

THE FAMILY ALTAR





INTRODUCTION

The research is in and it is not pretty. Families are busier and fractured like never before. The definition of families varies from home to home and takes a variety of shapes and sizes. The fast paced 24/7 technological fueled lifestyle means that the family can often find itself in many places and spaces at once. Family togetherness, mealtimes, spirituality and play is being lost in the frenzy and our children are missing out!

On the church front study after study is telling us that we are losing between fifty and ninety per cent of our children by the time they finish high school. This is despite a golden era where the best curriculum, programs and resources have been produced for every age group. Something is missing.

I am convinced that the answer is not more programs and events and better church/school as good as these are, but a focus on equipping our parents, grandparents, mentors and their homes to seize moments regularly where the human and the divine can be in direct contact in a special and meaningful way.

An investment of time, places and spaces in the home will pay dividends that will rebound down to eternity.

I am persuaded that the answer lies at the family altar.

WHAT IS AN ALTAR?

In Old Testament times the altar was made of stone, brick, metal or earth or a combination of all of the above. It was a place where the divine and human worlds or the visible and invisible interacted. These altars were built at significant places or significant events in Biblical history. It was usually a place where sacrifices were made in worship.

In Genesis, chapter 12, we find that the patriarch, Abraham, and his household travels to Shechem and it is here that God tells Abraham that he is going to give to his descendants this land and so Abraham builds an altar there to the Lord and calls his household to worship.

In Genesis, chapter 28, we find Jacob fleeing from his brother, Esau. One night he uses a stone for a pillow and then dreams of a ladder with angels descending to attend him and ascending to God. We find in verse 18 that Jacob sets up the stone as a memorial pillar and poured oil on it. He names that place, "Bethel", meaning House of God.

In Genesis, chapter 35, God instructs Jacob to go back to Bethel and to build an altar there where God had appeared to him. Jacob instructed his household to remove all of their foreign gods and they buried them under an oak tree at Shechem. At Bethel, Jacob again sets up a stone pillar and worships God there along with his household.

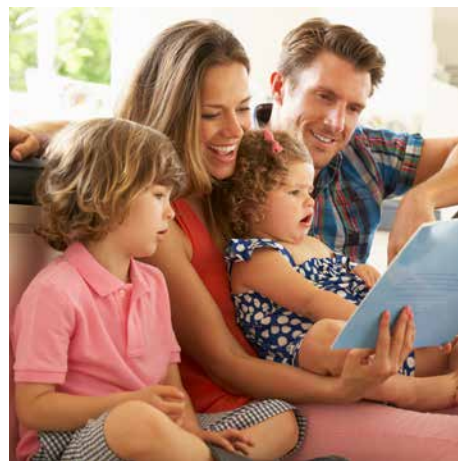
Later in the time of the Exodus and the crossing of the Jordan River into Canaan at Gilgal, Joshua instructs one man from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to pick up a stone from the middle of the Jordan and to build a memorial altar 'so that when your children ask you what these stones mean you can tell them the story of God's deliverance'.

Even further down the track in 1 Samuel, 7, we find the Israelites and Philistines doing battle at Mizpah. The Israelites win the battle miraculously with intervention from God and so the prophet Samuel takes a stone and sets it up as a memorial to that battle. He calls the stone 'Ebenezer', saying, "thus far the Lord has helped us. We also find in Samuel 7 that Samuel regularly travelled from Bethel to Gilgal and to Mizpah and it is at these significant places of worship that He ministers to and judges Israel.

As we can see altars and stones are significant worship places for the patriarchs and their families, a place where they met God, listened to His word and heard His voice.

At the cross Jesus becomes our sacrificial lamb paying the penalty for our sins and providing direct access to God the Father.

We no longer have to sacrifice animals (thank goodness) but the idea of calling those in your household to a significant place and time of worship where the human and divine interact was a necessity in Old and New Testament times and continues to be of necessity today.



HOUSEHOLD WORSHIP/FAITH IS OF EXTREME IMPORTANCE

Research tells us that children are more likely to adopt the faith of their parents. That is good news but it is also a little bit scary for me as a parent. My children do not just see me at church but they also see me during my 24/7 living. They see me in my marriage, in the way

I parent, in my down time, in my googling time etc. and the really tough question I have to ask myself is that when my children look at me in my 24/7 living, what do they see? My children are more likely to adopt the 24/7 faith rather than the 7th day faith.

THE RESEARCH SAYS...

The research is clear that when it comes to passing on faith to the next generation, the single most important influence on children was the faith and relationship of parents with their children.

Christian Smith and Patricia Snell in their research (*Souls in Transition*, 2009) found that parents are the single most important influence on the religious outcomes in the lives of young adults. On the other hand, teenage participation in evangelisation missions and youth groups does not predict a high level of religiosity just a few years later.

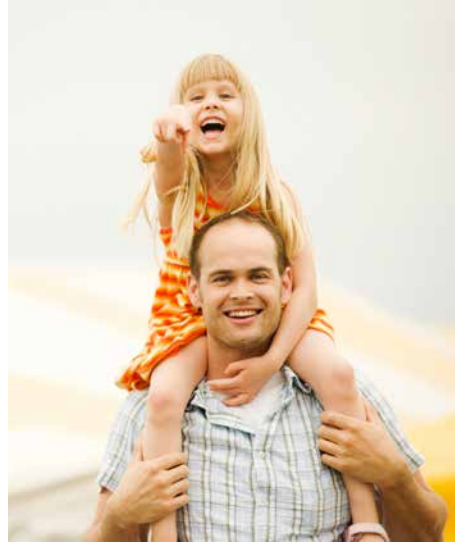
Bengston, Putney and Harris in, *Families and Faith, How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations*, (2013) says that, 'the influence within the home can be more powerful than forces at church, school or in society at large'. This was the same for both those who were religious and those who were not. Bengston et al also found that children are more likely to adopt the faith of their parents and the religiousness of their parents and children act on what they have seen in their parent's relationship with God and each other.



What has emerged in the research are significant factors for successful faith transmission.

- Parents modeling how to practice their faith by attending and serving in the church is important but that influence can be blunted if either parent does not have a close relationship with their children.
- There is a strong correlation between the religiosity of young adults and a close relationship with their father.
- Parents who gave their children room to question, doubt and work out their faith identity were more successful in passing on faith than those who over reacted or shut down questioning and doubt.
- Segregated church environments can create a culture that makes parents antagonists rather than partners in the process of passing on faith to children.
- Young adults who reject the religion of their parents and then come back are those who had a close relationship with their parents, saw them consistently living their faith and had the freedom to find their own religious identity.

(Brunner and Stroope, *It Starts at Home*, 2010. Denton and Pierce, *A Faith of Their Own*, 2011) Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 2011. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 2009.)



One of the issues that George Barna and the Valuegenesis studies have highlighted is the lack of family worship in the home.

George Barna in his 2003 paradigm-shifting book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (page 78), stated that,

“Fewer than 10% of parents who regularly attend church with their kids read the Bible together, pray together or participate in an act of service as a family unit.”

“Even fewer families – 1 out of every 20 – have any type of worship experience together with their kids other than while they are at church during a typical month.”

Adventist Valuegenesis Studies (2012, Gane, p 76) Key Findings found that of active Seventh-day Adventists low numbers have regular family worship...40 percent of families never have worship at home, 26 percent have worship on a daily basis and only 33 percent have family worship once a week.

1. The Valuegenesis study also discovered that 44 percent of fathers and 61 percent of mothers talk to their children about their faith on a regular basis.
2. There is a positive relationship between parents talking about their faith and Christian commitment in their children.
3. There is a positive relationship between the frequency of family worship and Christian commitment.
4. The most effective parenting style in enhancing the attributes measured in this study is one in which there is emotional warmth and affection and in which young

people are free from an over-protective environment.

Before we start blaming parents, lets remember that for many years what was said and modelled to parents was that the church, the pastor and the school was the fount of all knowledge and our spoken/unspoken mantra has been to give us your children and we will transform them into model spiritual citizens. It is now clear that this has not worked. Sorry parents, we should have known better.

Donald Whitney says "Having your family in a Christ-exalting, gospel-centered, Bible-teaching local church is crucial to Christian parenting. But it is not enough for conveying to your family all you want to teach them about God and your beliefs. Moreover, it is unlikely that exposure to the church once or twice a week will impress your children enough with the greatness and glory of God that they will want to pursue him once they leave your home." (*Family Worship*, 2016)





“We can’t out-teach what you teach at home. We’re not that good.” (David Frazee quoted in Kara Powell, The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family, 2014)

Kurt Brunner and Steve Stroope in, *It Starts and Home*, (2010), say that, “left to do the entire job by itself, a church can only impart enough faith to inoculate kids against taking it seriously”.

This research is sobering but emphasizes that incarnation (faith lived out at home) trumps proclamation (preaching and programs at church) every time.

Faith really does begin, is nurtured and strengthened around the family altar.



MY STORY

Many ask me why are you a pastor? Why have you been an Adventist Christian all your life? All I can say is that I had faithful parents who every morning after breakfast cleared the table, gathered the six children around that table and opened The Word. Dad would read from the large family Bible that had pride of place in our lounge room. Mum would read from the Daily Devotional book and we would learn our memory gems.

Every evening Mum would read to us from Uncle Arthur's Bible Story series and would go over our weekly lesson from the Sabbath School lesson pamphlets. She would then tuck us into bed and would pray with each of her children a prayer that went something like this. "Please help Daron to realise that he is not just on earth for himself and his own glory but for your purpose and your glory and a life of service to others." I would hear her pray that prayer for my brothers as well.

On our lounge room and passage way walls were pictures of Jesus with the children and Jesus knocking on a door. There was a mirror on the wall with frosted painting that to me looked like God hovering over His Church. As I looked at these pictures I knew that Jesus was important to our home and

that He loved children like me. Above our door was a maroon placard with silver writing on it with the following words. 'Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation'. Despite the imperfection, issues, stresses and busyness that every family has, I knew that my family stood for Jesus because we sat with Him every morning and evening and ate our meals with Him. I knew that when I went in and when I went out that Christ was the head of my house and my life. These things (faith in the home) had a profound impact on me. Now my story is much more than that. I could tell you about the mentors and church/youth programs that strengthened my faith but it was the 'hand that rocked the cradle that ignited and fanned the flames of faith.' My parents incarnated Jesus to me and when I saw Him, I followed Him.

RAISING UP YOUR FAMILY ALTAR

The question is, what moment, time and place can you set aside to call your family to worship? Where is the moment where you allow the human and divine to interact in a special and meaningful way? Is there a place or a time in your family's routines that is most convenient for this to happen? The biggest thing is to start simple and remember anything you do at home to point the hearts of your family to God is far more powerful than anything preached from the pulpit.

Deuteronomy 4:6-9 says,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your

heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (NIV, Zondervan, 2011)

God wants to work for you and with you in the routine and at time mundane rituals of our 24/7 living. This is the crucible where faith is formed.



SOME TIPS

Go ahead! These simple steps will have a huge impact on the faith of your family that will rebound through to eternity.

- Keep it simple/start simple. It could be prayer before meals or a short time of sharing a bible text or two in the morning. Reading, praying and singing are good elements of family worship to keep in mind.
- Keep it short and punchy (the last thing we want to do is bore our children).
- Make it age appropriate.
- Place a picture or two on your wall of Jesus with the children or similar. Or poems and verses such as the “Christ is the Head of this House” poster.
- Purchase a good daily devotional book that is relevant to your family.
- Eat regular meals together around the family table. Children are less likely to become involved in at risk activities, are more likely to do better at school and to adopt the values of the family just by doing this simple thing.
- Maybe there is a space at the table or somewhere else in the house that can be set up as a family worship type of place. A large family Bible, *Table Talk* cards, pictures, flowers; devotional books, music, musical instruments and other items of sacred significance can be placed at this spot. This gives your children a sense of the sacred and the awe and wonder of God right in their home.
- Read a good Christian novel or church history book together as a family or watch an electronic series together and discuss.
- For busy people the family Altar could be worship in the car on the way to school or as you are tucking your children in at night. The important thing is that the children realise that God is an integral part of the home.



WHAT CAN FAMILIES DO?

Love God. Let your children catch you doing so — children are more likely to adopt the faith of their parents.

1. Practice Spiritual Disciplines/Rituals around Sabbath and daily routines.
2. Call your family to prayer and worship. Buy a daily devotional that is relevant for your family.
3. Set up your family Altar.
4. Let your children see how God works for you in the good times and tough times.
5. Be involved in church.
6. Capture the daily “God Moments.” Identify answers to prayer, identify when God showed up during your families day.

5 QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS/CARE GIVERS

1. What moment/time in my family's busy schedule can I claim for God?

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2. Where in my house can I raise a family altar to the Lord? What will that look like?

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3. When my children/grandchildren look at my marriage/relationship what do they see?

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4. When my children/grandchildren look at my 24/7 living what do they see?

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5. What extra do I need to do to further raise up my family altar?

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Remember to start simple, be intentional and then watch what God does with your marriage, family and your 24/7 living.



WHAT CAN CHURCHES DO?

EQUIP PARENTS

1. Run Parenting/Discipleship classes or weekends.
2. Make sure all of your programs are family friendly.
3. Help parents apply the gospel to their everyday lives.
4. Include and welcome parents into your children's programs.
5. Provide family altar resources for families. Pictures, discussion starters, devotional books and family Bibles.

5 QUESTIONS FOR CHURCHES/BOARDS

1. How does the research discussed in this booklet impact the way we do church and the way we do life?

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2. How can we best equip parents to be the best models of faith that they can be in their homes?

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3. What ideas can we put in place to make sure that our sermons and worship do not just stay at church but permeate the fabric of our families 24/7 living?

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4. What can we do to help strengthen the homes of the parents in our congregation?

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5. What spiritual disciplines/rituals do we want to see parents model in their homes and how will we help them to do that?

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CONCLUSION

Malachi 4: 5-6 says,

“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” (NIV, Zondervan, 2011)

Now more than ever we need hearts to be turned. Hearts of the parents to each other.

Hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents and most of all the hearts of the family turned to the cross and to the face of Jesus full of love, grace and salvation.

Let every husband, let every wife, let every Christian be challenged by these words: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)

Faith begins at home....



About the Author

Pr Daron Pratt is the Family and Children's Ministries director for the North New South Wales Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia. He is married to Lisa and has two children; Andrew and Maddison. Daron is passionate about the importance of bringing Churches and homes together with a strategic focus and, with intentionality, raise our children to know and love the Lord.



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