanding of Family as Vocation***

The assumption in our congregation after multiple years of focus on the theological tenants of grace and vocation was that while in regard to their work, people didn't quite "get it" that church-going people would certainly understand what it means to be claimed and called by God to serve in their families...and that the church is the place that helps them to know and understand that calling. But we were mistaken, we had assumed too much and hadn't listened closely enough.

Even though we've been talking about vocation for years at Westwood, it became clear that a great many hadn't connected it with their own experience, their own lived realities, most specifically the way that they parent/grandparent and move thru life with their families.

The definition of grace and vocation Westwood has adopted is "In our baptism, we are both claimed and called to be God's hands and feet in all the realms of our lives." Calling is not something reserved for a niche gift or passion, but calling is a part of every

aspect of our lives. Parent, employee, student, child, citizen, neighbor, etc. there is no time and place in which you are not called.

By 2018, affinity small groups focused on sectors of the economy had been meeting at Westwood for several years. While on maternity leave in the spring of 2018, I started to consider my vocation as a mother, and subsequently think about our focus on work in our vocation affinity groups. While Westwood had success in work affinity groups, it became clear as I stared into the face of my second child that we had to look at family if we were ever going to fully help people realize that they are claimed and called by God in all the realms of their life. It was clear that there was a next move, and parents were a demographic we had not yet deeply engaged in the vocation conversation.

It's my conviction that while many people enjoy their work, or find fulfillment and purpose in their occupations, there is nothing that is more personal, or more pervasive or influential than their familial roles. Parenting is deeply personal and not transactional...like work can be. Being a mom, in my case, helped me to fully examine what it meant to be God's hands and feet in seeking the thriving of my children...to understand that I was called to this role and claimed in my baptism to be a co-creator and co-worker with God in my children's lives. So I began to wonder, "do others understand and feel this responsibility as intensely too?"

### ***Working God's Claims and Callings in Families – Affinity Groups for Parents***

Upon my return to work, our leadership team began discussions about how we might expand our understanding of calling as work to include family callings as well. As a result of these discussions, in the fall of 2018, my job description changed, and I began to convene specific groups of parents. The first group were parents with high school aged children. Over the past few years, the groups have grown to include parents of middle schoolers, young moms, grandparents, mothers of all aged children, young dads; during epiphany 2020 we had 11 other small groups focused on family callings: dads, grandparents, parents of adult children, spouse, sibling, empty nesters, single mothers, friends as family, etc.

### ***Six-week Family Affinity Group Meetings***

#### ***Process and Format***

For our first pilot group, we selected parents of varying engagement levels who all had kids who had gone through our confirmation programming. In the invite I specified that this was a personal invitation to a pilot group and not simply a blanket invite. All parents had at least one high school student and our conversations were based around parenting youth of that age. 20 people were invited; it was assumed that 12 would say yes, and given the longevity of the commitment that at least 8 would be there each week.

We gathered in family's homes to create a relational atmosphere and to get people comfortable, as some in the group were not close to each other. This proved to be a great decision and I believe contributed to the connections made. The time together was focused on conversation and brainstorming around developing a definition of the Vocation of Parenting. Scripture was used as a grounding of conversation as well as the prayer of good courage and personal worldviews.

- **Week 1-** The group spent time getting to know one another and discussing the Joys and challenges of parenting or grandparenting a specific aged child or family. A part of this conversation led to the realization that there are very few times in parenting when parents talk about their parenting journey, noting that at soccer they talk with other parents about soccer, or at band they talk about band, etc. We came to realize that there is lack of spaces for talking about parental calling, questions, and agency.
- **Week 2-** Conversation was centered around Romans 14:7-9 and Galatians 2:19b-21 with reflection on how these scripture texts inform a definition of a vocation of parenting or grandparenting. Generally, this week has been the most challenging for the groups. For some it was easier than others, but for the most part, using scripture to help them define their role and purpose as a parent proved difficult. Once they leaned in and made progress on their understanding of God's claim and call they were invited to craft a definition of The Vocation of Parenting/Grand-parenting as a group.
- **Week 3-** In pairs, we discussed the prayer of good courage set next to their definition of the vocation of parenting/grandparenting. The prayer of

good courage has become a missional-visional prayer/statement for Westwood over the past 7 years and so it helped clarify their group definition of the vocation of parenting.

- **Week 4-** The definitions of the Family Affinity Groups are usually lengthy and impersonal. In an effort to create something they could remember and internalize they were asked to come to the group with their own six-word definition (Hemmingway exercise) of the vocation of parenting/grand-parenting, something that they could claim as their own and remember once the group was finished. This is the week that typically we saw things “click” when it came to understanding God’s claim and call of parenting/grandparenting.
- **Week 5-** in pairs we begin by discussing Ephesians 4: 8-16 and considering “what speaks to you from this passage in relation to our vocation of parenting conversation?” Their roles become clearer and language around God’s claim and call of parenting/grandparenting gains clarity. This week includes an exercise about world view. Members are asked to list what the “American dream” defines as success and consider what their definition of the vocation of parenting/grand-parenting defines as success. This is the week where the majority of the ah-ha’s happen!
- **Week 6-** the last week the group is invited to consider:
  - what should the staff/council know about the experience of parenting a teenager, and about this group?
  - What would a congregation that supported parents/grandparents look like?
  - What’s next for this group, and future groups?

As people of faith, many for whom this was their first experience defining God’s claim and call in their parenting, these 6 weeks helped them to gain clarity and confidence in being the parent that they have been called to be. What we believe has emerged from these many groups, is that parenting is God’s work in the world, who God has claimed and called us to be. Understanding that the narrative of Jesus is not separate from the life of parenting, but rather a lens through which we see the world.

### ***One Person's Experience***

Here is one comment we received about the experience coming out of participation in a vocation of parenting group:

“For my husband and I who had very different experiences with faith/religion growing up, this vocation of parenting class was really instrumental in aligning how we raise our children in regard to their faith and frankly, everyday life. My husband with his Catholic experience had more of a view of faith as a structured practice that is very black and white. Through this group, talking with other parents and discussing our own experiences and questions helped to change the idea of faith not only as a “practice” but faith as being a “relationship”. This has guided raising our children and talking about how faith is integrated in every relationship and in every part of life; it's much more realistic and tangible for both of us and more specifically my husband.” -Sara and Bob Moran (Parents of a High schooler and Elementary child)

There are other stories like this; people talking for the first time about how faith is not separate from and makes a difference in their parenting..

### ***Observations and Comments***

Many of the statements made in our first evening together tell us that parents are filled with insecurity about doing enough, being enough, doing it perfect and right so that they can raise perfect and right kids.

Everyone said in their own way, “I have no idea what I'm doing, or if I'm doing this 'right'”

On many occasions it was communicated that there are no places in their life where they are having this conversation or being honest about what they don't know, their insecurities, failings, but mostly, the last place they would have thought to have these conversations is in the church.

When pressed to think deeply about a scripture passage and discuss what it had to do with their 2018 lives, many talked about this as a foreign practice. There was an

assumption by some that they didn't want to come to the group meetings because they were not interested in being a part of a group who appears to have it all together. They hadn't ever sat down to flesh out what a particular text has to do with their own life. Practically speaking, they talked of how the pastors do it for them, and they have life application, but not done the hard work themselves, to wrestle with and come up with how it applies to their very lives.

### **Questions**

As with most new things, the practice of family affinity groups opens up many more questions than providing answers!

We've learned that for certain age groups of parents or demographics of life, 6 weeks is a large commitment.

What is the sweet spot of a commitment to help build momentum?

What is the reimagined role of leader to help our people understand these things for themselves rather than someone telling them how/what to do?

Should what we've learned inform the ways that we structure our teams/staff time going forward? Yes! In fact it has, thirty percent of our Director of Youth Ministry's job description moved to include family affinity group facilitation. We believe that the capacity for people to do their own vocation work and development will happen most effectively and with greater success in these intensive and specific kinds of examination of ones particular family role.

How have we come to believe that people think no one else is going thru the same stuff? (or that others have it all figured out)

How do we partner with/equip families so that vocation language is present in all areas of their life?

What's different and what is similar between other age groups?

What is the next step for people who have been through a group, is there a next opportunity to engage and go even deeper into this conversation?

### ***Leadership as Facilitation***

Leading these groups has stretched me as a leader. I decided I would not “lead” but facilitate. In ministry we are trained to be the “experts” on a variety of topics. In this case, leading was not answering questions, rather letting silence be present so that people matured into answering their own questions. The invitation to say more or clarify further was about as much as I entered the conversation. The definition of the vocation of parenting was created entirely by the group. The discussion was generated by the group keying off one another. The depth was generated by the group themselves. I believe we had the experience we did because of this one key decision.

In deciding that my role was only to refer again and again to God's claiming and calling the group was invited to speak into one another's experiences and to put language to their own experience of parenting/grand-parenting rather than be a passive member of the group. For example, if we looked at a scripture verse and they were asked, “how does this inform your role as a parent?” often silence followed, with the assumption that I as the church leader would help them to the answer and instead, my only reply was “in your baptism you were claimed and called to be God's hands and feet in the world”, encouraging them to grow in spiritual maturity by investigating and putting words to what they may have already known but hadn't practiced saying out loud. Instead of giving answers, I invited them to put faith language to their own journey of parenting, foreign at first, but over the course of our time together, it became easier and easier for them to do.

### ***Learnings/Conclusions***

- Though we've been focused on grace and vocation for years, its clear that for many, it was the first time they had considered parenting as doing God's work and that what they do in their family deeply matters.
- Through the work of affinity groups, we see that the church has not done a good job of helping people to see that faith absolutely has something to do with their real lives.

- The vocation of parenting and the assumptions about “good parenting” are skewed by the “American Dream” worldview, and the church has so much work to do to push against this idea of perfection/success/shame.
- Giving space and time for people to consider that their life and their roles matter was revolutionary for some of these people. Helping to connect the dots that faith is not solely about morality or a practice but that as people of faith they have agency and are a part of God's work in the world is crucial.
- Ministry to our young people ought to start with parents understanding the concept of vocation and agency.
- This was a clear window into the amount of work still to be done in the vocation of families.
- People (in this case, parents) belonging to each other adds content and connection to the faith formation process not only in our kids but in the ongoing faith formation of parents.

Our faith formation with an elective model of confirmation develops and builds capacity toward our young people understanding God's claim and call, and these family affinity groups are a part of the comprehensive reorientation of faith formation for our families at Westwood.

While this journey and process is unique to Westwood, its transferable element may be fluidity of roles within a staff, allowing for job descriptions to change or expand in order to take on an “all in” approach to vocation...and to ask bigger questions outside the scope of particular program area responsibilities.