

“One of Us”: Connectedness in a Parenting Grandparent Support Group.

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Abstract

According to the Census 2000, 6.3% of all children under 18 years of age in the United States are living in grandparent-headed households (an increase from 5.5% in 1990). These parenting grandparents usually begin raising their grandchildren suddenly as a result of such things as parental substance abuse, incarceration, child neglect or abuse, or death. According to Minkler and Roe these new parenting responsibilities often result in higher rates of depression and isolation for the parenting grandparents. These grandparents often cite two resources that help them to cope with their new situations: support groups and their faith in a transcendent Other. For that reason parenting grandparent support groups are becoming an important intervention for this population. The God-Sent Grandparents Support Group, sponsored by the Salvation Army in Allegheny County, is one such group. It is intentionally faith-based grounded in faith in a transcendent Other, in this case the Judeo-Christian God. This paper tells their story.

Introduction

*“Over the river and through the woods To Grandmother’s house we go.
The horse knows the way To carry the sleigh Through the white and drifted snow, O!
Over the river and through the woods Oh, how the wind does blow....
Hurrah for the fun, Is the pudding done? Hurrah for the pumpkin pie.*

When people think of grandparents, I suspect, the images evoked in those familiar words come to mind – not for all, but for many – even if they aren’t their own direct experience of a grandparent. These are images of warm and cozy homes, smells of baking pies and cookies wafting through the air, laughter, security, a fun place to visit. Though that Currier and Ives sort of vision of grandparents may still exist in the reality of some people, for others the picture of grandparents that comes to mind is very different. “Our fairy-tale picture of a family is usually that of a father, a mother, and a child or children,” the AARP Grandparent Information Center reminds us, “but in today’s world, that picture doesn’t always reflect reality. Often little Johnny and Jane go home after school to grandparent-headed households” (AARP, 2001). Times are changing, and with them the definition of *grandparent* is changing, too. Increasingly, non-biological parents who are nonetheless kin are raising children.

Census 2000 reveals that over 5.7 million grandparents in the United States are living with grandchildren, of whom 2.4 million are responsible for caring for those grandchildren’s needs (Bryson, 2001). Approximately 77% of grandparent caregivers have had responsibility for most of the basic needs of their grandchildren for a year or more, 35% of them for five years or more (Bryson, 2001). The U.S. Census Bureau, in fact, suggested that the growing presence of parenting grandparents and their needs was a significant factor in the fabric of our nation when it added three specific questions to the Census 2000 long form regarding grandparents as caregivers.

Some of the factors that account for grandparents becoming active parents, according to *Generations United*, a national coalition dedicated to intergenerational policy, programs, and issues, and based in Washington, D.C., are incarceration of a parent, alcohol and drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, mental health problems, family violence, poverty, child abuse and/or

neglect, abandonment, divorce, unemployment, and death of a parent. “The grandparents are motivated by the love that they feel for their grandchildren,” according to AARP, “and step in to fill a gap created by the problem” (AARP, 2001).

Roe and Minkler state that both parenting grandparents and their grandchildren have significant health needs – both physical and emotional (Roe & Minkler, 1998). In both national and smaller-scale studies, parenting grandparents have been shown to exhibit high rates of depression, rate their own health as poor, and have the presence of frequent multiple chronic health problems (Roe & Minkler, 1998). A further consequence of caregiving for parenting grandparents is decreased socialization with, and increased isolation from, friends and family members (Roe & Minkler, 1998).

At least two things are suggested by these observations: (a) parenting grandparents are a growing group in the United States; and (b) they are at high risk for depression, as well as isolation from peers and family. The latter suggests a need for emotional supports for this population to empower them to cope with the emotional traumas that they may face. Support groups are increasingly providing encouragement, hope, knowledge, and a place to connect with a caring community.

I first became interested in grandparents raising grandchildren when I became Director of the GrandKIN Raising GrandKIDS Program at Generations Together/University of Pittsburgh. I began to learn of many of the needs cited above (and more besides). As I began to talk with parenting grandparents, individually and in groups, I began to discover something else about them (at least those in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania): wherever I went they told me of the importance of their faith in God as a coping mechanism. They related to me that their faith provided a kind of “lifeline” on the most stressful of days. Faith also offered them a sense of connection, of belonging, to One who cared for them.

As I listened to them, I began to formulate an idea: it might be intriguing and informative to explore the relationship among personal faith in a transcendent Other, parenting grandparent support groups, and feelings of isolation. In other words, do support groups address issues of isolation by providing places of belonging and connection with others who share similar experiences and who care about them? Further, if you throw personal faith into the mix, what role, if any, does that faith play in the support group process as a place of connection and belonging? In those initial days when those thoughts occurred to me, my answer to those questions was essentially, “I don’t have a clue!” I had some ideas, some speculations; but I needed more. I needed to hear from the parenting grandparents themselves to learn if I was onto something or not. That quest for understanding of this led to the God-Sent Grandparents.

The God-Sent Grandparents is a parenting grandparent support group that is sponsored by the Salvation Army in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. They are intentionally faith-based. In every support group that I have visited somebody has noted how important their faith in God was to them for coping and providing daily meaning. In those groups, though, faith was mentioned because it was important to one or more members. Had those members not shared it, faith would not have been mentioned. The God-Sent Grandparents is a different sort of group in that regard. Faith is central to what it is about and what it does. Each meeting opens with a reading of scripture. Prayer is shared at several points during the meeting. The group and its facilitator openly and regularly offer personal testimonies to what their faith means to them. In fact, when asked in an interview just before Thanksgiving what she credited with the success of the God-Sent Grandparents group, the facilitator of the group (and my key informant) said: “I think

because it is a faith-based group. We can't do it without the direction of the Holy Spirit.”

I have been intrigued and saddened by the reasons for the isolation, too. Parenting grandparents often find themselves isolated from communities who don't understand the issues that they are facing as parenting grandparents. They also often become isolated from their own peers and neighbors. One parenting grandparent couple is raising two young grandchildren in a neighborhood that is filled with children all of whom (except theirs) are being raised in 20- or 30- something households with both biological parents present. This couple is isolated from both the neighborhood of younger families and from their own peers. They are isolated from the neighborhood because they, in their late 50s, have different developmental issues than their neighbors and the younger neighbors don't quite know how to relate to this “oddity” in their neighborhood. As a result when there is a neighborhood get together or a children's birthday party: all of the neighbors are invited *except* this grandparent-headed family. On the other side of the equation – their peers – they find the isolation of being the only one of their group who is raising children. Where the others are free to come and go as they please, to travel, to stay out as late as they care to, and so forth, these parenting grandparents' lives are structured to a large extent by the needs of their grandchildren. In the midst of that reality, they have discovered that those who used to be their friends and associates are rarely in touch with them. This sort of scenario isn't unusual.

The study that follows will not be able to make any claims as to how issues of isolation are being addressed among the members of the God-Sent Grandparents, nor will there be the ability to claim anything as generalizable to parenting grandparents support groups across the board. The interpretation of the meaning of this support group as illustrated in one cultural theme is that connectedness is important to these grandparents. Though no direct connection can be made between the theme of connection and any reduction of the often present sense of isolation, there may be a relationship. That potential connection can be cause for continued exploration of the meaning of this group, as well as the meaning of other parenting grandparent support groups.

This is a study of one group in one place at one moment in time (a moment that extends from September to November, 2001). There is no claim being made that the connectedness that happened in that moment of time in that group is present in other parenting grandparent support groups. There isn't even a claim that what was observed in that moment would have been observed before that moment or will be observed after that moment. What is important is that it was observed in that moment. The question for this study is: what does it mean in the context of the God-Sent Grandparents? This study will attempt to provide an answer to that question through an interpretation of a theme that appears to be central to this group: the theme of connectedness. The purpose of the study is not to develop a model of some sort that other support groups can follow if they wish to emulate the success of this group. Instead the purpose is to simply tell the story of the God-Sent Grandparents and to suggest at least one interpretation of a theme that is significant to its members. In doing so perhaps something can be discovered about the importance of connectedness to ourselves, as well as enriching our understanding of this segment of the parenting grandparent population.

Methodology

The observation site was the Salvation Army on Third Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh. The regular meeting of the God-Sent Grandparents is in the second floor conference room of the

Salvation Army building. The only alteration from that meeting place was on two occasions when there were special meals served. For those meetings the group moved to a larger first floor conference room which had the kitchen adjacent, thus facilitating serving of these special meals. Almost from the beginning I was more than a passive observer in the group. I was warmly welcomed each week. The group meets weekly. With one exception when I was out of town, I attended weekly from September 21 through November 31, and then returned two weeks later for their Christmas party

Although I did observe the group in more passive ways (i.e., listening to what was said, looking around the building, examining the make-up of the room), my participation was more active. It included much conversation with individuals in the group (which added depth to my understanding of this group and the people who comprise it), praying aloud when requested to do so by the group facilitator, sharing in the oral reading of the scripture from time to time, and participating in group discussions. This participant observer role was essential to understanding the group as well as gaining acceptance by them. It enabled me to truly become immersed in this culture (Fetterman, 1998). My learning would have been seriously constricted if I had simply arrived each week, taken a seat in the back of the room, watched and listened, left at the end of the meeting and recorded my notes. Breadth and depth were added to my understanding by allowing myself to become involved as fully as possible with this group, plus I made some wonderful new friends.

There is, however, a downside to this immersion if an ethnographer isn't careful; at least I found that to be true of me. Spradley offers a value as well as a caution (perhaps without realizing it) of participant observation: "The participant observer...will experience being both insider and outsider simultaneously" (Spradley, 1980). The value is the added depth of the observation: combining both the experiences and the analyses of them. The caution, however, involves remembering to do *both* of those things *simultaneously*. Sometimes I found myself getting so involved in what was going on in the group or in a conversation that I was having that I forgot to have a part of my mind looking critically, analytically, at what was going on and why it was happening. Experience with ethnographic research should help this simultaneous maintenance of emic and etic perspectives (Fetterman, 1998) to be more natural.

My participant observation was conducted using two sources. The first source was my weekly field notes. What I recorded in those notes was largely influenced by questions that I brought to the observation (Spradley, 1980). I noticed the nature of those questions changing and becoming more specific as the weeks progressed. When I began my observation with the group my knowledge of them and of the issues and themes of importance to them was limited; therefore, the questions that informed my notes were general and diffuse. As the observation progressed, however, my insights into the God-Sent Grandparents deepened and I began to notice specific issues and themes being played out over and over again. At that point the questions that guided the kind of record that I was keeping became more specific and focused. I was looking for evidence of the theme that I had discovered. That is good in that focus had to be achieved eventually. It is also a danger, though, because it could have prevented me from seeing other issues and themes that were unfolding. That sort of tunnel vision could have provided a skewed picture of these parenting grandparents. I don't believe that happened; but it is a caution that I think I'll need to be continually aware of as I focus my observations.

As a part of the process of recording field notes, I drew a site map early on. As Fetterman helpfully observes: "Like writing, mapmaking forces the ethnographer to abstract and reduce

reality to a manageable size” (Fetterman, 1998). The site map will help readers to situate various activities in this group, and help to contextualize the themes that are shared. The exercise of drawing the site map helped me to see the room in which we meet with different, more analytical eyes: I had to examine what was in the room and where it was physically positioned. In the process of doing that examination, though, I also was forced to ask myself *why* things were located as they were in the room. I had to ask myself questions like, for example, “Why are those chairs arranged just that way?”

The final method that I used was formal, structured interviews (Fetterman, 1998). I did make use of some informal interviewing (Fetterman, 1998) also as I talked with group members before the meetings began and during lunch. Those informal interviews provided some interesting background which helped to identify issues and themes for me to consider and explore. The structured, formal interviews were more helpful to me because they served “comparative and representative purposes – comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes” (Fetterman, 1998). I was able to examine the theme that I had uncovered against the realities of these two representative grandmothers. The interview, thus, became a kind of “reality check” for me.

I scheduled the formal interviews for the first two weeks of November. By that time I had been observing this group for over a month. One of the interviews was the group facilitator who is also my main informant. She is the gatekeeper through whom I gained entry into the group. We have been colleagues since I began directing the GrandKIN Raising GrandKIDS Program. There is a mutual respect and trust between us; therefore, scheduling an interview with her was not a difficult matter, nor did I have to give it a second thought. It was a foregone conclusion for me that I wanted to interview her. In addition to facilitating this group, I also discovered that she has been a parenting grandparent (something that I didn’t know before). Her interview brought added depth for that reason.

The selection of the parenting grandparent members of the group to interview was another matter. I was never concerned about who would accept the invitation to be interviewed. The group had received me so warmly, and seemed to like the idea that they were truly helping me to learn, that I felt that any of the group would have accepted my invitation to be interviewed. In other words, because I had developed “friendly relationships with people in the social situation,” (Spradley, 1980) I felt that finding informants would not be difficult.

Actually I would have preferred to have time to interview them all believing that this would tremendously add to the richness of the data. In this short time frame (which is, I believe, a problem in doing an adequate piece of work) I had to choose. My observations led me to choose two grandmothers whom I believed were representative of the larger group, able to tell their story, and willing to do so. To more efficiently use time and to experiment with a style of interviewing that I watched Dr. Maureen Porter use in a class on Educational Anthropology, I decided to interview both grandmothers in one sitting. It worked very well; but I learned that as the interviewer I really had to be “on my toes” to (a) keep the conversation flowing and (b) prevent either of the two from dominating and preventing the other from having opportunities to speak. I liked the interaction of that format, though, because I discovered that what one of the women said would sometimes trigger a thought in the other. That triggering effect wouldn’t have happened had it been just one grandmother and me. I would try this method again, continuing to work on the two “on my toes” issues that I realized.

Cultural Theme **Developing, Sustaining, and Nurturing Connectedness**

Connectedness: a Word of Background

A person observing the God-Sent Grandparents could probably perceive a number of cultural themes. One of them, and one that has implications given the isolation and loss of socialization that many parenting grandparents experience, is the theme of connectedness. To be able to claim that this is a theme throughout parenting grandparent support groups generally, more groups would need to be observed. For *this* group, however, connectedness appears to be an important theme. It is probably a theme that is implicit, but nonetheless real. In my weeks of observing the group, I never heard a member say that connectedness is a purpose of the group. Yet, their other words and actions suggest that underlying the existence of this group is the need to connect these grandparents: with each other, with a caring and understanding community, and – in the case of this particular group because it is faith-based – with God. That connectedness is lived in several ways which will be suggested in the following sections.

Connected through Scripture

“In the beginning God created the heaven and earth. And the earth was without form, and void: and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.” (Genesis 1:1-5)

With that reading the Thanksgiving meeting of the God-Sent Grandparents begins. One grandmother reads the opening of the book of Genesis, verses one through five. When she is done with her reading, the next person around the table proceeds to read the next section in this passage of scripture which is the Creation Story. And so it goes . . . one grandmother after another reading a brief passage of the first chapter of Genesis until the entire Creation Story has been read. To an outsider standing at the door or secluded in the back of the room, this may appear to be a Sunday School- type exercise where you go around the room reading something from the Bible but nobody is paying much attention and the reading doesn't seem to be having much impact on the group.

That assessment would fail to understand what was happening in *this* group as they read the scripture. It would not perceive the profound impact of the scripture on this group of grandmothers. After the reading of the Creation Story was done this day, one of the grandmothers said:

“You know, when I was coming in on the bus today this scripture came to my mind – and I didn't know we were going to be reading it here! Then I looked outside at the beautiful day and I just wanted to praise God! I wanted to stand up and shout. But I didn't because I didn't think others on the bus would like it.”

Scripture is not just a routine activity with which this group begins its meetings. Rather, scripture is a vital component in these women's lives.

Every meeting begins in a similar way: with the reading of a passage of scripture – usually read by one or more of the grandmothers. Some of the women are more certain of their abilities to read aloud than others; but that doesn't matter. What matters is the scripture that is being read, not the prowess of the reader. In this way the grandparents of the God-Sent

Grandparents are connected to God through this faith-based text as well as to each other through this common activity. Frequently the participants reflect on the scripture much like the grandmother on the bus did. They share ways in which the scripture that has been read – or scripture generally – is a source of strength for them in their daily life or how the specific scripture that they just read together has triggered a thought or a feeling in them. One person’s sharing often triggers a thought in another grandparent who in turn shares. In the discussion that follows such sharing there is a kind of learning happening as each person’s comments are instructive to another participant. There is also mutual support as one person hears his or her feelings and fears and thoughts expressed by another and realizes that s/he isn’t alone.

Shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the group gathered and read a passage of scripture from the book of Proverbs. In the section that was read was the verse: *“The Lord is a mighty tower where his people can run for safety” (Proverbs 18:10)*. In the wake of those attacks, the grandparents of the God-Sent Grandparents were frightened and anxious. They were concerned over the future – for them and for the country: when would the next attack be?; would it be more devastating than the last one? Some of them were anxious about their children, grandchildren, nieces, or nephews, who were in the military and might be deployed into dangerous situations to fight terrorism. That verse of scripture, read as it was in a time of fear and anxiety for these grandmothers, inspired them and seemed to give them a kind of strength. Another group reading those words from Proverbs might have found no special meaning in them. This group, however, grounded in its Christian faith, found those words from scripture and the ensuing discussion about them a reminder of where they ultimately felt that they could find their strength: in God and their common faith in God. In that way those words were a point of connection in difficult times for these grandparents. Those words connected them to each other through their caring community of faith. They also connected them to God by reminding them of the faith that they espouse.

Connected through Learning

Every week’s agenda for the God-Sent Grandparents has a section called, “Topic of the Day.” In that section is always some sort of learning activity. The learning activity may be a speaker who is informing them of some community service that they can gain access to as, for example, the day a Salvation Army staff member informed the group of dinners being offered at no cost to them on Christmas Day at various Pittsburgh hotels. Occasionally there are open discussions during the “Topic of the Day” time where there is no specific speaker but when the group reflects together on issues of common interest such as “What will you do in chemical warfare?”; “How is your attitude?”; or general discussion times where any member can bring up whatever concerns he or she has that day. At still other times there are specific outside speakers who inform the group on a variety of topics of interest to them. Examples of this are the speaker that related the work of “Families Outside,” a program where volunteers go to prisons in Pennsylvania to visit prisoners – a topic of special relevance to many parenting grandparents as they are parenting due to the incarceration of their grandchildren’s biological parents. Another example of such a speaker was the day an adherent of Islam spoke on “Culture, Religion, and Differences” – a topic that was of great interest to the group coming as it did a little over a month after the September 11 attacks and the resulting concern of Islamic beliefs. Another example of such a topic is the day that I led a brief worship service – the first time that the group had shared a formal worship service in six years.

Each of those “topics” provides an opportunity for hearing from others and learning from

them (whether the *others* are outside speakers or another group member). Even a member who is not sharing thoughts aloud is quite possibly participating by being mentally engaged in what is being discussed. Through that discussion the grandparents are intellectually and, very often, emotionally, connected. These topics also provide an occasion for another kind of connection: connection with a larger world. As was the case with both the speaker from “Families Outside” and Islam, the group members were reminded of their place in a larger world of ideas and concerns and, thus, they – individually and as a caring community – were connected with the larger community within which they are situated.

Connected through Prayer

Prayer is another one of those connectors (like scripture) which wouldn't be necessarily meaningful in another parenting grandparent support group. The God-Sent Grandparents, however, places value in the inclusion of prayer in their meetings because they are a faith-based group. Every meeting includes prayer in at least three ways: there is an opening prayer that is linked in some way to the scripture that is being read; there is closing prayer just before lunch is served; and there is a time of sharing prayer concerns in the middle of the meeting somewhere. For every prayer, regardless of when it occurs during the meeting or its length, the group does two things: they stand up and join hands in a circle.

Standing up is a sign of respect. When the President of the United States enters a room everybody present stands up. In some Christian churches when the Gospel is read everybody stands up. Standing up is a sign of respect, honoring the person who has entered or the event that is about to take place. When people stand together there is a kind of unity happening there as they are united in their honor and respect of the person and event. That unity provides a connection among those present, something shared.

In a more tangible way connection in the God-Sent Grandparents is displayed by the joined hands in a circle. It is significant that they don't join hands in a straight line from end of the room to the other. Instead they join hands in a *circle*. A circle is a figure that has no beginning and no end. In the joining hands during prayer the participants are connected symbolically and physically. They are connected symbolically to God and to each other through this circle which is endless and is itself a symbol in many places of love. They are also connected physically, the warmth of hands enclosing other hands, the feel of a gentle squeeze reminding them that they are alive and connected with others who are also alive.

The connections of the God-Sent Grandparents go beyond the members present in any given meeting, as is demonstrated by the intercessory prayer times. The purpose of those times is to not only remember the needs and concerns of those in the room, but to remember those who aren't present and the reasons that they aren't present. Some members may be unable to attend due to illness, some because they are away and taking care of an ailing relative, some because they are grieving the loss of a child, some because they just have other commitments, or some other reason. Regardless of the reasons for the absence, though, *all* members – not just those sitting around the tables in the Salvation Army building – are remembered in prayer.

How dramatically Florence, the group facilitator, illustrated the importance of prayer as a connection point for these grandparents, as well as connectedness as a theme of this groups existence! Advent was going to begin soon and, with it, the presence of Salvation Army volunteers ringing bells and collecting money in their kettles for the work of “the army.” In a prayer time one Friday morning, Florence reminded us of the upcoming season of bells and kettles and donations to help people. She asked us to remember in our prayers those volunteers

who would be standing outside in all kinds of weather. She then mentioned a specific “kettle worker,” a 79-year old woman who is also a member of the God-Sent Grandparents. Last year she stood outside ringing her bell and collecting donations in all kinds of weather and didn’t miss a day. Florence asked us to say a special prayer for her as she got ready to volunteer again because “she’s one of us.” This 79-year old woman, though not physically present that day, was present in another way. She was present in the minds and hearts of the other members through the prayer that they shared.

Connected through a Caring Community

The God-Sent Grandparents is a group that basically likes each other. They care for and about each other. As the group is gathering each Friday morning it is not unusual to hear members talking about some crisis or illness that an absent member is experiencing. You also hear one member sharing a crisis that s/he is experiencing or has experienced while one or more of the other group members listen actively and compassionately. There is the conversation (typical of many other such conversations) where a grandmother was telling a few of us before the meeting began of her difficult Thanksgiving Eve when her granddaughter came home from school very ill with a very high temperature. The little girl ended up in the Emergency Room. The grandmother was afraid for the little girl and was concerned for the family Thanksgiving plans, too. The little girl is fine now. As she told her story, though, the other group members listened with genuine concern for her and her feelings, not just to be polite. In their listening they offered her support.

It hasn’t always been that way, Florence (the group facilitator) told me. In fact it is gratifying to her to see the group’s relationships deepening as they become a more caring, connected community. “They call one another now,” Florence said. “Before they would bicker and argue about, ‘I’m not calling her no more because she never returns my phone call!’ But just getting them to know that that’s OK. Maybe she doesn’t want to talk. And that’s OK, too. So it’s accepting that person for whatever they are, whatever they do...”

The development of a caring community that facilitates a sense of connection has been an evolving thing. It has taken years and the development of relationships. That kind of care isn’t inherent in a group; it grows over time. It is growing in the God-Sent Grandparents, and is a factor in participants continuing to be a part of the group. “I’ve been a part of the group now for, oh, I’d say four years,” Connie, a grandmother, told me, “and I’ve totally enjoyed it. I’ve enjoyed the fellowship.”

From Connie’s perspective that fellowship is a primary reason why this group exists. “I don’t talk too much about my personal life,” she said. “But I listen...and I’m there also. A good listener. I’ll help you in any way I can. All of us have problems. None of us are problem exempt, believe me.” And then looking at me with a gleam in her eye, she said, “Including you!” The God-Sent Grandparents doesn’t exist just to acknowledge the presence of problems in peoples’ lives. It exists to listen and help in whatever way it can – as individual members and as a group as is demonstrated when they give small amounts of money to members in need.

This caring community, evolving its relationships over time, is there to help each member whether or not they are present at the meeting. “We keep in touch,” Joanne, another grandmother, told me. “If I don’t see or hear from you I’ll get on the phone and call you...Sharon has called me and said, ‘I don’t feel so good. Maybe you can deposit my checks in the bank.’ So she says, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Nothing.’ So I ride the bus down to her house and get the checks and go downtown and deposit them for her. I’ve been shopping for her when she

didn't feel like it. And she'd say, 'You're a life saver.'" The God-Sent Grandparents appear to have a lot of "life savers": members who are willing to go beyond the time of the group meetings to demonstrate caring for other members whether it is something tangible like depositing checks and buying groceries or more symbolic like going to the funeral home to support a grieving member. Regardless of how the caring community is demonstrated, its existence provides another source of connectedness in this group.

Connected through Meals

"I thank God for this beautiful day . . . I thank God for my family . . . I thank God for my country . . . I thank God for each of you . . . I just thank God for everything . . ." And so we pray at the Thanksgiving Meeting of the God-Sent Grandparents Support Group. Every meeting of the God-Sent Grandparents begins and ends with prayer, and includes a time of intercessory prayer for concerns and joys of group members during the meeting. This day – the Friday before Thanksgiving Day – the group facilitator opens the meeting with a different sort of prayer. The 28 of us in attendance stand and join hands around the room – forming a large circle that encompasses this large meeting room. Then she says, "Since this is our last meeting before Thanksgiving, we're going to open in prayer differently. I want us to go around the room and each of us share a brief statement of something that we're thankful to God for." And we do. Each of us contributes just a sentence or two of something for which we are thankful. The words of thanksgiving range from personal thanks for health and safety to thanks for friends and family to thanks for our country. All of the comments appear to be from the heart . . . certainly unrehearsed . . . and directed as much to God as to the rest of us in the room.

From there proceeds the regular agenda of more prayer, announcements, the topic of the day, and so forth. All through the meeting there has been quiet activity in the meeting room and the adjacent kitchen as people continued to unobtrusively make preparations for this meal: going into the kitchen to check on items that are cooking on the stove or warming in the oven, bringing items out to the buffet table as they are readied. A smell of roasting turkey and roast beef, and cooking greens fills the room – a wonderful distraction from the regular flow of the meeting.

The God-Sent Grandparents end all of their meetings with lunch, always provided by the facilitator. This day, though, the meal is more bountiful than usual. A great deal more preparation and thought have gone into this meal than the others, too. In fact, we began preparing for this meal a week before this day. A week ago, after the meeting concluded and before *that* lunch was served, the secretary led a discussion of who would be bringing what to the Thanksgiving Feast. Some spirited but good humored discussion ensued about who made better greens and should, thus, be the one to contribute them to the meal. Finally, a list of items to be brought for the meal (and who would bring them) was completed and the final menu was reported to the facilitator.

Now, the day of the Thanksgiving Feast has arrived . . . the formal meeting has concluded . . . the meal is prepared . . . and it is time to party! The speaker offers the final prayer of the day: thanking God for this day and for this food. And we get up from our places to proceed down the buffet line. What confronts us is an awesome sight: tables that line the length of the room filled with platters and bowls and trays filled with turkey and dressing and greens and salads and rolls and cakes and pies and cookies and beverages and rolls and roast beef and fried chicken and . . . you get the idea!

And we eat and we talk and we laugh and we share stories with each other. The group is in no hurry to leave as people are enjoying the relaxed atmosphere that the food facilitates.

Finally, though, it is time to go. The “Light Up Night” festivities in Pittsburgh have caused the re-routing of some buses and some of the grandmothers are concerned about how they will get home. So we all begin to clean up the room. Dirty plates and plastic ware (“we’re not washing any more dishes than we have to!” the facilitator exclaimed) are thrown in the garbage as is the now soiled paper table coverings. People begin collecting the dishes of food remnants that they’d contributed for the return trip to their homes. Alas, some serving utensils do have to be washed. So several of us collected them and went to the kitchen to wash them and put them away. The meeting, having begun a bit before 11:00 a.m. is now over around 2:00 p.m. People have gone home or to wherever they were going next in their days. And the facilitator and I were sitting at a table chatting . . . feeling good about the experience and reflecting on the lives that these parenting grandparents live: how they often don’t seem to have lots to be thankful for, yet today they clearly told us things that they *are* thankful for. And we were reminded that even the most stressful lives can find reason for hope and thanks!

This meal on this day is more festive and bountiful than others shared by the group. Nonetheless meals are a regular part of the flow of the group. At first it seemed that meals were served as a sort of convenience for the group. The meetings are scheduled from 11:00 a.m. to about 1:00 p.m. It seemed that meals were served because this was over the lunch hour. That *is* probably part of the reason. It occurred to me, though, that these meals are more than conveniences. Instead they speak to the theme of connectedness. Sharing food can be a social act providing a somewhat relaxed atmosphere to “catch up” with others, to discuss important matters, to renew friendships, to build relationships, in short, to connect with other people. Often people have told me that they don’t like to eat alone. That is, at least in part, because meals can be rich times of connection.

A ritual . . . eating together . . . weekly . . . and especially in this Thanksgiving Feast. This group is a faith-based group, sponsored by the Salvation Army. Prayer and scripture are an integral part of their experience. Members regularly attest to how their faith in God enables them to cope with the stress and trauma of raising grandchildren. Given those faith-based realities, I don’t think that it is a stretch to see the sacramental/faith-based connections with the meals that they share. Even though the Salvation Army as a denomination does not utilize the Sacrament of Holy Communion, many of the group members *do* recognize and affirm it. That meal, Holy Communion – The Lord’s Supper – The Eucharist – is set in the context of fellowship. It is about people joining together to share food (whether it be bread and wine, or the banquet that these grandmothers prepared for Thanksgiving or the usual lunches they eat together), and connecting with each other through it and, by extension connecting to God. After all, the “Communion” in the title affirms connection – with each other and with God. The Christian scripture (and this group is currently wholly Christian) connects the Kingdom of God with a feast, too: “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15b). Sharing of food, thus, has a long tradition of connection to transcendent things (i.e., the kingdom of God and a resurrected savior) as well as to other people. Every week, and certainly in this joyous Thanksgiving Feast ritual, these grandmothers connect with each other, and do so in the context of their Christian faith.

Another connection occurs to me, too. In many years of conducting Christian funerals, I also attended many post-funeral luncheons. Those meals weren’t just convenience for the participants because they were hungry. In a sense, those meals were a part of the funeral ritual. They were a statement of life after the death that we’d all been focused on during the funeral

service itself. They marked a kind of transition from the focus on death to a reentering of the world, and a reaffirmation of the presence and power of life. Every week the God-Sent Grandparents affirm the same things. They come out of the “world” for a brief time to be together – to laugh and cry and pray and learn together. The time comes, though, to leave that gathering with its safety and mutual understandings, and to return to the world where all isn’t always safe and where everybody doesn’t always understand what they experience as parenting grandparents. Yet it is there, in that “world,” that most of the living of their lives happens. How fitting to every week make that transition from a time apart to a time of reentering the “normal” worlds in which they live with a meal.

Food and fellowship shared. More than just a convenience for hungry grandmothers. Coming as it does after the formal business meeting and before the leaving to go to wherever they are going: this sharing is a time of transition. It is a ritual of reentry. It is a ritual that affirms their connection with each other. For another group this meal may not have the sacramental qualities that this group’s does. This group, however, is intentionally faith-based in its orientation. This group has its Christian faith as a central component to its existence. For those reasons these meals – dramatized in the festive Thanksgiving Feast – are sacramental in nature and serve as transition points that enable participants to prepare each other through the connections that they experience for the return to their daily lives.

Being “One of Us”: Connectedness and The God-Sent Grandparents

She’s one of us. A simple, yet profound, statement not only of the importance of prayer for this group, but of the connections that they feel toward each other. That was the prayer reminder that Florence offered to the group regarding one, specific 79-year old grandmother. The group’s actions suggest that the same sentiment can be expressed about each one. . . “She’s one of us” . . . “He’s one of us.”

Does the group always agree? Certainly not! I would often sit back and smile as the group would argue with one another. It seems that somebody, for example, always has something to disagree with the secretary about regarding the accuracy of the minutes of the previous week’s meeting. Sometimes the arguments are heated; sometimes they are lighter and filled with joking and laughter. Somebody coming to the door in the midst of one of these arguments may wonder what was going on and leave thinking that this group really doesn’t care for each other. Not so, however.

Families behave in just this way. Most families disagree – sometimes heatedly, sometimes with joking and laughter. They disagree, however. Disagreement and even anger sometimes aren’t signs of disconnection, nor are they signs of disaffection. Ironic though it may seem the presence of these things may be the strongest indicators of affection and connection. A group, whether it be a family or any other group, that never disagrees and is always smiling at each other could very likely be a picture of dysfunction. No . . . the God-Sent Grandparents care enough about each other and feel safe enough with each other to disagree and even sometimes to argue. This is the same group that is also calling each other outside of meetings, praying for each other in and out of meetings, going to funerals to support each other, going shopping for each other, and eating meals together. They are connected. Though it would take more observation to determine it, it is just possible that this connectedness that is experienced through the God-Sent Grandparents may well help to cope with the possibility of isolation that studies suggest parenting grandparents are at risk of.

Possibilities for Faith-based Communities

The God-Sent Grandparents identify themselves, individually and as a group, as *Christian*. That is important in understanding what grounds them theologically. It is also important to note because this paper makes no attempt to relate the cultural theme of connectedness to faith traditions other than Christian. It is beyond the scope of this study to suggest implications for other faith traditions, though they may exist. With that in mind, I'd like to suggest some possibilities for faith communities to be in ministry with and for families headed by grandparents and other relatives. A way of framing those possibilities makes use of the acronym **L—E—A—D**:

L – Listen & Learn
E – Educate
A – Accept
D -- Discover

Congregations can **L—E—A—D** as they **Listen to and Learn about families headed by kinship caregivers**. Margaret Ann Crain offers a helpful reminder that the Christian Educator (and I would think any who are in ministry) “cannot see the glimpses of the reign of God that are already present in a congregation until he or she sees the people who are a part of the congregation in the complexity of the lives they lead, recognizing that each one seeks to be faithful, and that each one is a child of God touched by grace” (Crain, 1997). Education is relational and, thus, brings the need to know – to really know – the people with whom we interact. To be effective it needs to result in knowing people “in the complexity of the lives they lead,” not just their names and addresses. Families headed by grandparents and other relatives have more than their share of complexity, including the situations that bring them together, the conflicting and often negative emotions that they experience, and the unique needs of these second time around parents as they raise children in a world that is very different from the one in which they raised children the first time. Congregations can **L—E—A—D** by

- Learning who the relative caregiver-headed families are in the congregation and community.
- Doing research through talking to some of these families: what are their needs?; what makes these families unique?; what circumstances led to these families forming?
- Finding out what is being done in the community to address their needs, and what needs are going unmet.
- Exploring ways that the faith community can “fill the gap” and begin to meet some of these unmet needs.

Congregations can **L—E—A—D** as they **Educate others about grandparents and other relatives who are raising children**. In a Focus Group that I conducted with parenting grandparents, participants were asked what could be done to help the community to become more supportive of their families. Several of the grandparents responded simply, “Tell them who we are.” Once faith communities have listened and learned it is important that they begin telling the stories that they have heard – to their congregations, to the communities at large, and to systems with whom these families interact (e.g., schools, welfare agencies, etc.). It is also helpful to find ways that these caregiver families can be telling their own stories. Be creative! Identify people and groups in your congregations and communities who need to know the stories of the

parenting relatives. Then develop ways to tell those stories that will be powerful and motivating. In the creative planning don't forget to incorporate the relative caregivers in the telling, too. We need to stand *with* not just *for* these families. A goal of ministry to relative caregiver headed families is their empowerment, not just the provision of services.

Congregations can L—E—A—D as they **A**cept kinship care families into their faith community. That means genuine acceptance into the entire fabric of the congregation, not just providing services to families. Often these families bring significant emotional issues. The children in these families, for example, often exhibit behavioral/discipline issues related to things like ADHD and the effects on the infant of maternal substance abuse. Will the congregation welcome these children into their religious education programming, even when their behaviors are challenges to classroom discipline? Will the congregation train its leaders in how to understand and lovingly cope with the issues that these family members bring? Acceptance is more than incorporation of people onto a membership roll. Acceptance involves reaching out in love and care even to those whose personalities and behaviors present difficult challenges. Congregations can L—E—A—D by fully accepting families headed by grandparents and other relatives – seeing them as individuals with contributions to make, not just problems to be solved.

Congregations can L—E—A—D as they **D**iscover ways to connect kinship care families to God, to each other, to the community of faith, and to the larger community. The congregation can help to connect these families with each other through intergenerational programs and parenting education experiences. The congregation can connect them with God and the community of faith through things such as worship that affirms the legitimacy of their family configuration by lifting them as sermon illustrations and using them in the conducting of rituals such as in the lighting of the Advent Wreath. Several congregations in a community can join together for activities for kinship caregiver headed families. Congregations can add support systems to their ministries, such as the God-Sent Grandparents. Further, congregations can help to connect relative caregiver families with other systems in the community who could also be providing support and service. Congregations can connect these families by helping them to navigate often difficult systems, such as welfare systems, health care systems, school systems, and legal systems. Of course, for that navigation assistance to occur effectively, members of the community of faith first need to educate themselves about those systems. Standing with these families and educating them about the intricacies of navigating such systems can be a real source of connecting them with the broader community, however.

As congregations L—E—A—D they need to continually ask questions of themselves and of the families that they seek to empower and to serve. Questions like: how can our community of faith help these families to address the special stress and fear and guilt that they often experience?; how can we more compassionately integrate relative caregiver families into the fabric of our congregation?; what do relative caregiver families identify as their needs, not just what do *we* perceive as their needs?; how can the message of hope be made real to them when they often feel abandoned and disconnected? As questions like these are asked and reflected upon, our communities of faith can move toward ways in which relative caregivers become not just a population with needs and problems that we feel obligated to care for, but *one of us* – connected in meaningful ways to God, to each other, to the community of faith, and to the larger community.

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