



Milestones as a Means to Empower and Equip Lives of Faith

Debbie Streicher

A milestone is an action or event marking a significant change or stage in development. Birthdays, anniversaries, new homes, new jobs, getting a driver's license, learning to ride a bike, and graduating from high school or college are all examples of times of significant change in our lives. But how many of the events listed are used as opportunities to help empower and equip children, youth, and adults with the ability to grow in their faith? Empowerment leads to spiritual growth and engagement in a faith journey.

Debbie Streicher is a member of the Milestones Ministry Team serving as a writer, developer, and coach. She also serves as President of the Christian Education Network of the ELCA. Over the past 25 years, Debbie has served in the role of volunteer and on staff for all aspects of Christian education in a congregation. She has facilitated, overseen, organized, and developed faith formation programs from infants through adults. She worked intricately with Faith Inkubators resource development and has consulted and led events for congregations using these materials for over 15 years. Debbie has held volunteer leadership roles in education and evangelism at synod and national levels for 12+ years. Her vision is to involve all ages in faith formation, strengthen family relationships through spiritual growth, and empower God-given gifts to do ministry.

BC Crothers begins her book, *Church-Filling Techniques for Building Community*, with a letter to church leadership:

*Dear Minister,
You are not alone in feeling despair as you look out on to the near-empty pews. You are not alone in your questioning of people's faith, commitment, love of God and church in today's world. You are not alone when seeking ways to create change, stimulate parish growth; wondering if your efforts would bear fruit, and in your darkest moments ask, "Why bother?" (3)*

She goes on to write that the answer is one small step at a time as the only way to effect change. Her suggestions for growing community include times to gather for special events such as birthdays, memory of loved ones, memory of animals, family day, etc. These events can be defined as milestones in the lives of those in the congregation. Providing an opportunity to add the element of faith through prayer and blessing enriches lives and empowers all ages to grow in their faith life.

Each time an event happens, the norm becomes the building of relationships, praying for one another and blessing one another. One step at a time, one milestone event at a time grows faith lives. Adding faith to everyday events becomes the norm. This does not happen overnight or without continued support, encouragement, and follow-up from leadership.

Milestone moments can be embraced as a time to empower all ages in both the congregation and in the home. The end result enables and equips us to serve others through our faith in the greater world. Connecting with God during significant events in our lives through relationships, prayer, and blessing forms a strong faith foundation. Ultimately faith talk becomes a way of life and is included in everyday happenings as well as times of significant change. Lifelong faith formation is

realized through continued opportunities and invitations to celebrate milestones in our lives.

In *For Everything a Season, 75 Blessings for Life's Milestones*, Mary Nilsen writes,

We have become increasingly aware of many people of faith who yearn for some sense of the sacred in the midst of very hectic lives. However, they simply do not know what to do or how to do it. This book is one response to the question, "How can I make both the ordinary and the special events of my life and lives of those I care about more intentionally sacred?"

Our hope and prayer is that this tool will help you discover the profound joy and hope in this God who can bring calm in the midst of chaos, turn our mourning into dancing, and transform our everyday interactions in time and place into holy moments of timeless grace. (vii)

For Everything a Season is now in its third edition. It is a tool to help empower families in the home to "do ministry" and bring the element of faith, the sacred, as Mary writes to both the good and the bad in everyday, ordinary events in our lives. There are 75 blessings for life's milestones in this book that can be given to parents, grandparents, and others for all different seasons of their lives. Placing this book in the hands of parents, grandparents, and other adults is a first step in empowering in the home.

On the next page is sample from *For Everything a Season, 75 Blessings for Life's Milestones*.

Blessing for Those Leaving Home

PREPARATION This blessing is intended to be used when children become young adults and move out of the family home heading for college, the military, jobs . . . Life changes dramatically for the person leaving, but also for those remaining at home. This blessing gives all present a chance to express their thoughts and feelings about this change.

Set a begging bowl* on a table.

WELCOME

*For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven.*

Welcome to this time of saying good-bye as one member leaves the family nest.

PRAYER

Thank you, God,
for the years of
learning and growing, of
loving and giving, we have
had together. We ask your
grace upon (name) who is leaving and
on those who remain behind. Give us all we need as we move
into a new stage of life, separated by space, but bound together
in love. Amen

BIBLE TEXT

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from
your presence? . . . If I take the wings of the morning and
settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand
shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

Psalm 139:7, 9-10

REFLECTION

The image of God's hand leading us wherever we go, whether together or apart, is a comforting one. Have all present finish these sentences:

When I look ahead, I feel saddest about . . .

I feel most excited about . . .

My prayer for the future is . . .

During the days and weeks ahead, what I need from you
who love me is . . .

RITUAL ACTION

Pass the begging bowl from person to person, asking each person to hold it up and say, Ever-present God, please lead me and give me all I need in the days ahead.

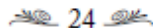
SONG

Place your hands on the person leaving and sing or say,
As You Go on Your Way, (p. 84).

*For more information see the Introduction.

BLESSING

May the hand of God hold us fast, keeping us safe from all danger. Amen



In Vibrant Faith in the Congregation David Anderson lists five principles for living and passing on faith:

- ◆ Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships—often in our own homes.
- ◆ The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and ministry of the home.
- ◆ Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too.
- ◆ Faith is caught more than it is taught.

- ◆ If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults.

He writes, that “this foundational orientation helps congregational leaders see the work of the church beyond the venue of congregational activities. Through a variety of relationships and daily life experiences, the Holy Spirit works in people’s lives to form faith” (15)

I would like to emphasize the importance for leaders to see beyond the activities happening in the congregation and envision the impact our ministries could have if we role

model significant milestones in our faith communities, but also provide ample tools and ways to empower the same ministry to take place in the home. Please take a moment to revisit the five principles listed above and add the words “*using faith milestones as a tool for lifelong faith formation*” to the end of each principle. Can you envision the impact on the lives of all ages if we intentionally connect with God for every milestone in our lives?

Story 1

Deaconess Kristen Baltrum, Director of Youth and Household Ministry at Bethlehem Lutheran in Longmont, CO, is passionate about equipping households with a means to “do faith” at home. She has organized a special room in the church building for families to gather with children to do faith activities or to choose an activity for the home. There are also 16 milestones boxes. From losing a tooth to getting a new pet to retirement, all the ages are invited to take a bag with tools to equip and empower them to do a milestone in their homes. See a video of Kristen and her ministry at www.milestonesministry.org.

Story 2

A congregation in Minot, ND lost most of their resources for Christian education during a flood in 2011. This provided an opportunity for them to assess their ministries and introduce some changes and experience new beginnings. Out of tragedy and loss came a sense of need to redefine programs and shift to a ministry model celebrating milestones regularly in the congregation and including all ages. They are excited about how modeling milestones in the congregation will grow towards encouraging milestones to happen in the home too.

Story 3

Hermitage United Methodist in Hermitage, TN designs a trifold brochure each year for parents with the schedule for milestones to be celebrated. The brochure includes a guide for practicing and nurturing faith at home for parents as well. The brochure states:

Hermitage United Methodist’s Milestone Ministry Program helps to make a connection between our everyday lives and our faith life. Faith is formed through personal and trusted relationships. Jesus started with a few disciples who went and gathered more disciples from their homes and surrounding communities. Through their efforts faith communities began to grow. Growing in faith is not just a Sunday morning activity here at HUMC. It’s part of all we are and all we do as God’s beloved people. ([Brochure](#))

Story 4

[St. Mark’s Lutheran in Williamsport, PA](#) has a milestones ministry for all different ages. They explain their milestones are marked by:

- ◆ Celebration during worship. Families and the congregation celebrate the milestone together.
- ◆ Gifts. Each milestone is celebrated with gifts from the congregation. The gifts serve as a reminder for the individual as their faith journey continues.
- ◆ A luncheon. The families gather for fellowship and lunch. Often, this is an opportunity for the milestone recipient to examine and understand their gifts.
- ◆ Taking it all home. Families begin to use the tools and experiences in their daily lives at home. Growth in faith is going on everywhere!

The first milestone for young families is baptism and they give the gift of a faith chest for each child with the vision it will be filled with more physical memories of life’s events over the years.



In the stories I shared and in most congregations, I find we tend to focus celebrating milestones around significant markers on the faith journey of children, youth, and families. Recognizing milestones in the lives of adults is important too.

In their book, *Celebrating the Milestones of Faith*, Laura and Robert J Keeley write:

Children and teens need to see adult people of faith who are deepening their relationship with God. They need to know how adults pray. They need to see them in times of sorrow and doubt, and in times of sadness and joy. We cannot expect children to grow into mature disciples unless they see how other followers of Christ live a life of faith. Milestone celebrations allow the church community to participate in the faith journey of all its members, not just the young. (10)

[Milestones Ministry](#) recently published eight milestones specifically for times in our adult lives when it is important to walk side by side with one another as a faith community for events we seldom connect with God.

- ◆ Aging Parent
- ◆ Grandparents
- ◆ Retirement
- ◆ Return from Military Deployment
- ◆ New Job
- ◆ New Home
- ◆ Anniversary of Marriage
- ◆ Empty Nest

These mark the beginning of naming milestones and times in our life that are important and integral to our lives. Including children and youth as we process these events in the lives of adults is teaching them about our faith. We share joy and sorrow through every age.

Suggested Steps to begin a Milestones Ministry Model

1. Assess what milestones, both church and every day, events that may already be happening in the congregation and in homes. In some communities, it may be more related to adults, in others children and families.
2. Choose whether you will do one regularly, for example, monthly. Some congregations begin with one or two the first year. Doing one monthly helps set up a tradition that a significant event will be celebrated each month. Will milestones in the home be encouraged? What tools would be provided for households? How would you follow-up with those doing them in the home?
3. Build a consistent framework for each milestone to create a common language using basic steps for establishing a faith practice. Milestones Ministry uses four steps: 1) Caring Conversations, 2) Devotions, 3) Service, and 4) Rituals and Traditions. *For Everything a Season* uses a basic five step process: 1) Welcome, 2) Prayer, 3) Bible Text, 4) Reflection, and 5) Ritual Action. Consistency is important to empower all ages.
4. Share stories about each milestone whether done in the congregation or in households via newsletters, FB pages, and inviting individuals to tell their story during a worship service. We, as leaders of the church, can talk endlessly about the importance of faith practices and having a faith life. People expect us to tell stories. But when the stories come from the congregation as personal faith stories about where God is at work in their lives, we tend to sit up and listen. I would love to say that I changed a life, but nine times out of ten, God has called the quiet five year-old or the disabled elderly who has been

sitting in the back for years to be his voice. It changes hearts and minds.

5. Gradually, over time, add more milestones. This has the potential to change the way we do ministry and eventually become entirely a work of the people.

Reflecting on the letter from BC Crothers to ministers I quoted at the beginning of this article:

You are not alone in your questioning of people's faith, commitment, love of God and church in today's world. You are not alone when seeking ways to create change, stimulate parish growth; wondering if your efforts would bear fruit, and in your darkest moments ask, "Why bother?"

Perhaps investigating where milestones could make a difference in your ministry may be an answer to *why bother?* It is clear you would not be alone if all the ages were invited to view milestones in their lives as occasions to connect with God. Empowering and equipping all ages to "do ministry" in the congregation and in the home could create a stimulating change and establish a new way to grow the church.

I want you to realize that I continue to work as hard as I know how for you, and also for the Christians over at Laodicea. Not many of you have met me face-to-face, but that doesn't make any difference. Know that I'm on your side, right alongside you. You're not in this alone.
(Colossians 2:1, *The Message*)

Works Sited

Anderson, David. *Vibrant Faith in the Congregation*. Minneapolis: Vibrant Faith, 2011. (<http://store.milestonesministry.org/category-s/1822.htm>)

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Keeley, Laura and Robert J. *Celebrating the Milestones of Faith: A Guide for Churches*. Grand Rapids, Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2009.

The Nilsen Family. *For Everything a Season, 75 Blessings for Life's Milestones*, Third Edition. Zion Publishing, 2014. (<http://store.milestonesministry.org/category-s/1822.htm>)