Will our children have faith?

Will our children and grandchildren discover
  the joy and peace of following Christ?
  opportunities to serve with creativity and vitality?
  the deep challenge of becoming more through faith development?

Or will the churches we cherish become empty museums?

Fifty and sixty years ago marked the heyday of American Protestantism. Churches were filled to overflowing; new buildings were springing up; Presbyterians were becoming organized and systematic like never before in the history of America.

But the last five or six decades have been tough for churches – Methodist and Presbyterian and Episcopalian and United Church of Christ. Even the Southern Baptist Church has peaked in membership and is now losing members.

No longer do blue laws support church membership and participation. There are a lot of other things to do on Sundays now than worship and Sunday School. In fact, our own efforts to share the Christian faith are complicated by soccer and other school and social activities on Sundays.

Fifty years ago, few would dream of saying, “Sunday is my only day to rest.” But now, with two-income households the norm – and single-parent households at an all-time high – we feel busier than ever, with little desire or ability to limit the things we want to do or accomplish with and for our children and grandchildren.

Robert W. Lynn was a professor at Union Seminary in New York City, and then the vice-president for religion at the Lilly Endowment. Decades ago, he challenged the church with a question that remains pressing for us today: “The immediate future of . . . Protestant education is uncertain,” he wrote. “Despite its appearance of modernity and relentless relevance, mainstream Protestantism is rooted in the ethos of the last century. Do we have the courage to acknowledge the shaking of the foundations?”

John Westerhoff, for many years professor of religion and education at Duke Divinity School, put the question in an even more pointed way. “Will our children have faith?” Will we depend primarily on our “church school with teachers, subject matter, curriculum resources, supplies, equipment, age-graded classes, classrooms, and . . . a professional church educator” to transmit our faith to our children and grandchildren?”

No, we cannot.

Now, don’t get me wrong: Church school teachers are great. The right curriculum is critically important. Well-furnished classrooms with age-graded groups are very helpful. But Westerhoff is right: we cannot depend on religious education and schooling to transform our children and grandchildren. Conversion does not take place through the right lesson plan on the right Sunday with the right curricular goals - any more than we can expect my Prius to turn into a Ford because it often sits right next door to the largest Ford dealership in town.

No, conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit. It often occurs when passionate, committed visionary people surround others in a community of faith, hope and love.
As Westerhoff says, some of the giants in Presbyterian educational leadership – like C. Ellis Nelson and Sara Little – “boldly . . . made the case that effective programs of Christian education [take place] in the light of the total mission and ministry of the church. They acknowledged,” Westerhoff believes, “that the church teaches most significantly through nurture in a worshiping, witnessing community of faith.”

A worshiping, witnessing community of faith.

Marion is one of the matriarchs of our church, a committed elder and a 1939 graduate of the Assembly Training School, the school that produced so many wonderful church educators for the southern Presbyterian church, the school which – many years later, as the Presbyterian School of Christian Education – trained and nurtured our excellent director of Christian education for children and youth ministry, Clarisse Durnell.

Marion Notestein is dying. As I sit with her, it is hard for me to tell if she is dying quickly or slowly – but she is dying. She has cancer, and at age 99, has opted not to receive treatment. The last several times I have seen her, she has been at peace – confident of God’s care and ready for glad reunion with loved ones in the church triumphant who have already gone ahead to the other side.

The last time I visited Marion, she was pleased and grateful for the wonderful visit and the beautiful roses she has received from a member of our church, that day (or the day before). Even a professional educator like Marion, I believe, would say that the most important aspects of sharing our faith with our children and grandchildren – of telling the great good news to the coming generation, and sharing the glorious deeds of the LORD and the wonders God has done – is not the right lesson plan or the perfect curriculum or the best conference speaker – but instead the warmed heart and vibrant passion of a fellow disciple who visits and listens and bring beautiful flowers to a friend who is dying.

The church teaches most significantly through a worshiping, witnessing community of faith.

How will we teach our children?

How will the next generation come to know the mercies of the Lord?

Who will rise up and share the glorious deeds and the wonders of our God?

As a child, I remember Mrs. Wrenn and Mr. Rogerson, Mr. Spragins and Mrs. Little. I remember their positive spirit, caring embrace, eager exuberance – their love and forgiveness and grace. As a youth, I remember Rick Leary and Dawkins and Carolyn Hodges. I recall their joy and laughter, their patience and persistence, their abiding desire to share God’s goodness with us.

Oh, I remember pastors, too. But what often made all the difference for me was the ordinary people on the pews, who took their hearts in their hands and decided not to let their anxiety about everything they didn’t know about the Bible overcome them, and who instead stepped forward to teach in the church school, and mentor the confirmands, and cook for the youth group.

When I was a child and a middle-schooler and a high school student,

they learned my name and connected with me,
they listened to my thoughts about God and grace and sin and life,
they studied the Bible with me,
they prayed with and for me,
they took time off work to go to conferences and on mission trips with me.

They loved me and nurtured me as a worshiping, witnessing community of faith.
John Westeroff doesn’t pull any punches. He communicates clearly that the job before us is BIG. “Education,” he writes, real education, “is concerned that the story [of God’s mighty deeds] be known and owned; it is concerned that this story be understood and applied. . . . Christian education requires that we help persons regain their God-given ability to wonder and create; to dream and imagine and envision; to sing, paint, dance, and act. It requires a recovery of our natural ability for ecstasy; our appreciation of the new, the marvelous, the mysterious.”

As surprising as it may sound, we do this every day – in the way we live our lives. Our choices and commitments pave the way for others to dream and to act, to be transformed by the mysterious. And sometimes it is not the adults, but our children and grandchildren themselves who lead us.

Sammy Turner is a high school student in Ft. Myers. He plays football on his high school team there. About ten days ago, something big happened in his life. He caught a pass and ran for a touchdown. In the end zone, he took a knee to honor a murdered teammate and to thank God. The celebration lasted only four or five seconds.

Well, the ref threw a flag, and penalized Sammy’s team for delay of game and drawing undue attention to himself. For Sammy, it was much simpler. “I felt like I had to thank God for blessing me,” he said.

It’s become a news story, going from the Ft. Myers area to the national press. Just this morning, I saw a follow-up story about it, and I was impressed by the member of Sammy’s family they were interviewing. He refused to blame the ref, the coach or the principal. Instead, it is simply a reflection of who Sammy is.

Sammy is the grandson of one of our elders here at First Presbyterian Church.

I know.

Your children and your grandchildren are all grown up.

They live in Chicago or LA or some faraway place.

You may think “I don’t have a degree in education” or “I don’t fully understand the Bible” or “I’m so overwhelmed by work or family – or my own anger and resentment” or “I’m too old.”

Friends, those are excuses.

Instead, there is only one bedrock question:

   Do we know what it means to be loved by God in Christ, and are we willing to love others in Christ’s name, as the Christian community?

Then:

   Will we open our mouths with sayings from of old?
   Will we share the good news with our children, and tell the coming generation?
   Will we proclaim with a loud voice – with heart and hands and passion and vitality – the glorious deeds of the Lord and the wonders God has done?
   Will we rise up and tell the good news to our children, so that they may set their hope in God and keep the Lord’s commandments?

Our children and grandchildren need church school teachers.
Our children and grandchildren need confirmation mentors.
Our children and grandchildren need youth advisors.

You are the answer to their prayers.
Rise up. Rise up.