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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

A Line of Matriarchs: Findings from the Three Generations Project

Ron Bruner and Dudley Chancey

Abstract: Although shared practices are central to religious socialization, relationships empower such sharing. Familial relationships are the most durable and effective of such relationships, even when family form varies. Though many ethnic and faith groups tend to emphasize patriarchal leadership within congregations and families, in fact, matriarchs serve as the spiritual anchors for succeeding generations in a surprising number of three (and more) generation families. Data supporting this assertion are a part of the results of the Three Generations Project, a study of faith families within Churches of Christ.

Introduction

Within most Christian faith groups, communities interpret their sacred texts, traditions, and context to produce a set of norms for their community. Such norms include the appropriate persons and means to socialize the next generation in matters of faith. Until recent history, the norm for most families and congregations within conservative Protestant groups has entailed the assumption of patriarchal leadership in the congregation and in the family. Despite the establishment of such norms, there has been little evaluation or understanding of what has actually worked when families sustainably share their faith across generations. In the case of patriarchal leadership, a particular doctrinal and traditional understanding of faith has guided a prescribed choice of faith-sharing practices. This project does not seek to undertake the theological or philosophical task of questioning tradition, but rather to ascertain from actual family practice the extent to which public rhetoric (espoused theology) connects with private reality (operant theology).¹

¹ The ARCS project describes four theological voices: operant, espoused, normative, and formal. The operant voice is theology at the core of a religious practice. A community's beliefs are verbalized in the espoused voice. Using Scripture or tradition to shape theology is normative. Academic theologians use the formal voice. Helen Cameron,

This study shows that, in Churches of Christ, the ability of families with sequential matriarchs to maintain a steady connection to a single faith group for a number of generations suggests that spiritual matriarchies are at least as effective in espousing healthy faith in the long term as patriarchies. To establish this thesis, this work will first describe how families within this tradition have constructed roles and negotiated tasks in ways that emerge more from practice than formal theology. In many cases, mothers have tended to handle certain spiritual roles and tasks in the family because of time commitments and childcare responsibilities. This tendency has shifted in the most recent generation as marital partners have newly negotiated solutions.² Thus, in this area, matriarchy has been an operative response to perceived needs.

Secondly, matriarchy is an operant structural response to the need for intergenerational familial spiritual leadership. This paper will present evidence that faith practices often follow maternal bloodlines instead of paternal. Narrational evidence will also show that women often make key choices whether to stand firm within their faith group or to yield previously held ground to maintain family solidarity and continuity. Such matriarchy takes theological stands. Sometimes, operant conservative positions maintain a connection with the espoused mainstream theology of the faith group. At other times, matriarchs are flexibly progressive to adjust the boundaries of the group to retain younger generations with beliefs that are unorthodox, but not central, to the identity of the faith community.

In this study, we define a matriarch as a woman (usually older) who is the head of a family or exercises significant power within a family. A patriarch is a man (usually older) who is the head of a family or exercises significant power within a family. In differing cultures, either or both can be normative. In this work, we use the terms descriptively without any pejorative intent, while recognizing the term patriarchy as deeply problematic because of its presumption of fixed gender roles, including male leadership and female submission, and too-frequent abuse of power.

The Context

This study focuses on families who are members of a *cappella* Churches of Christ, one of three strands of the Stone-Campbell Restoration

Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

² For a broader discussion of the shift in spiritual roles in families, see Penny Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Moment (hereinafter, SCM): the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Churches of Christ, Non-instrumental. With roots in Scotland and Ireland,³ this movement grew rapidly in the United States in the early 19th century. Since the members of the non-instrumental Churches of Christ have prided themselves in being called “a people of the book,” their efforts to connect all aspects of belief and life to the Scriptures have significantly shaped the theology of the movement. Essentially orthodox in many regards, the differences that came to define this group can largely be found in its ecclesiology, soteriology, and liturgy.

Beliefs and practices connected with gender have shifted over the years. In the early 1800s, churches associated with the New England “Christian” movement led by James O’Kelly (1735-1826) and Elias Smith (1769-1846) supported the efforts of women evangelists. Although they encountered resistance in some communities, women like Nancy Cram, Abigail Roberts, Clarissa Danforth, and Nancy Towle served for decades as itinerant preachers.⁴ Western American churches did not so readily receive women in their pulpits. In the last half of the 19th century, thought leaders in the Churches of Christ (exemplified by David Lipscomb) strongly advanced the ideas of the “cult of true womanhood.”⁵ As Fundamentalist groups arose at the turn of the 20th century, Churches of Christ tended to adopt beliefs more in line with their thought and their focus on literal readings of certain Pauline texts⁶ than with the Disciples of Christ, whose ministers and scholars more rapidly adopted biblical critical scholarship. Though neither the label fundamentalist nor evangelical fits the Churches of Christ, there have been similarities among those groups in their stances toward gender-defined roles.⁷ Investigators have examined the importance of parenting roles within this faith group since the 1990s. The work of Lewis, Carley, and Tippens, for example, established quantitatively that—

³ Lynn McMillon, “Alexander Campbell’s Early Exposure to Scottish Restorationism: 1808-1809,” *Restoration Quarterly* 30 2-3 (1988), 105-110.

⁴ C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1993), 22-31. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 78-79.

⁵ Allen, 130.

⁶ Kathy Pulley, “Women in Ministry: Churches of Christ,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 779-780.

⁷ For a broader history of gender issues and fundamentalism in the United States, see Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender: 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

in the Churches of Christ—parents who spent more time with their children, used a substantial amount of that time to talk about faith, and who were actively faithful themselves were much more likely to have children who remained faithful.⁸ Our questions included, “What does parental and grandparental faithfulness look like?” “What importance does intergenerational faith have across three or more generations?” Our findings follow.

Methodology

This project identifies common intergenerational factors in faith sharing within a particular conservative Protestant faith fellowship, the Churches of Christ, by conversing with families that have remained in that fellowship for three or more generations.⁹ Researchers use qualitative research methods to develop a grounded understanding¹⁰ of how faith-resilient families have adapted to changing circumstances and significant life stressors from generation to generation. These conversations with purposefully selected families¹¹ have produced insights into how such families have grown together in faith. The approach taken in this study required that participants in all three generations: (1) were willing to participate in this study, (2) were adults with the liberty to make choices about where and whether to pursue their faith, and (3) had adequate possession of their faculties of recall and communication.

This qualitative study produces a complex perspective of the faith practices used by respondent families by utilizing a triangulation of methods, in this case, data triangulation.¹² The three data sources in this study are documents, questionnaires, and interviews. The researchers evaluate two historical documents produced by the respondent families: (1) an annal of the family’s spiritual life and (2) a genogram.¹³ Among other

⁸ David K. Lewis, Carley H. Dodd, and Darryl L. Tippens, *The Gospel According to Generation X: The Culture of Adolescent Faith* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1995), 101-110.

⁹ This study was reviewed and approved by the University Research Board at Oklahoma Christian University on February 6, 2012.

¹⁰ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 1-22.

¹¹ Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 169-186.

¹² Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 172-181.

¹³ Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson, *Genograms in Family Assessment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

facts, the annals record which congregations in what physical locations respondents have attended, as well as significant community roles, spiritual events, and mentoring relationships that coincided with those locations.

The questionnaires are a battery of validated measures producing information about respondent attachments to God, parenting bonding, and orthodoxy of doctrine. The measures used in this study are the Attachment to God Index,¹⁴ the Christian Orthodoxy Scale,¹⁵ the Multidimensional Quest Orientation Scale,¹⁶ the Parental Bonding Instrument,¹⁷ and the Religious Emphasis Scale.¹⁸ These instruments also provide quantitative data to compare to qualitative understandings formed by this study.

Central to the project are private, semi-structured interviews conducted with at least one member of each of the three generations of faith within the family, generation one being the eldest and generation three being the youngest. Twenty-five three-generation families were part of this study. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for later coding. The investigators designed questions for these semi-structured interviews that evoked narratives of the respondents' experience of their spiritual formation within their family.

Results and Analysis

As various types of data have emerged from each of the generations, the investigators have engaged the data to construct, test, and correct tentative findings and theories. This paper presents partial findings of this study.¹⁹ Not only are a surprising number of matriarchs present in the

¹⁴ Richard Beck and Angie McDonald, "Attachment to God: The Attachment to God Inventory, Tests or Working Model Correspondence, and an Exploration of Faith Group Differences," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32 2 (2004); 92-103.

¹⁵ J. Timothy Fullerton and Bruce Hunsberger, "A Unidimensional Measure of Christian Orthodoxy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 4 (1982); 317-326.

¹⁶ Richard Beck and Ryan Jessup, "The Multidimensional Nature of Quest Motivation," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32 4 (2004); 283-294.

¹⁷ Gordon Parker, Hilary Tupling, and L. B. Brown, "A Parental Bonding Instrument," *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 52 1 (1979); 1-10.

¹⁸ Bob Altemeyer, *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988). Bruce Hunsberger, "Religious Emphasis Scale," review in *Measures of Religiosity*, eds. Peter C. Hill and Ralph W. Hood, Jr. (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1999), 208-210.

¹⁹ Other results of this study have been published in Ron Bruner and Dudley Chancey, "Grief and Spiritual Coping: The Practices of Three Generations of Faith," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* 7 1 (2021): 1-24.

group of families comprising the sample, but in many cases, these matriarchs form a chain that spans multiple generations (up to five generations). Such a line of matriarchs may function in various family types and often keep their role even when strong male leaders (including deacons, elders, or ministers) emerge within, or marry into, the family.

In Churches of Christ, certain spiritual practices are formative in socializing children as members of this faith group. Data emerging from this study show that prayer, Bible study, attending worship, and living moral lives are, in the opinion of the respondents, the central spiritual practices for families within this faith group. One generation one respondent spoke of her mother's moral example in this way: "I think observing her life, her integrity, her honesty, always trying to do the right thing, serving other people, I think made a strong impression on me. I wanted to be like that. So, in her quiet way—not much verbal discussion with us about her faith—but it was more my observation of her demonstration of her faith."²⁰ Parents are the exemplars for children in the practice of these disciplines, yet such modeling tends to be gendered.

In considering the spiritual discipline of prayer, respondents recall two recurring prayer times prominent in their lives as children: mealtime and bedtime. Among the respondents in this study, fathers are almost universally the parents who lead prayer at the dinner table. When asked about their first memories of prayer, respondents would typically recall memories as did this generation two mother about her generation one matriarch:

R: It would have to be at mealtime and when we went to bed at night. Mother would tuck me in and say prayers. That's the earliest I remember.

Q: Who typically did the praying at mealtime?

R: My dad.²¹

In a very similar way, generation three of the same family recalls being parented by her generation two mother:

²⁰ F7G1P1F, interview. Hereinafter, we refer to the respondents by their code number. Any names or locations in the comments have been changed to protect the privacy of the families involved. The code numbers empowered the researchers to identify the generation, gender, and number of each respondent without using their name.

²¹ F19G2P1F, interview. See also F25G2P1F, interview.

- Q: What are the earliest memories you have of prayer in your family?
- R: Um, I think mine would be sitting around the table at dinner, with my dad. My dad was always the one that led the prayer, and we did it at every meal. That's what I remember the earliest.
- Q: What are other times of family prayer that you remember?
- R: My mom used to tuck me in at bedtime and said prayer. It didn't happen every night, but I remember very vaguely of her reading a story to me and saying a prayer before I went to bed.²²

Ultimately, this generation three mother describes her prayer practice with the fourth generation: "I read her Bible every night to her. After we read the Bible, we talk about the story that we just read again. We always end with praying for our family and our friends. At the dinner table, we say the same prayer every night, and she's almost saying it on her own now."²³

Other respondents echoed that it was usually the mother who handled bedtime prayers, "Praying with my mom at bedtime with my mom when I was a little girl and praying at the dinner table."²⁴ When fathers are present but do not lead the prayer, they are usually the one who decides who does lead the prayer, whether by naming the leader, asking for volunteers, or taking turns.²⁵ "At dinner time—we would take turns as to who would pray. But my mom never prayed. It was always me, or my brothers, or my dad who prayed."²⁶

Mothers may also teach their children how to pray, yet they typically do so as a part of bedtime prayers. One generation two mother recalls, "My earliest memories of prayer are of my mother, praying with me at bedtime. At first, she read a prayer out of a children's book, but as time went on, I began to say my own prayers."²⁷ Her son received his understanding of prayer from her in a similar way: "As far back as I can remember, my mom would sit down with my brother and I and read us a story out of the

²² F19G3P1F, interview. See also F22G2P1M, interview.

²³ F19G3P1F, interview.

²⁴ F15G2P1F, interview.

²⁵ F22G3P1M, interview.

²⁶ F8G3P1F, interview.

²⁷ F10G2P1F, interview.

Children's Story Bible, then after that, we would pray together."²⁸ A generation one woman whose father was not converted until later in her life noted that prayers happened at "bedtime mainly because my dad was never home at mealtime. He worked different hours, so we ate before he got home and were in bed before he got home."²⁹ Sometimes this learning process happened without mothers ever actually having prayed in front of their children. As a matter of fact, some generation two and generation three respondents observed that they had never heard their mothers pray, even though they were fully aware that this was her regular practice.

Although fathers may sometimes be a part of bedtime spiritual practices, including Bible reading, storytime, and prayer, such bedtime activities are more usually led by mothers. When fathers did lead such bedtime devotionals, the results were often memorable.

Prayer practices, though, are changing over time for various reasons: attitudes in the church, individual attitudes, and personal temperament, for example. Consider this exchange with a generation three parent teaching her daughter to pray:

R: At the dinner table, we say the same prayer every night, and she's almost saying it on her own now. We want to teach her to be open about praying because, [with] me growing up, it wasn't like that.

Q: What do you mean by that?

R: My dad was always the one that said the prayer, so I was never in a position that I had to. And, you know, when I got married, Matt was in a family where he grew up that his mom said the prayer a lot, and when we would pray, he would ask me to pray, and I wouldn't do it. I feel like prayer is a very personal thing to me. I struggle to pray in front of people because I don't want to sound dumb. I don't want to sound like I don't know what I'm talking about. I want to teach Lauren that it is okay to pray out loud. That it is okay to pray in front of other people because I was scared about doing it. One year we had Small Groups, and after Bible Study, we did a big chain prayer, and every night, I would get nervous and get sick to my stomach

²⁸ F10G3P1F, interview.

²⁹ F19G1P1F, interview.

because I don't know how. I still struggle with how to pray. Do I just talk like he's there? Do I have to get formal? I want Lauren and Hanna to feel like it's okay to pray openly and not be scared to do it.

Q: Do you feel like your dad being the only one that prayed has hindered you from being open about praying? Looking back, how do you feel about that? What are your thoughts on that?

R: I'm not. I'm a shy person when it comes to being in front of people. So even if I had the opportunity to do it more, I don't know if I would do it. I'm just a private person. Very quiet. I really struggle with when I'm on the spot on how to say things, how to word things. And so, I tend to ramble when I do get nervous, so I don't know if it would have changed anything.

Q: Within the family?

R: Within the family, yeah, it definitely would have changed me. It would have changed my views on it. It would have helped me change my views on it more, but I don't think that's just the type of person I am. A very private person. I don't want Lauren to feel that way. The Church of Christ is different now than it used to be. It's a lot more open. People are praying openly now. It's not so much that the men have to lead all of the prayers in the Bible classes. I want her to feel comfortable doing that when she's in the youth group.³⁰

The faith of fathers was often more seen than heard. "We were taught that praying was important, but we just prayed more independently. Dad was never comfortable with leading a public prayer of any kind."³¹ "We had some family devotionals. My mom was over those, and she taught us three girls. We looked forward to that time and would do some studying to get ready for those. Dad was not vocal about his faith. When it came to that, he was a man of action rather than words."³²

³⁰ F19G3P1F, interview.

³¹ F1G2P1F, interview.

³² F1G2P1F, interview.

One interesting definition of roles comes from a dialogue about metaphors:

Q: What is the metaphor that best describes the church? Explain.

A: Bride of Christ? To pull on one that's already been used.

Q: Well, it's very biblical, is it not?

A: Yes, it is. And I think, being a bride myself, I may understand that a little bit better now. Sometimes the church gets it right, and sometimes the church doesn't get it right. But God still loves us, and He's the head, and He's trying to direct us spiritually. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But it's the one that presents faith to the rest of the world. I mean, look at our marriage, Bart's at work, and I'm the one that most people see in our family. I'm the one that takes Sarah to places, that brings food to those that are sick or whatever. I represent our marriage to other people. I think that's what the church does. It represents the faith to others. That God is still in it.³³

As children begin to form their views of God, they may identify with the views of the same gender parent; "I think I see God very similarly to the way my mother does. I think my dad being male probably has a little different look,"³⁴ observes a generation two daughter about generation one mother. Sometimes, though, offspring choose the view of the parent that makes sense to them, not necessarily the view of the same-gender parent. This generation three son said,

I think I have a closer relationship with God than my father does. But I think my mother and I have very similar views on God. The beauty of that similarity is that she never pushed that on me. Once I began to question some things, she

³³ F1G3P1F, interview. Gendered language for God is rendered as it was spoken. As with many faith groups, patriarchy has shaped many habits. Most members of Churches of Christ would see no issue with this.

³⁴ F11G2P1F, interview.

revealed similar sentiments, and we have good discussions about what God is like and what he desires from us.³⁵

Gender Roles

Some generations still have a persistent view of the male as the leader and as the parent with the more important career. One generation one mother remarked about her generation two daughter,

Well, I think the training Candace had in the home, when you marry, your husband is your number one focus, except God, of course; whatever is required, that is what you do. It was her job to accept it—that her husband was a serviceman and would take her all over the world—and I had to accept it. She was gone for ten years to Germany, and that’s the way it is. You just trust that what they have learned at home will carry them through, and you just accept the normal things that happen in life and go on.³⁶

Although many remembered their mothers as Bible class teachers, others took up less public, yet important roles in the church: “My mother wasn’t as much a teacher, but she did things for those who were ill, for funerals and for the nursery in particular, she worked in it.”³⁷

There have been those with more of a partnership view, even among the first generation in this study. A generation one widower speaks about such a relationship:

My wife was her own person in the Lord, and I was, too. I like that very much because she was not a clingy vine; she was her own person. She was a born teacher and a music major in college in piano. She was very much a partner in our family with everything we did spiritually. We had a lot in common that way. So, when I had lost her, her faith was strong, and so I knew exactly what she would do if I had died: she’d [have] gone on, and she would have continued to do what she could do physically.³⁸

³⁵ F10G3P1M, interview.

³⁶ F7G1P1F, interview.

³⁷ F22G1P1F, interview.

³⁸ F20G1P1M, interview.

Generation three shows signs of a changing perspective on the relative roles of men and women in the church. One generation three father expressed his hopes for the future church,

I think everyone would understand they're required, and their obligation to give not only monetarily but also used their gifts God has imparted to them. I'd hope my kids were using their gifts and that my daughter's gifts wouldn't just be restricted to children's worship. I think our women are underutilized in the church. I would hope my daughter would have something to offer the church.³⁹

Another generation three father engaged the researcher in a conversation about women and leadership:

R: I would love to see men and women treated a bit more equally. And I think they are treated equally in some instances, but it just seems like no one's willing to; we don't want to step on anyone's toes.

Q: So what would that look like?

A: A woman's prayer is just as good as a man's prayer. If a woman can write a church book song, why can't she lead a prayer right in front of the congregation? Logically it didn't make much sense to me. I understand that many of the scriptures we go off mainly are Paul's instructions to Timothy, but that was right for those people and the place. I mean, he was, he was, wasn't Timothy going to the Greeks, wasn't he preaching to the Greeks, isn't that right?

Q: He was mainly speaking, yes, to Gentiles.

A: Gentiles, and so. If I remember my Greek philosophy, didn't they assume that to think you had to have a brain and usually thought of men as better thinkers than women? All the great Greek philosophers are men. They didn't have a lot of respect for women to begin with. Paul told Timothy to be circumcised even though he didn't need to be, it was all about keeping

³⁹ F7G3P1M, interview.

appearances. . . . And if my generation and my grandchildren's generation are not ready for equal leadership and gender neutrality, so be it. Because the worst thing we could do is drive people away. But at the same time, you're driving people away to begin with by not allowing women.⁴⁰

Some women, though comfortable with some changes in roles, have limits.⁴¹ A dialogue with a generation three mother gives one common opinion:

Q: Do you think God had more planned for women?

R: Yeah, I do. I think if I went to a church and saw a female preaching, I would be very uncomfortable with that. Or a woman being part of the Communion. I grew up in a church where women couldn't teach past a certain grade level. At my church now we have a female children's minister. I think that's okay because females tend to be more of a better organizer. More caring and creative in that aspect. I feel like there can be more roles for us rather than just teaching below third grade. . . . I mentioned a little bit more of women's roles. Not so much women in the pulpit or serving communion but more of . . . I don't know what we could do more of but just see more of children's ministers as women. I really don't know. I don't see a whole lot of change as I've gotten older, so I don't really know what we could do. Maybe have more women in, not a deacon-like role, but in organizations that the church does, put women in charge of those organizations. Shut-ins and things like that. I hope I see a little bit of change like that, but I pretty much hope it stays the same. I don't want it to change a whole lot.⁴²

⁴⁰ F14G3P1M, interview.

⁴¹ Other studies conducted within the Churches of Christ have also revealed a similar ambivalence of some women's attitudes toward spiritual leadership; Shannon Clarkson Rains, Jennifer M. Dabbs, and Kaley D. Ihfe, "Oneness in Christ: A Qualitative Study of Women's Initial Experiences Leading in Public Worship at Broadway Church of Christ," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* 7 1 (2021); 25-44.

⁴² F19G3P1F, interview.

Fathers sometimes served as models and figures of accountability:

“Work was another thing that they did, that’s why it was instilled so much in me . . . working 60 hours a week. My dad would do the same. He would get up; he would purposefully not schedule things on Sundays; he wouldn’t let us play sports that involved Wednesday night sports if it could be avoided. Things like that. Those are all pretty big deals, especially when you get into high school.”⁴³

Thus, work and school are important, but not as important as spiritual matters. Sometimes, though, mothers bring accountability to the spiritual part of life. One generation one respondent recalls the influence of her mother:

“I remember when I quit going to church there for a while when my children were young, my mother—when she found [out] about it—she said ‘Nancy, now you know what you’re supposed to do.’ She didn’t fuss at me or anything; she just said, well, you know.”⁴⁴

And her generation two daughter recalls her consistent influence:

“My mother took the four of us to church alone. I’m sure, often didn’t get anything out of the lessons, but she felt it was important for us to be at church. She lived it, she didn’t just drag us to church; she tried to be what God wanted her to be.”⁴⁵

In another family, a daughter recalls her mother’s influence, even in the face of her father’s indifference. “My mother was very strong even though my father didn’t go to church, she always got us kids to church. So, I always really appreciated that.”⁴⁶

⁴³ F22G3P1M, interview.

⁴⁴ F11G1P1F, interview.

⁴⁵ F11G2P1F, interview.

⁴⁶ F15G1P1F, interview.

Generational Influence on Conversion

“My grandfather was killed in a car accident, and my father thought the world and all about him. And he knew that my grandfather had wanted him to become a Christian, but he had never submitted to that. And so, that is what spurred my father to become a Christian, being baptized.” In fact, this role model influenced an entire family: “So, we had a meeting with the family, and my two older brothers and I and my father were all baptized at the same time.”⁴⁷ In other families, though, it was the mother who had this kind of influence:

The church was a very small group of people. Most of them [had moved] from Tennessee and the Oklahoma area. Church was a place where you attended all day on Sunday; it was at home, and the church was small in this little Colorado town, so my mother was probably the fountainhead of faith in the family at first. Her mother had been reached out to by one of the preachers. The uncle had owned a grocery store in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he started a church in the store, and my mother was a recipient of faith through her. Times were very hard, but the church was very close, and we spent the day together.⁴⁸

Do mature fathers seek to exert more of an influence on grown children as faith becomes more prominent in their own lives? One generation two parent notes,

My youngest daughter and me have been reading the Bible through the two years together but separate. We’re doing it at our own pace, but we discuss a lot of the chapters and the books as we’ve gone through them. Informal type, not as much formal, but that keeps ya . . . your kids can humble you so much when you see them growing.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ F15G1P1F, interview.

⁴⁸ F20G1P1M, interview.

⁴⁹ F18G2P1M, interview.

With single-parent families (or effectively single-parent families), the influence of the present parent would seem to be critical. The interview with a generation three daughter confirms this:

Q: What are the most important things your parents did to help shape your faith?

R: Interestingly enough, I would say that my mom . . . I don't know what I'm trying to say. Since my dad was not in the picture [dad had divorced mom], she always taught me from an early age that it didn't matter that you didn't have an earthly father because you always have a heavenly Father. So, I think that being engraved into my mind at a young age has really shaped my spiritual beliefs today. And just her, mainly her persistence in making sure that I was always, you know, getting up and going to church, going to all the youth group activities, and keeping involved and wanting me to go to a Christian college. The conversations that we had together were always; everything was always centered around God⁵⁰

In conversations with these three-generation families, matriarchs—whether generation one or generation three—had an abiding influence over the spiritual lives of their progeny. This is coherent with the work of Bengston, Putney, and Harris, who arrive at a similar conclusion.⁵¹ It is also at odds with quantitative data that have demonstrated the key role that fathers play. In those cases, though, children may not have been as often part of a family with such intergenerational loyalty to the same tradition.

Implications

This study sought to answer at least three questions. The first question was, “What does parental and grandparental faithfulness look like?” This work has shown that respondents have identified prayer, Bible study, attending worship, and living moral lives as the central spiritual practices for families within this faith group. The presence of parents at

⁵⁰ F25G3P1F, interview.

⁵¹ Vern L. Bengston, with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 116-117.

mealtimes and bedtimes is particularly formative for children and frequently becomes the context for deeper questions and conversations. Because of familial roles and commitments, mothers have most often been the available parents for these exchanges, although there are signs of changes in the most recent generations. As rich and important as these intergenerational conversations are, most often, a mother's offspring find themselves convicted of the importance of belief by "her demonstration of her faith."⁵²

"What importance does intergenerational faith have across three or more generations?" Although quantitative studies show that grandparents have a lesser effect on the faith of their grandchildren than do the parents,⁵³ the work of a first-generation grandparent in an intergenerational alliance with a second-generation parent may help that parent remain faithful. Such alliances have indirect but powerful consequences for the third generation.⁵⁴ Our study shows that a faithful matriarch or patriarch can be a stabilizing force during loss and stress for the resilience of families and the individuals within those families.⁵⁵ Multigenerational faith families do not necessarily have fewer trials. They are better equipped, though, to deal with them.

The ability of these families with sequential matriarchs to maintain a steady connection to a single faith group for several generations suggests that spiritual matriarchies are at least as, if not more effective in espousing healthy faith in the long term as patriarchies. Although matriarchs are as capable of abuses of power as patriarchs, especially as self-appointed gatekeepers of the faith, more often matriarchs prefer relational power over hierarchical. These spiritual matriarchs exercise the power of connection, not compulsion. The presence of these matriarchies implies that, within this faith fellowship, espoused and normative understandings of sacred texts and spiritual practices require re-examination. There is clear evidence in this study of shifting attitudes about the roles of men and women in the

⁵² F7G1P1F, interview.

⁵³ Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 261.

⁵⁴ These "intergenerational alliances" can be helpful in healthy families and less so in families experiencing intragenerational conflict. Wesley R. Burr, Loren D. Marks, and Randal D. Day, *Sacred Matters: Religion and Spirituality in Families* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 177-178.

⁵⁵ See Bruner and Chancey, "Grief and Spiritual Coping."

family, and in the practices of new generations of parents.⁵⁶ Future studies of these shifts and the ways they represent the adaptation of the church to its ever-changing context are likely to be fruitful.

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⁵⁶ Although this shift may have been emerging for some time, it has been more operant and less publicly espoused in some faith groups. W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).