After pondering for months on how to structure this presentation I finally decided to return to the model for preaching that I learned from Dr. Richard Caemmerer in the seminary (not Luther, but Seminex); the model of Goal, Malady, and Means. What’s the goal—what is it that we are seeking to achieve? What’s the malady—what are those things might that prevent us from reaching the goal? What’s the means—what things will help us to reach the goal?

THE GOAL

About the same time that I was asked to give a title to my presentation someone said, “The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers; the truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong questions.” Thinking about a title and reflecting on the theme of this conference, Rethinking Confirmation: Signs of Life in Times of Change, I couldn’t get away from the thought that we are asking the wrong question. Sometimes I think we’ve done way too much thinking about and tinkering with confirmation, when what we really need to think about is life-long faith formation. And for me, the critical question that underlies life-long faith formation is this, “What do we want for our children?” Here’s what I want for my children and grandchildren.

When I was a little kid we moved a lot due to my dad’s job. By the time I was in 2nd grade we had lived in five different houses in three different towns, and I was attending my third different school. It was hard constantly trying to fit in to a new environment and make new
friends. It was there in 2nd grade that I began having the nightly dream, really the nightmare, that I was being chased by kids bigger than me, terrified that they would catch me and beat me up. Then one night in the midst of that nightmare I woke up and there at the foot of my bed sat an angel, dressed in white. The angel never said a word. He just sat there looking at me with a warm and loving smile. And I never had that nightmare again.

It wasn’t until years later that I ever told anyone about this experience. My wife and I were driving in the car one day, and somehow the conversation rolled around to angels, and I told her about this childhood experience. To say the least, she was surprised. I had grown up believing that we each have a guardian angel who watches over us, so I just assumed that this was my guardian angel and that others too had seen their guardian angel. It was in this conversation with my wife that I realized that was not the case, that in fact I was rather odd.

But that childhood experience has had a deep and lasting impact in my life. I am convinced that through that experience God sought to reassure me of his constant love and presence. Reflecting on that childhood experience led me to identify what has been the defining scripture passage for God’s relationship with me; it’s from Isaiah 43.1-5:

Thus says the Lord, he who created you, he who formed you;
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you,
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned,
And the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God . . . your Savior . . .
You are precious in my sight . . . and I love you . . .
Do not fear, for I am with you.
Ever since that night in 2nd grade I have never really been afraid. It’s not that life has always been easy. It’s not that I haven’t faced some significant challenges and trials. But in the midst of those I have somehow known that God loves me and is with me. That’s what I want for my children and grandchildren, and for all children, and for all people. I want them to know deep within their being that God has called each of them by name, that they are his beloved children, and that they are precious in his sight. I want them to know deep within their being that when they walk through life’s waters of trouble and life’s flames of trial they are not alone, that the God who called them and loves them is with them. And I want them to have deep within their being the desire to share that great good news with others. That’s what I want for my children, and my grandchildren, and for all children, and for all people. That’s my goal! And I believe that’s God’s goal!

By the way, as I have shared this childhood experience with others they have often asked, “What did the angel look like?” Some of you may remember the Marx Brothers. Well the angel kind of looked like Harpo Marx, the one with the curly blond hair, and who, instead of speaking, would honk his horn.

THE MALADY

So, what’s the malady? What might prevent us from helping all children, all people, to know deep within their being that God has called each of them by name, that they are his beloved children, and that they are precious in his sight? What might prevent us from helping them to know deep within their being that when they walk through life’s waters of trouble and life’s flames of trial they are not alone, that the God who called them and loves them is with them? What might prevent us from helping them have deep within their being the desire to share this great good news with others?
Malady #1: David Briggs, in an article in the November 5, 2014 issue of The Christian Century, quotes Christian Smith, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame and the lead researcher for the National Study of Youth and Religion: “Cultural messages encourage parents to turn their children over to ‘experts,’ and many parents consider faith formation to be the responsibility of clergy, Sunday schools, and youth groups.” (I encourage you to read that article).

For some time I have had this theory that back in the 1950’s and 1960’s the church adopted the public school philosophy of education: you bring your children to us educators, us experts, and we will teach them what they need to know to be competent and productive citizens. My theory is that the church adopted this philosophy for its programs of Christian education: you bring your children to us Christian educators, the experts, and we will teach them what they need to know to have a lasting and meaningful relationship with God, and live as genuine followers of Jesus. The problem with this philosophy in the church is that the public schools get the kids for six hours a day, five days a week, for a total of about 30 hours a week. In the church we get the kids for about one hour, one day (or maybe even two days) a week, for a total of one or two hours a week. That’s just not enough time to develop and nurture a child’s relationship with God in a way that will be lasting and meaningful, and that will help them to live as faithful followers of Jesus. If we want our children to have a relationship with God that is lasting and meaningful, and a desire to share that with others, that shaping and nurturing has to happen primarily in the home. Christian Smith, in that same National Study of Youth and Religion that I mentioned earlier states, “One of the key factors associated with older teens keeping their faith as young adults was having parents who talked about religion and spirituality at home.”

Malady #2: The church is not primarily in the information business, the church is in the relationship business. I brought along the
little blue book that was used for my Confirmation instruction. Its full title is, “A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism – A Handbook of Christian Doctrine.” This “short” explanation fills 206 pages, with 331 questions and answers, and 703 proof passages from the bible. And I memorized every word; at least long enough to recite it back to the pastor. And I actually do remember much of what I learned and memorized during those two years of Confirmation instruction in 7th and 8th grade. But as I reflected back on those classes I couldn’t recall a single classroom experience. I remember nothing that actually happened in the classes.

What I do remember is the relationship that I had with my pastor, Pastor Krause. Pastor Krause lived in a parsonage next to the church, but he had built a house out in the country that I think he intended for his retirement. My parents bought that house from him. But he kept a large tract of land next to the house that was his garden. During the summer months on his day off he would spend the day working in the garden, and my brother Dan and I, who at the time were in elementary school, would work along with Pastor Krause. He would bring his lunch with him, but he liked to have a bottle of beer with his lunch so my dad would keep some beer in the refrigerator for Pastor Krause. When it was time for lunch Pastor Krause would send Dan and me into the house to get his bottle of beer, and also to get our little silver baby cups. Pastor Krause would then pour just a little bit of beer into each of our cups, and we would sit beside the garden drinking beer with our pastor; and having conversation with our pastor about things like creation, and growth, and faith. (I realize that in today’s culture that would be completely inappropriate. But this was in the 1950’s in a small German Lutheran community.). The point is that what I most warmly remember is not the information passed on to me by my pastor, (don’t get me wrong, I realize that there is information that needs to be passed on), but what I most warmly remember is the relationship I had with my pastor. The fact that I am a pastor is due in large part to my
relationship with my childhood pastor. The church is not primarily in the information business, the church is in the relationship business, the business of developing and nurturing people’s relationships with God and with one another.

Malady #3: I sometimes wonder if we have spent way too much time thinking about and tinkering with Confirmation, and way too little time focusing on life-long faith formation, although that I think that is changing. I don’t mean to say that Confirmation is not important or that we should just do away with it. But somehow we have to get to a place of seeing Confirmation as only one step in the process of life-long faith formation.

The discussions about Confirmation that I frequently hear focus on things like this: Which curriculum should we use? How many years should it be? In what grades should it be taught? At what age should kids be confirmed? Should we use small groups or large groups, or both? Does it have to be taught by the pastor, or can it be taught by the youth director, parents, or other adults? Remember that quote with which I began, “The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers; the truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong questions.” To use the terminology of today, all of those questions I just listed are technical changes. What we need are adaptive changes. And that takes times. Somehow we have to get to a place of seeing Confirmation as only one step in the process of life-long faith formation.

MEANS

There are certainly other maladies. But what are some of the means, some of the things that we can do to help all children, to help all people, know deep within their being that God has called each of them by name, that they are his beloved children, and that they are
precious in his sight? What are some of the things that we can do to help them know deep within their being that when they walk through life’s waters of trouble and life’s flames of trial they are not alone, that the God who called them and loves them is with them? What are some of the things we can do to help them have deep within their being the desire to share this great good news with others?

The first and most important thing we can do is to help parents and other significant adults to be the primary passers-on of the faith. I am convinced that if the family—in whatever form the family takes, whether two-parent, single-parent, multiple-generations, or any other form—if the family is not the primary setting in which the faith is taught, the faith will most likely not be lasting or meaningful.

When our youngest daughter Sarah began Kindergarten the principal Brad Johnson said, “Your child’s success in school is directly proportional to your involvement as parents in her education.” Also, remember that quote earlier from the National Study of Youth and Religion, “One of the key factors associated with older teens keeping their faith as young adults was having parents who talked about religion and spirituality at home.” The first and most important thing we can do is to help parents and other significant adults to be the primary passers-on of the faith to their children.

When I was a kid we had family devotions after dinner before anyone left the table. We used a resource called Little Visits With God, and we kids were the ones who took turns reading the devotion each evening. Each devotion ended with a printed question that led to conversation among the family. Those conversations were significant in the development and nurturing of our faith.

I realize that such a ritual is unlikely to occur in many families in today’s world. In fact I never managed to pull it off very well with my
own children, except during Advent and Lent. I have sometimes wondered why it worked during Advent and Lent. Maybe it was the visuals: the Advent Calendar, the Advent Wreath, and the Lenten candles; and maybe it was that I actually took the time to encourage conversation about the significance of these seasons in the life of the church.

I am convinced that if we want our children to have a relationship with God in which they know deep within their being that God has called each of them by name, that they are his beloved children, and that they are precious in his sight; and if we want our children to have a relationship with God in which they know deep within their being that when they walk through life’s waters of trouble and life’s flames of trial they are not alone, that the God who called them and loves them is with them, and if we want our children to have a relationship with God in which they have deep within their being the desire to share this great good news with others—if we want our children to have that kind of lasting and meaningful relationship with God, they have to learn and experience it primarily within the context of the family.

What are some of the things that we are doing in the SEMN Synod to move toward this goal? We began by changing Karen Gieseke’s title from Director of Children, Youth and Family Ministry to Director of Faith Formation and Family Ministry. Karen has gathered a group of pastors and youth directors in what she describes as a “safe space,” where they can talk openly about the challenges of the current Confirmation ministry experience. This has been an important colleague group for participants to discuss some of the good ideas they would like to implement. We have also hosted several synod-wide dialogue events on Confirmation ministry, which have been well-attended and filled with questions and wonderings. I would encourage other synods or clusters of congregations to consider both of these possibilities.
Some things we have heard and learned include: No two congregations are offering the same experience, resources, model, or time frame. Contextualization is occurring where/when a leader feels energized or called to put forth the energy for the work involved. All have questions about the future of Confirmation. All have concerns about the youth and their families and their lack of connectedness to congregational life and faith. Not all congregations report negative stories, but most are feeling unsure about what they are doing and the impact it is or is not having. Technical questions/changes happen frequently in congregations: What curriculum should we use? Should confirmation last 1, 2, or 3 years? What is the best age at which to confirm? Does the pastor have to be the teacher, or can parents and other adults teach it? Adaptive change, on the other hand, is slow and a struggle.

One idea for an adaptive change is to offer an alternative track in addition to the traditional confirmation program, but thus far no one has the financial or people resources to do that.

I really don’t have any great answers. The advice I offer is try stuff, take some chances, see what works and what doesn’t work, and share that with the rest of us. There are organizations like Vibrant Faith Ministries and Marilyn Sharp Ministries, and Faith Inkubators, and Godly Play that are providing resources and encouragement to congregations and leaders who are trying to equip parents and other adults to be the primary passers-on of the faith to their children, beginning what we hope will be a process of life-long faith formation for our children.

One of the more hopeful things I have found thus far to facilitate this is the Stepping Stones or Milestones Ministry. Here’s an example of how that is working in my last congregation, Our Savior’s in Faribault. It begins with this description of the Stepping Stones Ministry:
“Significant moments and events often shape our lives. From being born, to being baptized, to going off to school, learning about the Bible and how to use it, First Communion, getting Confirmed, graduating from high school, to moving away from home. Through all of these significant moments and in our daily living, we are not just growing as individuals, but we are growing in our relationship with God. Every stepping stone we take in life, we take with Christ. We offer classes to each grade level through 5th grade in the hope of showing our families how Christ is ever present in our daily lives and how we can grow together as a community of faith.” (Illustration: How the Body of Christ Works)

The Stepping Stones include:

**Baptism:** Parents are invited to a session prior to baptism for conversation about the significance of baptism, the relationship that God forms with us in baptism, and the responsibilities of parents for the faith of their children. It includes providing parents with simple ways to bless their children even as babies.

**3-year-olds – Entering Christian Education & Bibles:** Parents and their children come together for conversation about Christian Education and children receive a children’s bible. They are shown how to use the bible, especially helping parents to help their children learn how to read and use their bibles.

**4-year-olds – Pray & Play:** Parents and children come together to learn simple prayers and practice ways to pray individually and together as a family.

**Kindergarten – Entering School:** Parents and children gather for conversation about the significance of starting school.

**1st Grade – Kids & Money:** Parents and children gather for conversation about spending, giving, and saving money, using my 10/10/80 plan for stewardship—Give away 10%, Save 10%, and Live on the other 80%.
2nd Grade – Pretzels & Prayer: Parents and children gather to make pretzels, an ancient symbol for prayer, and to practice some gestures that may accompany prayer.

3rd Grade – Introduction to the Bible: Children and parents gather to learn more deeply about how to read and use the Bible, and children receive a new Bible.

4th Grade – First Communion: Parents and children gather for conversation about the significance of the Lord’s Supper. One powerful element is parents sharing with their children their own first experience of participating in the Lord’s Supper.

5th Grade – My Body, God’s Gift: Parents and children gather to foster open communication between parents and children about sexuality as God’s good gift, helping children and parents see their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. (The children then participate in Confirmation classes in 6th through 8th grade.)

Children have experienced the presence of God in their lives. One hope from the Stepping Stones is that they give children the words to express those experiences of God’s presence. Note that all of the Stepping Stones include parents and their children. In every Stepping Stone parents are provided with ways in which they can teach the faith to their children at home, and bless their children. Every Stepping Stone is celebrated in a Sunday worship service where children and their parents are invited to come forward for a ritual of celebration and blessing. Also, in that worship service a child from that age group is invited to read the Gospel lesson for that day from the Spark Story Bible, copies of which are in every hymnal rack.

The hope is that beginning with baptism, these intentional Stepping Stones of faith will equip parents to be the primary teachers of the faith to their children, in the home, in a way that will lead to a pattern of life-long faith formation. (Illustration: How the Body of Christ Works – I like to imagine that our children are on the beam being
carried in the illustration, and that the three people carrying the beam are parents, church leaders, and other significant adults. In this way we grow together as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ.)

Trusting the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit, try stuff, take some chances, see what works and what doesn’t work, and share that with the rest of us. And remember to be patient. This will take time.

As long as we maintain our commitment to helping our children and all people to have a relationship with God in which they know deep within their being that God has called each of them by name, and that they are his beloved children, and that they are precious in his sight; as long as we maintain our commitment to helping our children and all people to have a relationship with God in which they know deep within their being that when they walk through life’s waters of trouble and life’s flames of trial they are not alone, and that the God who called them and loves them is with them; and as long as we maintain our commitment to helping our children and all people to have a relationship with God in which they have deep within their being the desire to share this great good news with others; as long as we maintain our commitment to helping our children and all people to have a lasting and meaningful relationship with God, the Holy Spirit will guide our efforts, and we will grow together as the Body of Christ.