

## Saints in Disguise: Faith-Filled Grandparents

By Marilyn Sharpe

**S**oon, we will observe and celebrate All Saints Day. This is our invitation to reflect on those saints of God who have shaped us in the faith. Let's unpack one wondrous part of God's plan to nurture a vibrant, life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ: faith-filled grandparents!

### WHO?

Some of us are blessed to count our grandparents among that "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1) that surrounds and shapes and holds us in the faith. Some of us have had faith grandparents, saints who were not related to us by birth or adoption or marriage; yet, chose to love us, to journey faithfully with us, and to leave the fingerprints of Jesus all over our lives. Both kinds of grandparents are important!

Now, for many of us, it is our turn. Perhaps you have beloved grandchildren who have arrived in your family by birth, adoption, foster care, or marriage. Maybe they live in your community or on the other side of the country. You have the opportunity to be a faith grandparent to them. Perhaps you don't have grandchildren to whom you are related by legally recognized bonds; yet the opportunity is there for you to be a faith grandparent to a child within the Christian family. All of us are called to pass on a vibrant and life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ to all of God's children.

### WHY ME? WHY NOW?

God is calling you to this ministry because you are a person of mature faith in Jesus Christ, a faith robust enough to pass on to children. This is your time, your



turn to leave a legacy. You probably have written a will, which designates to whom you are leaving things of material value. Faith grandparenting is your opportunity to leave a living legacy of what you believe about the Triune God and the stories about God's faithfulness in your life. You cannot choose an executor to do this work; it is yours to do, right now, today. "This is the day the Lord has made . . ." (Ps. 118:24). Let us fill this day with the presence of God for all those we love; all those who need the Good News of Jesus Christ. And, if not you, who? Whom can God send? Won't you answer, with the words of Is. 6:8, "Here am I; send me!" This is the most important legacy you will leave, the one that endures forever.

### WHERE? WHEN?

*Keep these commandments in your heart. Recite them to your (grand)children and talk about them, when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise (Deut. 6:6-7).*

This verse makes it very clear: we are only to talk about God when we are at home and when we are not at home, when we are lying down or not lying down. Anyplace else, any other time, we can talk about whatever we want to talk about! So, God's plan is for faith talk to suffuse all of life, everywhere, all of the time.

But what if we live a long distance apart, or if our lives are so busy we don't see one another very often? Living today, we are blessed with lots of ways to bridge distance and time apart:

- ❖ Use your phone. Call regularly to check in, and say, "I

love you," to ask for prayer requests, to catch up on one another's lives.

- ❖ Send a card or letter, declaring your love and connecting with the child in a heart-to-heart manner, even when you are not face-to-face.
- ❖ Send an e-mail. If you don't know how to e-mail, ask a younger person to teach you. You never know, that youth might become one of your faith grandchildren!
- ❖ Learn to text. Send them a message of care. Engage in a conversation.
- ❖ Send a care package, full of "faith groceries"—an age-appropriate Bible, a devotional book, toys or Bible story books for young children that help them learn the stories of faith, candies with wrappers that contain a Bible verse.
- ❖ Tape record yourself telling of a time of God's presence in your life, or reading a favorite Bible story.

Make being together a priority and make it happen at every possible opportunity!

If you live close by, spend time together and do all of the same things. Let the child know how much you cherish time together.

What about those *faith* grandchildren? Where am I going to find them? In your congregation is a good place to start. They might hang out in the narthex, or the youth room, or in the 5-year-old Sunday school class. They might be in the pew in front of you in worship, or sit next to you at a church supper. Smile at their parents. Say something kind and encouraging. Go to where the kids are. Introduce yourself. Ask their name, and remember it. Ask them what they are enjoying this year in school. Ask them about the challenges of being a kid their age. Listen and remember. Talk to them often, and go find them again next week and the week after that.

They might be in your neighborhood. Get to know the kids who live around you. Hang out with them. Talk to them and listen to them. Get to know their parents. Go to their games, their shows, their various activities; and in time they will eventually come to find you.

## WHAT AND HOW? GETTING STARTED

At The Youth & Family Institute, we have identified four simple, practical, doable faith practices that weave faith formation into our daily lives:

### CARING CONVERSATIONS:

This is the foundation of all our close relationships. It is the way we model and transmit Christian values and faith to the next generation. Listening deeply and respectfully, with great care; speaking with love and gentleness, helps children experience the love of God. Listen, listen, listen. Remember, remember, remember. Touch the heart with great affection and gentleness.

### DEVOTIONS:

Turn up the "God language" under caring conversations and you have a family devotion. Sometimes devotions use scripture, a devotional text and prayer at a set time in a set place each day. Sometimes, it grows out of spontaneous



conversation and wondering aloud how God might be present in the sunset, or current events, or a family celebration; and what God might be calling us to do in response. Pray with and for the child. Pray for God's presence and healing the hurts of the world. Tell your stories of God's faithfulness. Ask the child, "Where have you seen Jesus today?"

### RITUALS AND TRADITIONS:

We already have a multitude of rituals and traditions. How do we wake one another up, say goodbye for the day, welcome one another home, and say good night? How do we celebrate birthdays and holidays? Rituals and traditions make it very clear what our family values, believes and promotes and how faith shapes us individually and as a family. Make the sign of the cross on the forehead of a beloved one, reminding the child of his or her baptism. Light a candle on the table, reminding both of you that Jesus is the light of the world . . . a light that darkness cannot overcome.

### SERVICE:

Learning that "faith is caught more than it is taught," we understand that we need to be together as family or faith family, linking the generations, to serve as a loving response to what God has already done for us. Together, we have a chance to talk about what we have done, why we have done it, and what we have learned. This is the way to make service a joyous opportunity to love God back, to say "thank you," and to be the light of Christ for others.

God is with you in faith-full grand-parenting whether it is to a child from your own family or within the wider Christian family! We all thank God for you saints in disguise!

*Marilyn is the Director of Cross+Generational Ministries at The Youth & Family Institute, Minneapolis, Minn. For more information check out [www.tyfi.org](http://www.tyfi.org).*

# God Lived Next Door

By Karen Bernhardt

As a child, I never had the chance to get to know most of my grandparents. They passed away before I was born and my only living grandmother was too sick for me to spend much time with. I never felt cheated though.

Behind our home lived an amazing family. They were an average family, worked hard, and in my estimation, had an amazing family life. Their home was filled with love, patience, good food, and faith. My parents also got to know them. You see, my parents never attended church. We never prayed before meals or at bedtime, never spoke much about faith. God truly used our neighbors, Lois and Jack. Lois would bring up the subject of church to my mom when they visited, tell her about the Sunday school program at her church, and welcomed my mom to send us, even offering to take us.

Through the loving words of Lois, my mother sent me to Sunday school and had me baptized. Lois and Jack were picked as my godparents. My relationship with their family grew over the years. As a latchkey kid, I would stop at their house every day after school and Lois would welcome me with open arms and an open heart. She was never too busy to stop and visit, give me fresh baked cookies and ask about my day. Her home smelled of love.

Throughout my childhood, Lois taught me many lessons about faith and Christian family life. When things went wrong or got tough, I would see her turn to prayer and remind me we are never alone, that Jesus was always with us. I saw crosses in her home, Bibles in the rooms, and prayers being said at mealtime. She would never put down my family because we did not pray before meals, but would invite me to pray with them. When her son would see me there for yet another meal, and joke about me not having a home to eat at, Lois would smile and say, "Yes, that is OK. Karen is always welcome here."

God not only gave Lois and Jack to me as godparents, they were like grandparents to me, who considered me family and treated me like a granddaughter. They made sure I attended Sunday school weekly, that I got confirmed, attended youth group and church regularly. They wanted me to have a relationship with Jesus and were responsible for my faith growth over the years. Lois taught me about Jesus by her example. She taught me what a Christian family was all about; how to be a loving, Christian mother and supportive wife. She taught me the value of a child. She taught me forgiveness. Most

"She taught me the value of a child."

importantly, she taught me to never give up on God no matter how hard life can be. All these lessons I learned just by being with her.

I may not have understood a lot of things that happened during my childhood, but I knew I had the most loving godmother/grandmother. Lois never spoke ill of my parents. Instead she always reassured me of their love and most of all, the love Jesus had for me. She gave me a loving, safe place to be and learn but most of all, the priceless gift of love. I often wondered why God did not answer my prayers for my family life to change, to be growing up in a more loving and Christian home. I now know He was answering them through Lois.

When I'm making an important decision for my life, I think about what choice Lois would make. If I need counsel, I go to Lois for a listening ear. She continues to be a place of faith, love and acceptance for me.

Lois probably never knew all she was giving and teaching me—this is just how she lived her life in Christ. If I can live my life making an imprint on a child's life the way Lois did on mine, I will have lived a life in Christ. Who could ask for more? I thank God for you, Lois!

*Lois and Karen are members of the same congregation family. Karen and her husband, Douglas, are parents to seven children. They faithfully deposit love into the lives of their children, grandchildren, and many **faith** grandchildren.*

## GRAND RESOURCES

■ *Extreme Grandparenting . . . the ride of your life.* In this book, Dr. Tim and Darcy Kimmel offer principles for grandparenting in the 21st century. Includes ideas for making the most of "grand opportunities" for leaving "grand impressions."

Tyndale House Publishers, 2007

■ *Grandparents.com* links grandparents with activities they can do with grandchildren of any age, as well as providing expert advice on matters like long-distance grandparenting, "eight great ways to surprise your grandkids," and ideas for age-appropriate toys and gifts. Sign up for the free newsletter and get the free download of "100 Free Things To Do With Your Grandkids."

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