Faith at Home: but how?

By Adrian Peetoom and Bernice Stieva

Bernice is a professor of language arts and children's literature. Adrian spent his professional life with a children's book publisher, for many years as editor. We share a love for quality children's books, and we have come to believe that these can play an additional and important faith formation role.

This essay is written for parents of children (say, ages 0-12) and focuses on children's faith formation. We both believe that the family is the prime locus for it.

Both of us have grown up in families that provided us with these experiences:

- *The Bible was a familiar and much-read presence, the prime Book.*
- *Church was a routine: Sunday attendance and weekdays activities.*
- *Our closest family friends were church folk.*
- *Mealtimes were also family prayer times.*

But to these routines, common in many Christian families, we would now add a component, one prompted by our professional lives, namely the use of quality children's literature.

Synopsis

We are convinced that parents are the primary models for children's forms of faith. Blessed are the homes in which the Christian faith is a constant component of family routines. In which bible stories are familiar tales, from both Old and New Testament. Into which Jesus is a welcome guest. In which family events (both celebrations and losses) are communicated with God in prayer, and perhaps song. In which parents demonstrate the importance of the Christian community, in church attendance and the types of friends they choose, for themselves and their children.

To these, often already well established, family routines we add a fifth component, namely the deliberate use of quality children's literature. Quality literature at any level cannot help but address the important issues of human life, such issues as "Who am I?", "What am I living for?", "What is happiness?", "How can I love and be loved?" etc.

Faith formation

We deliberately use the term *faith formation*, instead of Sunday school or church education. The latter two terms focus on what churches do. Many parents gladly send their kids to church programs in the hope that something religious will stick.

"Faith formation" has a different focus. This approach invites children to follow in the footsteps of others, notably their parents. They may not. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the prime location for faith formation is the home, though the church has vital roles to play as well. Home

at its best constantly demonstrates faith in speech, in actions, in relationships, in short in all aspects of life. (But even homes at their best will experience the reality of doubt!)

Parents and churches will pray that God may bless positive modeling and teaching efforts, and that the Holy Spirit will infuse those efforts, precisely because ultimately faith is a gift of God. And to some people this gift may come even though they did not grow up in a faith family, and hence were not accustomed to going to church. God's Spirit works everywhere, not just in church.

Other writers have also argued that homes are crucial and church is essential.

On homes this:

"We know from centuries of experience that faith is not so much taught as caught. It is when children see individuals whose lives express joy, hope, courage, purposefulness, compassion, and serenity, *and those attributes are consciously articulated as gifts from a personal God* (our emphasis) that children "catch" the meaning of the Good News of Jesus." (Sylvia Sweeney in "Raising Children of Faith: A Parent's Guide." Forward Movement Publications, 2002.)

This same author summarizes John Westerhoff III in his famous "Will our children have faith?" (Re-issued in 2000 by Morehouse Publishing):

[Westerhoff] describes the kind of faith [very young] children have…and that many adults have their whole lives, as *affiliate* faith. "It is based on a deep and rooted sense of belonging, a shared identity with others, and positive personal participation in the story of the people of God. How do children come to have this kind of faith? They do so through *positive life experiences in faith communities* (our emphasis).

We want to make two observations that flow directly out of these two citations. First, some parents do not participate in faith communities, and make no effort to have their children exposed to any kind of religious routine. If their children eventually choose to join a faith community, it's totally their business. But how can their children choose when have never experienced what it is?

Mind you, paradoxically or so it seems at first glance, we believe that the best efforts of parents and church do not insure faith in their children. Those efforts may be necessary conditions, but they are not sufficient. God has no grandchildren. Faith is personal (though not private). People must indeed choose at some point.

And it is also true that some people come to the faith in spite of the fact that their home life was devoid of faith models. Consider this example.

Adrian's dad (Albert) grew up in a non-church family. Albert was born eight years after his only brother, who left home to join the Dutch navy at age 14, to parents who were already in their 40s. At about age 14, being for all intents and purposes an only child, growing up in a very poor family, and having begun working for a living at age 12, Albert drifted into a Reformed church. Initially he joined their young boys' club which would meet on Saturday evenings. The impulse for it was probably loneliness, and perhaps a friend had invited him. He kept going, then began attending church services on Sunday, joined church education programs, and was baptized at age 23. He married a woman from a staunch Reformed family, and remained a man of faith until his death at age 57. (His four sons followed in his faith footsteps, having been both faith taught in church and faith nurtured at home.)

Nevertheless, even though we recognize that "God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform" we maintain that home is for most children the prime faith formation environment. Then how can parents create the kind of home Sweeney talks about? We will first mention four traditional areas of faith formation, but then add a fifth, an addition we have come to believe can also play a vital role.

1. **Children need to know the stories of Old Testament and Gospels**

It is with some concern that we write the following paragraph. For too many Christians the Bible is not all that familiar a book. Parts of it may be, for instance the most famous parables like "the Good Samaritan" and "The Prodigal Son." Also the Christmas story (though Luke never mentions "the ox and the ass", nor does Matthew mention that there were <u>three</u> wise men). But the Old Testament may not be that highly regarded, containing too much violence and killing. And isn't Paul "too difficult", a rather forbidding writer who doesn't like women?

To that we say this. The Bible may be a difficult book, but it has served the Church for close to 20 centuries as a reliable and authoritative source of faith and knowledge. It has shaped the Church, and in many ways life outside the Church. Over a lifelong relationship with it a Christian's understanding of self, and of relationships with God and neighbor, grows, in the way a painter adds layer after layer of colour to achieve a desired piece of art. The Bible houses many narratives, all combining into the Grand Narrative of salvation, God's loving hand guiding the human race towards himself. Christian faith and practice flows directly out of this Book, even today. At minimum, Christians need to know its major stories. For God is not the product of intricate theology and sophisticated philosophy. God is the God of Adam and Eve, of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Jacob, of Moses and Miriam and Joshua, of Samuel and David, a participant in actual loves recorded for us. Following those (see also Hebrews chapter 11), God is a participant in our lives, a loving and caring participant. For a list of the most prominent stories worth having heard or read, see appendix A.

2. **Children need to learn that Jesus' story and our story are the same** (the following three sections are adapted from Sylvia Sweeney.)

The story did not end when Jesus ascended into heaven. [Children] need to learn about the church of the Acts of the Apostles. They need to know Paul and Peter and Priscilla and Aquila and Lydia and Timothy and Luke and Theophilus. As they grow older, they also need to hear the story of the saints in history, heroes of the Church like Francis, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, Martin Luther, Thomas Cranmer, Thomas á Beckett, William Tyndale, John Calvin, Florence Nightingale, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Teresa of Calcutta, and Desmond Tutu. The connection between the lives of the saints and life in our present age is a critical one in order for children and adults to believe the Gospel continues to have relevance in our age. The Grand Narrative continues after Revelation chapter 22:21, the story of the Kingdom of God unfolding in generation after generation.

3. **Children also need positive, affirming faith experiences**.

The home is a natural place for many such experiences. We have in mind not only reading/telling Bible stories, but also singing Christian songs, and setting aside time for prayers with your children. Prayers may be regular meal blessings, nighttime prayers, a morning devotional time before school. What's important is that these experiences are consistent and positive. Through these, and other, activities children come to believe that making time for God is a meaningful and important part of life, not just an accessory to real life. In Appendix B we have listed these, and a number of other family faith forming activities (with thanks to the aforementioned Sylvia Sweeney).

4. **Children need the experience of Christian friendship**.

Contrary to contemporary individualism (society is ultimately a collection of stand-alone individuals), God created us for community. The people we go to church with are not just our Sunday morning acquaintances but active members of our lives. The Christian community is a fellowship, a community we can rely on in every aspect of our lives, our whole lives long. Life is not something to be faced alone, but life is to be shared with a group of people who love us, pray for and with us, and support us in our life's journey.

For children this truth can become part of their own lives, for instance when parents encourage them to help others with chores, seniors for instance, and people with special needs. Adrian remembers that as a teenager he regularly visited a Christian couple with whom he could talk about topics he found it difficult to talk about with his own parents. Consequently he and his wife encouraged their own teenage children to have adult friends. Moreover, they encouraged them to look for opportunities to serve the needs of others, for instance in babysitting, and in visits to the elderly in a nearby seniors' home.

5. Share, and reflect on, quality children's books

We have become convinced that children's books can be an important component in faith formation. Quality children's books tend to touch on important issues of life, and those issues always involve faith.

Many families already know that stories are important. They take their children to libraries, give books as presents, read to their children before bed time, and refer to books in routine conversation.

Stories come naturally to children. As many experts have told us, when children play with cars, dolls and other toys, they often spin elaborate narratives, elaborate perhaps not in words, but sparse words may cover complex situations. Through stories children make sense of their lives, and grow in awareness and empathy. Stories enable them to explore their own thoughts and the thoughts of others.

Given the importance of stories, we believe that Christians need to pay attention to the *narrative* aspect of the Bible, the truth in its stories. That narrative perspective reflects the reality that God is a God of history. Jesus could have been born shortly after Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden, but he wasn't. It took many centuries before it was the right time, and the right time was God's choice. In the meantime, God chose an obscure and not very able (often not even willing) collection of tribes to exhibit his love and compassion. The Old Testament invites us to be companions of that history. The Israelites are "saints that go marching in" and "we want to be in their number." At heart their history is our theology.

On that foundation we also want to argue that literature (an aesthetic form of narrative) is a most suitable instrument of faith nurture and education. In literature we readers (and listeners) are able to see people in a variety of circumstances, and watch how they behave: in times of sadness and joy, danger and safety, poverty and wealth, alone and among others. We observe them as they make choices, between good and evil, between right and wrong. We follow them as they live the consequences of their choices. Good literature tells us how characters find, or do not find, meaning in their lives.

If only the world was full of people who are as nice and normal as we are. Or even if that is not the case, let "nice" and "normal" dominate our neighbourhood, our school, our church, and be found in all the people we meet face to face at some stage of our life's journey. People who dress like us, talk like us, eat the foods we eat, be as healthy as we are, be polite and respectful of our wishes and tastes as we are of theirs. But the truth is that we world is full of "other" people. Other in race, colour, religion, health, habits, thoughts, wishes, philosophies, life expectancies, choices of food, adaptions to climate and geography, levels of learning, types of art, etc. etc. The world is full of "others," and we ourselves are "others" to many people. So in this multi-facetted and interesting world human beings have to learn to get along and respect each other. Let there be no doubt about this: God calls us to know and love "the other."

And long before children go to school and learn about our multi-cultural Canadian society (perhaps experience it in their neighbourhood if they are lucky), the foundation for such learning is laid at home.

Quality children's books are a fine tool for it. Many children's books deal with issues of difference and respect. Contain characters that don't easily fit in, become lonely and discouraged. Feature subtle and brutal bullies (adults and children) who terrorize others. Kids treated badly by adults. Kids who have little and whose friends have lots. Kids and adults who have handicaps of one kind or another. Characters who are sad in their riches, and others who are happy in their poverty. Kids on the fringes who get to shine against all odds. Friendships that develop among disparate characters. The blessing of sharing instead of hoarding. And most of all: love shining even in dark places.

We therefore believe that good children's literature can be a mighty aid in making children sensitive to elements of the Christian faith. In what we have said about a number of children's books, we attempt to demonstrate this conviction. And, given our faith in the power of stories , we offer some of the criteria that have governed our work.

Layers of colour

We believe that quality children's books build on one another. Think of a painter artist who wants to achieve a certain shade of red. Usually it doesn't come out of a single tube, but it needs to be achieved by patiently adding layer after layer of paint, different shades and tones, until the combination of layers gets what the painter had in mind: depth of richness and the red he or she had imagined. Books are like the elements a painter uses, each one adding a "layer" to others.

We believe in "tough" stories

This is a difficult area. Many parents (and teachers) believe that we should shield children from tough stuff. From discovering early that the world is full of violence, injustice and oppression. That people can be mean to each other. That some problems seemingly cannot be solved. Why not concentrate on stories with bunnies in woods and lambs in meadows?

But while we agree that sound judgment is called for, we do not think that we should shield children altogether from the darker sides of life. Brokenness of life and evidence of sin invariably touches the lives of children. The Bible does not shy away from acknowledging those. Think of David, the Old Testament apple of God's eye. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband Uriah as a cover-up. His family was riddled with violence. And for another, the media are full of the darker sides of life, and children know it. Moreover, many children's books focus on hope, and hope is always framed by situations that seem hopeless. In appendix D you will meet the thoughts of an experienced

elementary school teacher who has struggled with this matter. She is also the mother in a Christian family, mother of (now adults) three sons.

Not all of our selections are "tough books", but many are. For instance, in some books we may meet parents who are less than saintly, and portraits of children who need to discover that love is often flawed and ragged. But isn't it true that one of the pillars of the Christian faith is sinful human existence crying out for redemption? So why hide parental imperfection from children by "banning" books that exhibit this reality? All we can say is that these books may become entrees into new beginnings that may benefit parents and children alike.

But we also acknowledge that parents are to be wise in book selections. Be aware of what their children are able to cope with. Chronological age and prior book experience matter. Adrian's children were left free to read whatever was in the house. One day his oldest daughter, then about 11 years old, got into an adult novel that had looked good to her (and she had seen her parents read it), a story about early Christians in the Roman Empire. Early in the book she encountered a rape scene and other forms of violence, and she began to ask her mother to explain, clearly uncomfortable. But then her mother suggested she put it inside until later. And she did, trusting her mother's judgment.

Picture books are for all ages

Many of the books we recommend are picture books. Unfortunately the notion is widespread that picture books are only for young children, and are childish. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many picture books deal with issues that span the ages of readers. It is true that some are more accessible for young children than others. But much is revealed in textual details, in illustration subtleties, in the use of colours and shapes. Moreover, books easily become a catalyst for discussions. It isn't just the reading (aloud) of any book we're after. Books have an even greater impact when they elicit discussions. The books we have chosen (as demonstrations) are invitations to discussion, to reflection, to linking with Christian ideas and (often) stories we find in the Bible. The language in those books is not meant to teach but to invite.

Imagination (or envisioning)

Children book authors use their imagination to create characters and stories. Walter Brueggemann, famous Old Testament scholar, has influenced us to see how imagination is an indispensable tool for understanding Scriptures, notably prophetic books. Imagination enables us to not be limited by our daily circumstances, or by the presence of oppressive powers that

seem so much stronger than we. (Think of the persuasive power of advertising against which so many people seem powerless.) Imagination enables us to see “how it will be” in the face of how it is.

Some Christian folks minutely analyze the words in, for instance Daniel and Revelations, to discover connections between prophesies voiced and the historical events past and to come. But it is also possible to see the often strong and absolute language not as specific predictions, but as dreams about “how it should be.” Take the famous passage from Isaiah 11, about “The wolf shall live with the lamb,” etc. Impossible you say? Literally, yes. But the prophet did not have the literal in mind. He asked his hearers and readers to imagine the impossible. For with God the impossible is possible. For but one illustration read 1 Kings 19, in which the prophet Elisha “knows” that all is lost, and “I alone am left” (14). Yet Yahweh tells him: “yet I will leaven seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (18). Following Scripture. many of the books we have chosen ask readers to imagine the impossibles as these unfold in stories.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring subjects, themes, ideas or narrative elements in works of art, notably literature. As is obvious in the books we have recommended, in quality children’s books various Scriptural motifs pop up regularly. When parents recognize certain motifs, they can draw their children’s attention to them. That recognition depends on two major tools.

1. The more parents are familiar with Scripture, the easier those motifs will be recognized as they read aloud good books with their children. In a selection of books we have identified some of those motifs, but as demonstrations and not as essentials in order to appreciate good stories. Motifs may well impact without articulation.
2. The more the eyes of parents look for those motifs, the more these will pop up, and not only in the books, but also in the events of daily life, in media communications, and in the stories of other folks. Practice makes, if not perfect, than certainly adept.

Here a list of the motifs we have encountered in the children’s books we looked at.

Life is a journey. Yet human beings also keep longing for a “home,” a place where they belong, where life can blossom. Where they can trust and are trusted. Where they are cared form, and are able to care. “Home” links to the biblical motif of **E*xodus,*** the biblical journey from slavery

(of all kinds) into freedom. And also to the Old Testament story of the ***Exile***, reinforced by Jesus and Paul about Christians never be entirely at home in the conditions of this world, but having their eyes on the Kingdom of God, on life as it should be in contrast with life as it is.

The Old Testament also regularly reminds us of our responsibilities toward the ***alien***, in our time anyone who doesn't find the mold of "the normal" (in our eyes): the homeless, the handicapped, the poor, the oppressed, whether physically close by or in our global world in which every corner is close by means of our sophisticated and ubiquitous media.

Creation links to the realization that "all that we possess" is given to us, and we are responsible for looking after it, and sharing it. Here the idea of human beings as steward comes to the fore.

And this finds its culmination in ***Jesus***, in whose life and words those motifs crop up regularly. Jesus as healer and lover of outcasts (Samaritans, women, children, tax collectors). Jesus who preached the Kingdom of God, which is life as it should be as compared to life as it is. Jesus who proclaims that institutions (e.g. the Sabbath) are for people, and not people for the institutions. Jesus as Saviour of all of us, as we are incapable of lifting ourselves out of the morass of sin and brokenness. (In Appendix C we discuss these motifs in more detail.)

The Books

We have chosen 50 books as a basic library in which these motifs may be found. This selection is only meant to be a collection of demonstrations. There are many, many more good books.

- Roughly 25 are picture books for the very young
- Roughly 25 are picture books that span all ages

For each section, as well as for individual books, we have provided user guides. We live in hope that, once parents catch the promise in these books, they will assemble their own library of these, and other suitable titles.

The power of good books

At the time of writing this, Adrian's great-grandchild Isabel was two years old, and utterly familiar with books. Her grandmother claims that she has heard 2,000 picture books read to her! Some of the texts she knows by heart. Early she began to also say, "Isabel read," and she would turn the pages for her adult companion, always starting at the beginning of the book, and often wetting her index finger before turning a page!

The adults in her home life love books. They demonstrate their love to Isabel. They are convinced that Isabel has already picked up her love for books by their demonstrations. The demonstrations do no only consist of voices linked to words and pictures on paper pages, but

also incorporate the intimacy of having a very young child on lap or in the crook of an arm, big body to little body, with adult attention focused entirely on child within this cozy setting. Love is in the air, and love encompasses a good book. Not only in the reading of a book itself, but also in the responses to the book by the child which are instantly lauded by the adult. No wonder the child wants this experience as often as possible.

Experts tell us that the Isabel experience will likely have many positive consequences for her. Perhaps she will learn to read new books by herself even before she goes to school. She will certainly come to have a rich oral and written vocabulary. Maybe soon she'll not only draw pictures but begin to write her own stories. But these possible pedagogical outcomes are not uppermost in adult minds. They do what they do because of their love for Isabel, and their delight in her learning whatever there is to learn in their home setting. Moreover, good stories provide such delight. They would wish, and we do too, that all adults in little children's lives would take time, much time, to read aloud to their children. From birth. (Actually, Isabel's mother read to her already when she was still in the womb.)

Reading aloud a book to a child, valuing, and reacting to, responses are instances of love experiences. To be continued as children get older, even when they have mastered reading without the help of adults, and have "graduated" from picture books to chapter books.[1]

However, there is another aspect of this activity we should pay attention to, one below the surface. Perhaps without being all that aware of it, the adults in a child's life express their own values in both the books they bring home and in the conversations that arise out of the books. Inevitably so. Those values are already also expressed in home routines, in the models the adults become for their offspring. In meal time routines, in time spent on work, entertainment, in conversations with children, and in those that swirl around the heads of children, in the kinds of family and friend relationships, in moneys spent, in interest in society (politics), in care for those who are in trouble. Without having an agenda for any of these, the books chosen (and rejected) will somehow affirm the values held, articulated or not.

[1] Adrian's wife Johanna is an ardent knitter. Over a number of winters she needle-klicked away while Adrian read aloud to her, almost all the Charles Dickens novels as well as other 19th century English literary works. That experience encompassed delight in the books as well as the love bond between them..

And that is the precisely the link this project has in mind. For Christian parents the book experience can be not only a desirable affirmation of the values important to them, suitable books can be deliberate channels of those values. (And, not to forget, challenges to secular values.) Attend to, for instance, these words from Deuteronomy (10: 18-19).

For the Lord your God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens…

Torey Hayden's "The Very Worst Thing" is a story of a widow and a fatherless boy, the boy also an alien in school and on playgrounds, and his (fictional) situation challenges any reader to ask what can be done for him. And then the book challenges Christians to be ready to help any such needy person if encountered. A great (chapter) book to read and discuss with 8-12 year olds. Fortunately there are many chapter and picture books that touch on profound human issues. On loneliness, damaged self-images, broken relationships, misguided coveting, on selfishness, sinful power and violence. But also on the power of love, charity, and care for others.

Some years ago two Christian academics expressed these and other truths in their "Literature through the Eyes of Faith" (Susan V. Gallagher & Roger Lundin. San Francisco: Harper& Row, 1989.) The set out to answer this question: "How does literature look through the eyes of faith?" Their focus is on adult literature, but their observations are equally valid for picture books and chapter books aimed at children. Literature stands in the way of those who claim that the only way to the truth is through science. "…the poets rightly celebrate the human ability to give order to experience in fresh and satisfying ways." (xviii) However, they point to the Romantic tendency to see all literature as escape from the brokenness in the world. There has been a tendency to see human imagination (a gift of God) as taking one out of this world into worlds where perfection reigns. But our authors point out that "The Christian student [and user] of literature ought to ground him or her thinking in the Scriptures and in the central doctrines of the Christian tradition." (xxii) And what are those relevant doctrines?

- Creation is good.
- Sin does not destroy the goodness.
- In the incarnation we recognize God's ongoing presence in this good creation.

So the authors suggest that "…literary texts are not merely imaginative creations, but also instruments composed of language that we use to perform certain activities, such as thinking about social issues, moral questions, or personal feelings." (xxv) And, "In reading a worthwhile book, we may explore the mysteries and interpret the meaning of the world in which God has placed us. There are indeed other ways to go about gaining an understanding of oneself, God, and the world. But works of literature afford a special chance to enter into conversation with the great characters and interpreters of the human drama. In large measure, we read in order to learn the truth, which we may encounter in the pages of a book in powerful and convincing ways." (15) The authors had the great works of adult literature in mind when they wrote these words, but in our minds their observations cover quality children's books just the same, the illustrations in picture books as well as the texts. For both adults' and children's literature these words ring true. "Reading literature is …an important part of our participation in the world. It does more than give us hedonistic pleasure or therapeutic escape from our dingy world. While it does not force us to become more humane, the act of reading can make a great difference in our lives. Reading literature carefully can be one way that we act as responsible Christians to serve our Lord and delight in his gifts." (60)

We do not advocate that homes become schools and parents become teachers. We hope that reading aloud with and to children is already a part of your normal family life. As many parents experience, children enjoy good stories and fine pictures, and relish opportunities to comment. Moreover, young children often insist on reading their favourite books again and again, which provide parents with opportunities to engage them in conversations that reach beyond the books into wider issues. For Christian parents those wider issues can easily be faith issues.

It may not be so easy in these often hectic times, where in many families both parents work outside the home during the day, to establish a regular routine of family time around books, especially with older children. Nevertheless, we urge you to try to establish such routines, if not every day than 2-3 times each week. Perhaps Sunday afternoons after church are opportune times. We also suggest that all members of the family are part of such routines.

We further suggest that the actual reading aloud expresses the respect for each book. Word accuracy is less important than expression of meaning. We suggest that parents read the material for each book we have provided ("Synopsis" and "Potential") ahead of the reading aloud. However, these sections have

been provided not as a "lesson plan" or "check list," but rather as possible alerts for what m*ight* arise in response to the reading. Might! Have the potential. Much will depend on parental sensitivity to children's responses to books and pictures. The more parents deliberately see themselves as Christians in a non-Christian world, the more they will be able to make use of the material the books provide (words and pictures) to share their own "living in the Spirit" with their children.

And…each family will have its own unique character.

Specific suggestions for picture books

1. First and foremost, we suggest that these books be enjoyed as a family with perhaps one or more family members rotating in reading aloud. Each reader should be able to do the story justice with varied speeds and emphases indicated by text and story. Hopefully it is possible to read the book within a relatively short time, without long hiatuses. Continuity is important.

2. Begin each book with a careful look at front and back covers, copyright page, title page, and an author information page (if included). Note the "birth date" of a book, its current age. These are important indications about what the book will be about. This initial set of expectations will help hearers and readers quickly grasp the importance of narrative events as they unfold. Moreover, these expectations will help focus on the major characters. Here are two examples.

3. We suggest that when points in the book capture specific interest on the part of any participant, reader or listener, you halt and discuss. This requires a balancing act, the flow of the story balancing with any specific interest shown by any reader or listener at any time.

4. The information we have provided (synopsis and potential) is for parents. The "Potential" focuses specifically on links to faith issues, and/or to passages from the Bible. Especially the "potential" section has many page references. We do not mean to suggest that when you meet these pages, you religiously draw your children's attention to them. We do ask that you read these sections before you begin reading the book aloud. They are intended to remind you of those parts of the book that offer opportunities for discussions around faith issues.

Note: Our hope is that when you have done a few of these books, you will get the hang of making faith connections without the help of what we have written for you. Beyond that, we offer these sources with the hope that your children will catch on to how good stories raise important questions that bear on profound human issues (which, we believe, always point to points of faith).

5. But…we hope that this experience remains a pleasant one. These activities are not an imitation of school (though there is some overlap with how good teachers share good books with their students). If breaking up the reading with difficult issues begins to interfere with the enjoyment of the story, let the reading of it take precedence.
6. In his book *The Spiritual Life of Children (Houghton Mifflin, 1990)* Robert Coles has alerted us to the varied ways in which children express their forms of faith. In thousands of interviews with hundreds of children in various countries with various parents (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, agnostic, atheist) he discovered children grappling with the profound issues of life. Always reflecting the environment in which they grew up, but responding to that environment and teaching in their own way. Clearly noticeable was the prime influence of home (parents,

grandparents, extended family), and also children's sharp sense of gaps between what home, religious institution and school "preached," and what these did. All this to say: take your children's language seriously, even though it may not conform to your own or the church's.

Example: THE QUILT MAKER'S GIFT

1. Cover (back and front). Is this a fairy tale (and would it begin with "Once upon a time?"). The back cover shows that prominent sources considered it a very good book.
2. Inside cover, back and cover. Given the title of the book, these must be panels in quilt. Did you know that panels have names, that such names reveal the stories behind each square, and the quilt's total composition?
3. Title page. Sometimes in picture books texts and illustrations are done by the same person. But more often two different artists contribute, one writer and one illustrator. This is such a book. But the title page illustration doesn't have a quilt. And who would be the quilt maker?
4. Copyright page. This book is already more than ten years old.
5. Dedication page. This book must be about giving, and about love.

Appendix A

Here is a list of stories from the Old Testament and the Gospels we think children should become acquainted with

1. The First Creation Story (Gen. 1:1-2:4a)
2. The Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:4b-3:24)
3. The Flood (Gen. 6:11-9:17)
4. The Visitation to Sarah and Abraham (Gen. 18:1-15)
5. Joseph and the Coat (Gen. 37)
6. Joseph and the Dreams (Gen. 39-41)
7. Joseph's Offering Refuge (Gen. 42-46)
8. The Baby in the Bulrushes (Ex. 1:1-2:10)
9. The Burning Bush (Ex. 3:1-4:17)
10. The 10 plagues (Ex. 5:1-2:36)
11. The Parting of the Red Sea (Ex. 13:17-14:31)
12. Miriam's Song of Triumph (Ex. 15:1-21)
13. Manna in the Wilderness (Ex. 15:22-16:36)
14. The Giving of the Covenant (Ex. 19:1-34:35)
15. The Entrance Into the Promised Land (Joshua 1-3)
16. The story of Samson (Judges 13-16)
17. Deborah (Judges 4 & 5)
18. Samuel and Eli (1 Sam. 3)
19. David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17)
20. Jonathan and Solomon (1 Sam. 18-20)
21. Elijah and the Followers of Baal (1 Kings 18)
22. Elijah and the Still Small Voice (1 Kings 19)
23. Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2)
24. Elisha Works Miracles (2 Kings 4 & 5)
25. Ruth
26. Queen Esther
27. The Babylonian Captivity (Dan. 1:1-7)
28. Dry Bones Story (Ezekiel 37:1-14)
29. Daniel in the Lion's Den (Daniel 6)
30. Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego (Daniel 3)
31. Jonah
32. The Rebuilding of Jerusalem (Zechariah 8)
33. The Birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-20)
34. The Baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:1-22)
35. The calling of Peter, John, James (Luke 8:40-56)
36. The Call of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13)
37. The Healing of Paralytic (Luke 5:17-26)
38. The Healing of Jairus' Daughter (Luke 8:40-56)
39. The Healing of the Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52)
40. Jesus Blesses the Children (Mark 10:13-16)
41. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37)
42. The Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32)
43. Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16:19-31)
44. Banquet Parables (Mt. 22:1-14, Luke 14:15-24)
45. Mustard Seed, Yeast, Lost Coin (Mt. 13:31-11, Lk 15:8-10)
46. The Sermon on the Mount/Plain (Mt. 5-7, Lk 15:8-10)

47. The Great Commandment (Mt. 22:34-40)
48. I Am the Bread of Life (John 6:25-59)
49. I Am the Light of the World (John 8:12-20)
50. I Am the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-8)
51. I Am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:17-27)
52. I am the Vine (John 15:1-17)
53. Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-19)
54. Jesus and the Woman At the Well (John 4:1-42)
55. Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11)
56. Loaves and Fishes (John 6:1-13)
57. Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42)
58. The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44)
59. Jesus' Death (Matthew 27)
60. Jesus' Resurrection (John 20:1-23)
61. The Road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35)
62. Thomas (John 20:19-29)
63. Jesus' Appearance at the Lake (John 21)
64. The Ascension/Great Commission (Mt. 28:16-20, Lk. 24:50-53)

Appendix B

Here are some specific activities that will support young people in the affiliative stage of faith.

- Re-tell (or re-read) Bible stories
- Do art projects around Bible stories
- Memorize short prayers together, including the Lord's Prayer
- Learn a new meal blessing together
- Invite church friends over to play
- Put up an Advent wreath and an Advent calendar
- Do something special to observe Lent as a family
- Make Christmas and Easter joyful celebrations of Christ
- Commemorate saints days at your house, particularly those family members are named for
- Pray together for friends, neighbours, and relatives who are sick
- Do family outreach activities
- Model forgiveness
- Invite friends to church with you
- Welcome new neighbours
- Hang Christian art in your baby's room
- Have Bibles and a Prayer Book in your house and use them
- Talk openly with your children about your life priorities, but be willing to live what you talk
- Eat meals together
- Have an agape feast with Christian friends
- Attend church as a family
- Teach Sunday School
- Kiss your children goodnight and tell them you love them
- Learn the names of the books of the Bible together
- Learn the Ten Commandments together
- Allow children to attend funerals when they want to go
- Practice "random acts of kindness" together
- Give each other gifts for no particular reason
- Name violence, prejudice, manipulation, and greed with you encounter them in the media
- Have quiet times and quiet spaces in your house
- Support and encourage both time alone and time together
- Actively, openly, physically, and verbally express love for one another and for others.

Appendix C: Various motifs in a bit more detail

As we mentioned, the more parents are familiar with Old and New Testament, the easier they will recognize their motifs embodied in quality children's books. We draw special attention to the motifs of Exodus, Exile and Alien.

Exodus (or delivery from slavery)

The story of the Exodus is found in the books of Exodus, parts of Numbers and Deuteronomy, and if we want to include the Israelites being settled in the promised land, the Book of Joshua. It was (is) the journey from slavery into freedom. The heart of it is found in the words of Deuteronomy 6:20ff:

We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand…he brought us out from there to bring us in and gave us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers.

But freedom has two sides, a freedom *from* and a freedom *for*. Right after the words cited above, Deuteronomy continues:

The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that might always prosper and be kept alive…"

That Exodus motif of "from slavery to freedom to service" dominates most of the Old Testament. About one third of Psalm 78, a recall of Israel's history, is devoted to this part of Israel's past. When the poet talks about the cycle of "disobedience-repentance-deliverance under Israel's and Judah's kings," he reminds them that in the earlier verses he recalled that even underway from Egypt to Israel, their forebears had lived the same pattern. Some of the prophets used the same imagery. Hosea (11:1): "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (This text is cited in Matthew 2:15 after telling us that Jesus and his parents had fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod.)

Exodus is also reflected in the way Jesus often said, "It has been said…but I tell you." For instance, the Torah prescribed Sabbath observance, in, for instance Deuteronomy 5:12. "Observe the Sabbath day and keep in holy." And in Deuteronomy (though not in Leviticus), this commandment is justified on the basis of, "you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day (5:15).

But in the time of Jesus this commandment had been turned into a renewed slavery, with compelling prescriptions of minute observances. So Jesus, according to Mark right at the beginning of his ministry devoted to announcing the Kingdom of God, says this: The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (2:27).

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians is one passionate argument against falling back into slavery, by slavishly following religious rules, including those of Christian Jews who wanted gentile converts to obey the rules for festival observance, the Sabbath, dietary restrictions, and especially circumcision. Paul reminded his beloved Galatians that he had preached freedom to them, freedom *from* their pagan religious obligations, and freedom *unto* a life more in harmony with what God had in mind when he created humankind.

Keep also in mind that when American slaves became acquainted with the Gospel and the Bible, they eagerly embraced the Exodus story as a beacon of hope for themselves. Many spirituals take up that motif. Example:

When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go,
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand, Let my People go.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

So when we read stories about oppression, either physical , psychological, or even self-imposed by fear and undue obedience to human rules, chances are that the exodus motif is invoked, consciously or not.

Exile (being a sojourner, pilgrim, one not really at home anywhere)

The exile is less prominent in the Bible itself, implied more than specifically expressed. Psalm 137 is general considered the primary Exile lament. "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Ezra and Nehemiah contain the stories of that exile which show us that only a part of the Jews returned, and the prophesies of Ezekiel urge Israelites to live holy lives wherever they live. Many Jews did not return, couldn't or wouldn't. They gradually spread throughout what became the Roman Empire. Alexandria (in Egypt) became home for a large Jewish community. In a recent article in *The Jerusalem Post* rabbi and scholar Daniel Gordis draws attention to the fact that a united Jewish nation in the Promised Land only spanned a few hundred years, and many Jews many times found themselves living elsewhere.

But in many Jewish hearts the memories of Jerusalem have always lingered, and in the New Testament we find evidence that many regularly visited the city for festivals. Mark and other gospels mention the presence of money changers in the temple, useful folks for visiting Jews carrying foreign coin. Acts 2 described the day of Pentecost, and contains a long list of visiting languages.

That exile theme is picked up in other New Testament passages that speak of living in but not of the world, and call Christians then (and us know), sojourners, pilgrims, colonists, people of the

Way, always on the way to a better Kingdom. We live on this earth both easy and uneasy. Easy because it is the place where God has set us. Uneasy because it often exhibits so little of the rule of God.

Even within the Promised Land, especially in the time of Jerusalem, kings and the temple, the ordinary Israelite must have often felt estranged. If Torah represents life as it might be (and, following Jesus, we focus on the spirit rather than on the letter of it), then human institutions often stand in the way. The Old Testament Jews discovered that, when temple hierarchy, royalty and Jerusalem at times turned into instruments of oppression. The prophets often railed against them. In chapter 7 Jeremiah was instructed by Yahweh to "Go and stand at the gate of the Lord's house [the temple] and proclaim there this [message of judgment and condemnation]". At one point the prophet says, "Do not trust in these deceptive words, 'This is the temple of, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" For at that point not justice but brutal rule emanated from that temple. Isaiah also has choice things to say about Jerusalem (1:21-24). In the New Testament Jesus often clashed with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes and the lawyers. And many scholars have argued that both gospels and epistles should be read with awareness of the oppression of the Roman Empire (sometimes in cahoots with the temple authorities) in mind.

In children's books we often encounter children hemmed in by "the way it is" as defended by adults, as compared to "the way it's supposed to be", the life they know they need. Often some story king or queen embodies that kind of power for its own sake, instead of power to serve (Ahab and Jezebel, for instance (see 1 Kings 18ff). Brute power may be found in the hands of a parent, a teacher, a children's clique. So when in children's books we meet folks who long for a different life but have to cope with the world in which they find themselves, think of the exile motif. The stories themselves will point to "the way it should be," in how characters and situations are portrayed. But in doing so, stories point to the overarching "the way it should be," captured in in part in the Torah, and especially in the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament epistles.

The Alien (or anyone outside of "mainstream")

Connected to the Exile motif is the Alien motif. "Aliens" get addressed a few times in the Torah. Keep in mind that kindness to the alien is never a matter of charity, but of justice.

Exodus 22:21: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Telling is that immediately after we read: "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan."

Exodus 23:9: You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 24: 22: "You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God."

Psalm 146: The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow."

Keep in mind that when a husband/father died, his wife and children were often left economically defenseless. Various prophets railed against the neglect of those vulnerable members of society.

Isaiah 1: "Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and thee widow's cause does not come before them."

Jesus expand those two categories to include all those who are on the fringes of society: women, lepers, tax collectors, beggars, prostitutes, children!, unlettered Galilean fishers.

Blessed are when we learn from literary works to "love our neighbour as ourselves," especially those who are alien in some way.

Creation

When the Bible lets us know that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, we are reminded that all that we have is given to us. Even the smartest and most creative scientist who calls into being achievements our forebears couldn't even dream about can only work with powers and materials provided for him.

Let's consider some basics, for instance, "unto us a child is born." Such a child is a gift to parents; to grandparents; to extended family; to church (a new member); to city, province and country (a new citizen and future tax payer); to other infants (a potential playmate a few years hence); to merchants of all sorts (a consumer); to schools (a future student); etc. Six pounds or so of gifted-ness wrapped up in a diaper asleep in a crib in a home in a community in a country. A gift for many.

But this child is also a recipient of gifts. For this little bundle was born into more than a clean and brand new crib. He or she came into a larger world already prepared for him. A world filled with parents and extended family; a church to form his faith; a municipality, province and country that had already developed built so many services (road, police, laws, courts, army, etc.); a school to educate; a library to feed the mind; a globe full of forests, rivers, lakes, seas, oceans, mountains, flatlands, animals, plants, polar regions, tropical regions, a playground and a home for peoples in great diversity, a garden to enjoy and to cultivate; a universe with a sun for light in the day, and a moon for light in the night, filled with stars to dream about, filled with space that invited to be explored.

Behold this baby boy: a gift to many and enfolded by many gifts.

Gratitude for gifts received

Gifts evoke responses, notably those of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving around the birth of a child is so normal as to be almost universal. (Exceptions are always particular personal tragedies.)

Babies are gifts that evoke creation feelings. Watch people at zoos, farms, agricultural fairs. Children and adults both flock to the places where little ones are on displays. Children have to be dragged away from watching eggs ready to deliver, the little beaks breaking the shell, the wet creatures lying panting, and then becoming fluffy bright-eyed chirping busy-bodies. An adult rhinoceros may well gather votes as the ugliest mammal around, but its little ones are considered adorable. A baby giraffe overwhelms the soul. A lovely bundle in a baby carriage or basket draws a crowd at airports and in supermarkets. Babies of any kind are received as gifts.

Awe and the Ordinary

But life is not a chain of spectacular events, but a string of ordinaries. For instance, meals are part of the ordinary, day-to-day human routines, ordinary in their regularity. We don't eat: we can't work and we can't live.

Yet eating is also special. Isn't it true that for most people eating times are thanksgiving times? In restaurants we thank the waiter. As guest at a private dinner we thank our hosts, with a special word for whichever of them did the actual cooking. Religious people of all stripes and in all ages have always acknowledged their god(s) for the gifts of food before them, even if they caught or harvested all ingredients themselves, and slaved long hours with primitive means, the cook exhausted from all the effort. In our homes parents asked for a blessing before, and gave thanks after, each meal. They also taught us a child's mealtime prayer as soon as we could talk. Christmas and Easter, prime Christian feasts of thanksgiving, are known for special meals (dishes), as are Thanksgiving Days in both Canada and the United States.

Moreover, the ultimate thanksgiving is the Eucharist (Lord's Supper). Even though different groups of Christians celebrate it in different ways (some in every church service, some less regularly) and use a different label for it, the heart of this congregational meal (bread and wine) is thanksgiving. (That is what the word Eucharist means.)

Acts 2:41-2: "So those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, *to the breaking of bread* and the prayers."

Acts 2:46: "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, *they broke bread at home* and ate their food with gladness and generous hearts, praising God…"

That "breaking of bread' points to Jesus "breaking bread" at his last meal with the disciples. For Christians every meal points to "Communion" with Christ deserving of "Thanksgiving."

Jesus

Key is the passage from Matthew 25.

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me

something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you cared for me, I was in prison and you visited me…truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

This passage reminds us that we meet Jesus in all those whose needs become our calling to help and provide. In some book characters we also see "Jesus" as loving and self-giving. Earlier we made mention of "life as it should be", and pointed to the Torah as source of knowledge about it. But we also mentioned that Jesus gave us more than the Torah, in his life as teachings, in his parables especially. Jesus loved as no one else loved, and in doing so points us to a life of love. None of the motifs we described (Exodus, Exile, Alien, Creation) can be divorced from the life of Jesus, and from his Cross (ultimate act of love) and Resurrection (Love is alive).

For instance, in the early chapters of "the Acts of the Apostles" we get glimpses of what happened in the early church.

Appendix D: On tough books

On this subject we can do no better than cite an experienced elementary school teacher, a Christian woman. (The author has taught at all elementary school levels for almost 20 years, and is the mother of three adult sons).

"Throughout my teaching career I have used books that raise difficult subjects with children. I do so for many reasons. For one, it seems to me that the only way to engage students is to give them something with which to engage, and something that is in itself engaging. There is nothing more engaging than the world as it is, and nothing I would wish more for my students than to be passionately engaged in the world as it is, making it into the world as it should be.

Having said that, there are areas I avoid with children. At one point I believed it was a good rule of thumb to teach children about injustices that happened to children their own age. Then I saw a photograph of Prince Harry holding a nine-month old baby girl who had been raped because someone believed that sex with an uninfected person cured AIDs. It was evident to me then that I must constantly judge what was suitable for the children I taught; that I needed to walk the narrow ridge between hopeful engagement and horrified paralysis. Dependent as this is upon the various contexts my students bring with them, this is not always easy to find.

I have encountered many reactions to this way of teaching. I have had a principal, in the nicest possible way, call me 'every principal's nightmare'. I have had parents write letters of support and letters of condemnation. And I have had fellow teachers who have embraced the text sets on war, race, and enslavement in their own classrooms, and teachers who have picked up their copies of Franklin and Ramona the Brave and walked away, shaking their heads.

In the main, I think there is a discourse about childhood that is diametrically opposed to teaching children about the world as it is. In this discourse, children are seen as innocent and in need of protection. These are people who see the 'world' of childhood as one of sweetness and light: baby animals, trips to Disneyland, tea parties, laughter, and family time. In this discourse, children can be or do anything they want; the future is open to them. Such a world is present in the culture around us, and, as Neil Gaiman points out, in the literature for children in which the greatest problem is that your birthday has been forgotten, and the solution to the problem is the surprise birthday party that has been planned all along. This discourse depends upon materialism and humanism as its foundation, and is reserved for a privileged minority in our world. The majority of the children I teach belong to this minority.

It is amazing to me the lengths people will go to ensure that their children remain in this world. There were televised panels of horrified parents when Susan Patron's book The Higher Power of Lucky won the Newbery. In that book, the main character hears the word 'scrotum' on the first page, and spends the rest of the book wondering what it means and knowing that it is a word of power. The point of the book is that there is no one she can trust enough to ask, until the last page. All over America, parents were swearing to keep that book out of their children's hands. In the discourse of innocent childhood, there are no scrotums. The energy and outrage parents devote to issues like this point to the likely possibility that this is not about their children, but about them. In a terrifying world in which nothing can be done to alleviate the disparities or race, class, and wealth, it is comforting to know that your children need only worry about bunnies and new teachers. However, that comfort is also a lie. As Maurice Sendak said, "I remember my own childhood vividly…I knew terrible things. But I knew I mustn't let adults know I knew. It would scare them."

Geraldine Vandekleut

When I spoke about this to a group of teachers once, one of them related that her 25 year old son was no longer speaking to her. According to her, her son had said one day that the world she had taught him about and brought him up in did not exist and never had, and that she had not given him the tools to manage the world as it was. My sense of this is that children want to believe us when we say that the world is this way, and yet they are troubled by the ways in which they see it is not. With no adult to properly explain the scrotum, they flounder, and keep their secrets. When they reach adulthood, most of them see that the way to deal with the world as it is is to do as their parents have done: get a job, be a good neighbour, feather their nests, and raise children who have baby animal pets. Cynicism is born in the crucible of knowledge of the world as it is, and hopelessness and despair about doing anything about it. As a teacher, I am in the business of teaching hope, justice, and the world as it is, to children who may grow up to be cynical materialists. Or they may not."