

FAITHFUL FAMILIES



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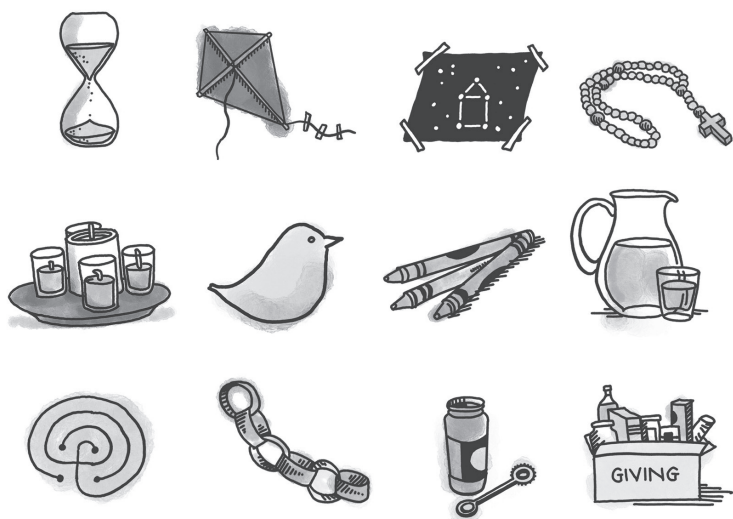
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FAITHFUL FAMILIES

CREATING SACRED MOMENTS AT HOME



T R A C I S M I T H



**chalice
press**

Saint Louis, Missouri

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To My Children—Clayton Elias, Samuel Antonio, and Marina Lynn:

May you embrace mystery and wonder, always.

This book is for you. —Love, Mama

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Deepest gratitude is reserved for my partner in life, Elias Cabarcas, who believed in this project from the very beginning and provided the space, assistance, and brains to make it happen. Te amo más.

Foreword

“So we know what we *don’t* want to teach him about God,” I said to my husband, Dan, as I collapsed onto the park bench, rubbing my pregnant belly. “But we haven’t decided what we *do* want to teach him.”

It was quiet between us for a moment, save for my labored breathing. A mile around our favorite walking track wasn’t as easy as it used to be, but then neither was anything else in those days leading up to and following our first baby’s birth.

Dan and I were both raised in loving, grace-filled homes, but in a fundamentalist religious culture that required total acquiescence to a strict set of theological beliefs and left little room for mystery. After years of doubt and deconstruction, we’d made peace with the meandering nature of our own faith journeys, but raising our little boy to do the same seemed daunting. We had no models for that, no roadmap. We knew what teachings we wanted to avoid, but were flummoxed about what to present as an alternative.

“Well I guess it’s like everything else with parenting,” Dan finally said. “We’ll just have to figure it out as we go.”

Indeed, parenting, like faith, can only be learned in the doing. So in this first year of being Henry’s parents, we’ve been taking it a day at a time, praying for wisdom, and getting help from those ahead of us on the path—good friends and good guides.

Traci Smith is one of those guides. From the moment I met her, I knew Traci was the kind of mom I wanted to be: playful, empathetic, and deliberate about integrating spiritual practices into her family’s everyday life. We met at a Christian women’s conference in Texas,

and throughout the first day of sessions, Traci insisted on wearing a rather loud, colorful pin her young son had crafted for her to remember him while they were apart. He'd have never known if she'd simply left it in her suitcase, but Traci wore that little pin proudly, and I loved how her eyes twinkled when she talked about her kids.

Traci brings that same joy to the book you now hold in your hands. *Faithful Families* is a thoughtful, practical guide to teaching by doing—to integrating prayer, tradition, Scripture, and ritual into the routines of a normal, busy family. What I love about this book, and about Traci's work, is how it illuminates the sacred in the everyday, how it invites us to turn a lazy Saturday morning breakfast, a long car ride, the death of a pet, or the end of a stressful day into an opportunity to look for God, hiding in plain sight. "We believe in mystery," she encourages us to tell our kids...and ourselves.

After reading *Faithful Families* (and dog-earing nearly every page for Dan), I felt relieved—relieved I didn't have to understand theodicy before praying a simple blessing over my son's bed at night, relieved I didn't have to know all the answers before staring in awe into a starry sky, relieved I didn't have to be free of doubt to be full of gratitude at our family's "gratitude café." For the first time since becoming a mother, I was thinking less about how I didn't want to parent and more about how I did want to parent, particularly as it concerned my child's spiritual formation.

It's as true for children as it is for adults: faith must be practiced. We can teach, certainly, and instruct and inform. But what will be remembered are those tangible, in-the-flesh actions that get God out of our heads and into our hands. What will be remembered

is the scent of a bubbling hot casserole for a family in need, the whoosh of a “Pentecost kite” whipping through the air, the feeling of prayer beads pressed against fingers, the dance of flame atop Advent candles.

As a new parent, I’m often overwhelmed at the prospect of raising a kind and happy son. With this book, Traci reminds us we aren’t called to be perfect; we’re called to be faithful. All we can do is attend to the present moment. All we can do is take it one step at a time.

— Rachel Held Evans

Preface to the New Edition —

It's been a little over three years since the first version of this book (formerly entitled *Seamless Faith*) was first conceived. As anyone who spends time with young children knows, a lot can change in three years. My boys, Clayton and Samuel, reinvented their mode of ambulation several times. Right before our eyes, my husband and I watched them transform from scooters to crawlers to walkers to runners in those years. We also learned that we're adding a third precious child to our family, right around the time this new version goes to print!

A lot has changed with the concepts and ideas presented in this book in the past three years as well. Since its initial release I've had the opportunity to connect with so many of you: parents, ministers, children and youth program directors, and more. You've shared your ideas and experiences with these practices, and you've made suggestions about what was missing.

The new edition takes the best of everyone's suggestions and makes the book even better. We've added new practices in every chapter, incorporated links to products or resources that will help you implement the ideas with even less preparation, and added resource guides for ministers and grandparents. Since so many of you give this book away for baptisms, baby showers and other special occasions, we've added a dedication page in the front so you can personalize your gift and create a keepsake for the recipient.

For this second edition I'd like to briefly thank a few people who were a part of the team that put it together: Paul Soupiset for brilliant cover design, the launch team of fifty superheroes and ministers who fielded my numerous crowdsourced questions and ideas, Rachel Held Evans for the lovely foreword, the team at Chalice Press

and (most importantly) *you* for picking it up and trying the ideas inside.

I hope you enjoy *Faithful Families* as much as I enjoyed creating it. I would love for you to tell me what you think by visiting www.traci-smith.com or posting on social media with the hashtag #FaithfulFamilies. Let me and other readers know what you've found most useful in this book. What has worked for your family and what has been a challenge? Together we can share ideas and support one another.

Traci Smith, 2017

Introduction

When my oldest son, Clayton, was four months old, he contracted his first cold. The pediatrician said it wasn't cause for alarm, to monitor him closely, and to bring him back if anything got worse. I spent the whole day worried. I trusted our doctor, but I was a fearful new mom, and my precious baby wasn't well. That evening, my anxiety got the best of me, and I began to conjure up all kinds of worst-case scenarios to the common head cold. At bedtime, as I changed him into his snuggly pajamas and rubbed him down with baby oil, I had an instinct that has now become a ritual in our home. I made the sign of the cross on Clayton's head and said, simply, "Lord, protect Clayton, keep him safe, and heal his little body. Amen." It was a simple gesture, but it felt very profound to me. I was calmer, and my peaceful presence had a positive effect on Clayton as well.

Faith is learned as it is woven seamlessly into the fabric of daily life. I don't intend to ever sit down with my children and "teach" them about the importance of asking God for healing, but they will grow up with that belief as a part of their everyday experience.

This book offers practical ways for families to live their faith together through a variety of ceremonies, traditions, and spiritual practices. These ideas can be practiced from any Christian perspective. Though I am a Presbyterian minister, this book was not written from an exclusively Reformed Protestant perspective. Catholic, Evangelical, Quaker, Unitarian, and even families who do not have a home congregation will find useful ideas in this book.

Part I, Traditions, gives ideas and guidelines for fifteen family traditions. These traditions are designed to deepen a family's life together using faith as the foundation. The most important rule to follow when instituting a tradition is consistency. Traditions lose

their impact if they are practiced haphazardly. Chapter 1 contains traditions that can happen at any time of year. The chapter 2 traditions coincide with holy days (holidays) throughout the year.

Part II, Ceremonies, describes 15 ceremonies for families to practice at home. They are divided into ceremonies that mark important life events or transitions, and ceremonies for difficult times. For purposes of this book, a ceremony differs from a tradition or a spiritual practice in that a ceremony is an isolated event and does not happen with regularity, as a tradition or a spiritual practice does.

Part III, Spiritual Practices, contains 20 spiritual practices divided into three sections. Chapter 5 teaches creative ways families can pray together; chapter 6 contains a variety of ancient spiritual practices adapted to family use; and chapter 7 includes a variety of other spiritual practices. These practices help family members grow spiritually as individuals and as a family.

I encourage families to “pick and choose” from this book. Most families will not choose to use all 50 ideas, but will identify the ones that resonate most closely with their family’s style, time constraints, and personality. For ease of use, the ideas in *Faithful Families* are written like a script. Families can follow the script very closely or use it as a guide to create their own traditions, ceremonies, and spiritual practices.

Read on for some frequently asked questions about these ideas, or refer back to this list after you’ve read through the ideas.

Frequently Asked Questions

I haven't been to church in a long time, and I don't know very much about the Bible. What should I know before reading this book?

You should know that I had you in mind when I wrote it, along with church-going families. The vast majority of these activities do not require any advance knowledge or practice. For those that do, a short introduction is given. It is assumed that parents will be learning these activities alongside their children and experiencing them at the same time.

What if my child/teenager doesn't want to participate in these activities for family faith?

There is a balance here, between two extremes. One extreme says, "This is completely optional. You don't have to do it if you don't want to." The other extreme says, "You will do this because we said so, and you will like it!"

The first extreme, being too lax, gives an easy out when it comes to faith. After all, when parents believe something is important, they insist on it. If a child says, "I don't want to go to school," even day after day, quitting school still isn't an option. Parents find a way to insist on school attendance, knowing that the skills learned in the classroom will pay dividends in the child's life in adulthood. This is true of faith and spiritual practice as well. Sometimes the practice becomes more meaningful or enjoyable with effort, and, if we don't put in the time and energy, we never reap the reward. The second extreme, rigidly insisting on 100 percent participation all the time, can backfire as well. Constantly badgering children to be involved with activities that don't resonate with them, or which annoy them, will eventually lead them to resent faith and spirituality.

One way to find a healthy balance is to insist that children try something once or twice, or to insist that they are present even if they are not participating. If the children seem to routinely resist the activities, give them a break for a few months and try again. This book has a variety of activities intended to reach a wide range of children. Keep at it, gently, and you will often find something that works well for your family. Note: faith traditions, ceremonies, and spiritual practices should never be used punitively. (“If you don’t shape up, you’ll have to...”) These ideas are designed to encourage openness, creativity, and healthy spirituality in your children, not to bully them into having faith.

What should I do when something goes wrong?

This book is based on the premise that sharing spirituality as a family and deepening your faith together is often a journey of discovery. Families will find activities in here that work well for their context and others that don’t work as well, or even at all. Each family is unique. Use this book as a guide, and an invitation to experiment. When something goes well, rejoice! When one of the activities falls flat for your family, let it go. Before you do, though, give it a second or even a third chance. Some of the practices in this book become more meaningful with time. Also, make use of the “Variations” portions of the activities to adapt ideas for your family.

My children are far apart in ages and have wildly different personalities; how will we make these ideas work as a family?

Each idea has several variations to accommodate differences in children’s ages and personalities. In some families, certain family members will be more drawn to a particular variation. There may

be some activities that are particularly loathed by a family member or two. Take an experimental approach, and don't force a child to participate in an activity more than a few times if she or he has demonstrated dislike for it. Along the same lines, take care not to negatively compare siblings in these activities. If one child is not enjoying an activity that another loves, use it as an opportunity to point out that God speaks to individual people in different ways.

How old should my children be to take part in these activities?

There are activities in this book for children of all ages, from babies to adolescents. The suggested ages are listed at the beginning of each activity. The ages listed in each idea are approximate. They were identified using my experience and knowledge of children's faith and psychological development at various stages. Some children, however, will be ready for an activity far earlier than the age listed, whereas others will need to wait even longer until they are ready. Parents are advised to experiment and use their instincts about what is best for their children.

What is the theological perspective of this book?

My own theological leanings are rooted in a reformed Christian perspective, having been aligned at various points in my faith journey with the United Church of Christ (UCC), Christian Reformed Church (CRC), and Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). Also, as a minister and a parent, it's my hope and prayer that my children and the children I pastor will learn to understand the world theologically and spiritually, no matter where they find their faith community as adults. This book provides the framework of spirituality on which the "walls" of any particular tradition can hang. I encourage you to adapt

these ideas to your own faith perspective and to seek guidance from your minister, pastor, or priest for ideas about how to incorporate elements from your unique tradition into these activities.

This book, while rooted in Christian faith, does not shy away from using examples and images from other faiths, knowing that the world is a diverse place. Teaching concepts from other faiths alongside one's own helps children to learn tolerance and acceptance for others. It also helps children understand what their faith has in common with other faiths.

I did one of the activities in the book, and my child asked a question about God I couldn't answer. What should I say or do when that happens?

Children have so many questions about the world around them, including faith and spirituality. "What happens when we die? How do we know there is a Spirit when we can't see it? If God is good and loving, why do bad things happen?" I encourage parents to embrace a single word when it comes to these tough questions: mystery. To say to children, "We believe in mystery," is a powerful thing. It's important not to use mystery lightly with children. To teach mystery is to embrace the truth that we don't know everything, rather than run from it. When a child asks a question that is answerable only through faith, say, "That is a wonderful mystery of our faith. Many people have different ideas, but most people say we can't know all of these answers while we are on earth. What do you think?" As children grow, they are able to engage spiritual and theological dialogue in even greater depth.

I am a pastor/youth minister/children's minister. How should I use this book?

This book is a tool for you. Use it to give ideas to parents in your congregation who come to you saying, "I want my children to grow up with a sense of faith, but I don't know where to start!" There are also several ideas in this book in which clergy participation with a particular family is encouraged. As you read through the ideas, consider how you might adapt them for your congregants' needs and theological leanings.

A note about gender language

As children hear their parents or other adults talk about God, they begin to form an opinion of what this God must be like: Is God loving or hateful? Is God near to us, or far away? Is God a man, or a woman? Christians affirm that God is neither male nor female, yet so many children think of God as an old man. One of the ways to help break out of this mold and help your children think of God beyond gender is to take out "he" when referring to God. This book refers to God in gender-neutral ways.

Get Ready: *Create a Sacred Space*

Many of the traditions, ceremonies, and spiritual practices in this book would be enhanced by having a sacred space in your home. A sacred space can be permanent—a room transformed into a family sanctuary—or it can be temporary—the living room transformed for a time.

Whether the sacred space is temporary or permanent depends on space considerations and family preference, but the following guidelines are useful for creating sacred space no matter the size or permanence of the space:

Comfort: Comfort is key in a sacred place! Soft cushions or chairs, blankets, and hammocks are all perfect for a sacred place. If there are older members of your family who don't transition easy to or from the floor, make sure there is a chair available. Allow children to sit or lie on the floor.

Clutter: Keep clutter under control in the sacred space. It's difficult to focus on spiritual matters when there is visual clutter in the space.

Senses: Engage all of the senses in a sacred space. What does the space look like? How do the blankets and chairs feel? Does it smell nice there? Is the sacred space free of unwanted electronic buzzing or other noise?

Inclusiveness: A family sacred space should have special elements for each member of the family. Allow each person to pick one piece of art or other element for the space.

Simplicity: Don't crowd the space. Allow it to be a place where the mind can wander and energy can move and flow.

Part One

Traditions

Chapter 1

Traditions for Every Day

Bedtime

Night Time Blessing

In addition to (or instead of) evening prayers, a bedtime blessing from parents is a wonderful tradition. Not only can it be done with children who are too young to speak, but it frees a busy child from the need to do or say anything. The blessing is simply received. It is a gift from the parent and an expression of the child being loved by God. Consider using the same blessing night after night so your child may begin to internalize and anticipate it.

Designed for Newborn through School Age

(As long as children are being tucked into bed by parents)

Time Investment: 30 seconds—1 minute

Materials: None

How To

1. At bedtime, after the child has finished his or her usual bedtime routine (teeth brushed, pajamas on, story read, etc.) say to your child, “*Daddy (or Mommy) is going to say a night time blessing now!*”
2. Place your hand on the child’s head or shoulder and say a short blessing. Use one of the examples or write your own.
 - i. [Child’s name], may God bless you and keep you.
May God be kind and gracious to you.
May God give you peace tonight and every night. Amen.¹
 - ii. [Child’s name], may the peace of God, which is bigger *than anything we understand, fill your heart and your mind, and may you know God’s love always. Amen.*²

iii. [Child's name], may the God of hope fill you with joy and peace, not only tonight, but tomorrow and the next day and all the days of your life. Amen.³

iv. God Bless [child's name]. Amen.

3. At the end of the blessing, say, “Amen,” give the child a hug or kiss, and leave the room.

Notes

- The bedtime blessing can be shared by whichever parent or caregiver is putting the child to bed. The consistency in the blessing through a variety of different people provides a sense of security and safety to children.
- There is no age too small for this blessing. Begin to bless your children at bedtime from their very first day of life!

Variations

- Write the blessing or type it, and put it in a frame it over the child's bed.
- Allow older children to say a blessing to parents as well.
- Have a time of bedtime prayers and do the blessing at the end.

Bedtime

Marking the Days God Has Given

When my son Clayton was about 18 months old, we began to add a sticker to a piece of poster board every night before bedtime. The original idea was to keep track of books we were reading, but it became more than that. Removing a sticker and affixing it to the poster board had a sort of ritual feel to it. It wasn't a "reward" for reading a book anymore; it was a moment to mark the fact that another day was through and that it was time for bed. This tradition is inspired by that same tradition I started with Clayton. Much like writing in a daily journal or marking off the days on a calendar, this tradition says, simply, "Another day has come and gone." As the days go by, the stars on the board become more numerous, and a simple piece of art is created. It's powerful to look at the board after a few months of this tradition.

Designed for Ages 18 Months—5 Years

Materials

1. Piece of poster board
2. Small star stickers

Time Investment: 30 seconds—1 minute per night

How To

1. Every evening, just before bed, walk to the poster board, choose a star sticker and place it on the poster board.
2. Say, *"Thank you, God, for another day. Amen."*

Notes

- This tradition is particularly effective for little ones. While they might not understand some of the spirituality behind marking the days God has given, they will still appreciate the tradition and routine feel of it. As they grow, the conversational aspect can grow and develop as well.
- Like some of the other traditions in this book, this tradition is effective in its simplicity. Some of our days are challenging; some are easy. This tradition thanks God for the day and does not offer commentary.
- Another beautiful thing about this tradition is how the days accumulate over time. Each of the stars represents a day, and over time it is impressive to think about the days, and the joys and challenges they presented.

Variations

- Use stickers with varied shapes or symbols.
- Put the stickers in a book rather than on a poster board.
- Say a prayer after putting the sticker on the poster board.
- Decorate or paint the board before hanging it.

Morning

Gratitude Cafe

One of my parishioners, a busy professional and mother of two, once told me, “In the morning, I take my coffee out to the porch and take a few minutes to reflect on everything I’m grateful for. This is how I find God and keep sane.” This tradition is a version of her tradition, adapted for family use. Gratitude has been proven, time and again, to be a value that increases health of all kinds: spiritual, mental, and physical. To take a moment and reflect on all of life’s many blessings, even once a week, is a worthwhile endeavor.

Designed for Ages 8+

Materials

1. A variety of morning beverages (tea, coffee, orange juice, hot chocolate)
2. Pencils and pens

Time Investment: 15–20 minutes

How To

1. Choose how often the family will hold the gratitude cafe. Weekly? Monthly? Daily? I suggest weekly, though some families will find this too frequent or infrequent for their needs.
2. On the morning of gratitude cafe, wake up early, make a special beverage for each family member, and gather someplace together. Outside can be a nice option, depending on space and weather conditions.
3. Say, *“There are so many things for which we can be thankful: the air we breathe, the home we live in, the clothes we wear. Let’s each*

take a moment and write down some of the things we are thankful for. Let's try to each write down five things, and then we will share them."

4. After a time of silent writing, say, *"Let's share the things we are thankful for with one another."*

5. Once everyone has shared, close by saying, *"God, we are thankful for all of these blessings, Amen."*

Notes

- Gratitude cafe is listed in the traditions section because it is, ideally, practiced with some degree of regularity. Over time, family members will begin to anticipate the gratitude cafe moments and look forward to reporting specific things for which they are thankful. Try to incorporate it at regular intervals throughout your family's life.
- Saturday mornings are a great time for many families, as are Sunday evenings. If the cafe moment needs to be cancelled for some reason, make an effort to reschedule within a day or two.
- Some may need prompting for this activity, especially at first. Ask leading questions:

Are you thankful for any material blessings of this past week?

Thankful for anything special we have done as a family?

Thankful for any lessons you have learned?

Morning: Gratitude Cafe

- Parents and adults can model what it means to be thankful in all circumstances by highlighting the lessons they've learned from mistakes, or the hidden blessings in difficult circumstances.

Variations

- At the end of the tradition, put the slips of paper in a basket and use them for the New Year's tradition "Remembering God's Blessings in the Past Year." (See chapter 2.)
- Have younger children draw pictures instead of writing.
- Encourage family members to hold individual gratitude cafes each day, and then compare notes at the end of the week.