

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Building a Strong Family by Serving Others

by Nicholas Chakos

The tech giant Google recently reported that 93 million “selfies” are taken each and every single day. On many days, I think that my 15-year-old daughter is single-handedly responsible for a sizeable percentage of that number. From the time that the first Kodak camera was sold in 1888 through 1950, it’s estimated that a few billion photographs were taken worldwide.

That’s seemingly less than what my other kids, ages 11, 9 and 7, snap, tweet, post and vine in one week. It’s easy to think that young people these days are so hooked on technology, so absorbed in self-promotion through their social networks, that they can’t see past their device’s screens and don’t care for anyone other than themselves, their “friends” and “followers.”

But to dismiss our young people’s social networks as frivolous or downright bad is to ignore the trend of how young people are using their phones, computers and virtual networks to inspire action and activity in the real world. While we do need to be protective of what our young people are viewing and sharing across cyberspace, we also must understand that our children value these networks and connections immensely and that they are not going away any time soon.

Throughout history, there have always been many demands, distractions and societal problems pulling at families. I doubt that an Orthodox Christian family, at any point in time, would say that raising a family “in the Church” was easy. Yet, we must deal with where we are today, live within the society which we currently have and struggle towards salvation in this world as it is.

The challenge for families today is to allow our children to leverage the strengths of technology while teaching them that our faith places a high value on external and personal relationships. Christ’s commandments, to love God completely and to love and serve our neighbors, were given to all of us and include every age group. Fulfilling these two great commandments typically takes personal interaction. At some point, if we are going to live up to Christ’s commandments and stand on His right side at Judgment, we must teach our children to put the tech down, go out and meet people where they are. But who has the time to go out and help others? Life is busy, plain and simple. I’m the first to admit that my wife and I struggle to keep a balance among Church, work, school, Greek school, baseball, Greek dance, modern dance, Girl Scouts, family vacations, gymnastics, swim



Photo courtesy of Nicholas Chakos

team, soccer, house chores, and homework. Even though we claim an importance on raising kind and helpful children and a desire to have our kids stay faithful members of the Church into adulthood, our actions often do not follow our aspirations.

Many of us suffer from the fleeting desire to give our children material wealth and prosperity while we fail to give them the peace, calmness of home and dedicated time that is necessary to grow together as a family and to work together, family-as-church, towards our salvation.

“We need to keep our kids in the church!” This is a plea that I hear often. I think that a better approach would be to say that “we need to keep the Church in our kids”. Keeping the Church in our kids starts with the family. As faithful parents a we must root our Faith deep into our homes and then take that faith back out into the world, building it into the routines and habits of our children.

This needs to be done through actions, not words. Parents need to lead by example, allowing our children to see us actively praying, fasting, attending church regularly and participating in acts of service to others.

Working together on outreach projects as a family not only allows us to follow Christ’s teachings, but it strengthens family togetherness, helps children learn, and empowers them to understand that they can help others. Serving others benefits a child’s psychological, social and intellectual development. It increases self-esteem, responsibility and helps children develop new social skills. The time that you spend together as a family helping others will be rewarding and more memorable than almost any other family activity this year.

Christmas is hardly two months past and my children have already forgotten what they received as presents. My children don’t remember where they celebrated their last birthday party (was it at home or did we go bowling?). My kids do remember with perfect clarity the days that we spent in Fairfax County, Va., just outside of Washington, as a family helping children in need through FOCUS North America.

Each year, the Fellowship of Orthodox Christians United to Serve (FOCUS) assists thousands of homeless and disadvantaged children get ready to go back to school. FOCUS’ program Operation Lace Up helps families in need get ready to go back-to-school by providing children with medical and dental check-ups, school supplies, new

backpacks and new athletic shoes so that they can attend school ready to learn and succeed. Over the past five years, FOCUS has been a significant partner with 250 school districts in 30 cities throughout the country, providing more than 252,000 disadvantaged children with educational support services while moving their parents from dependency to self-sufficiency through vocational training, job placement, and securing permanent housing.

Once these children are in school, FOCUS provides many of them with nutritious meals to ensure they stay properly fed, especially during targeted times of the week and month when family cupboards may be bare. FOCUS provides more than 20,000 meals each month to children who are hungry through no fault of their own.

My kids will never forget sitting and talking with children from area homeless shelters, walking hand in hand with them and helping them size a new winter coat and a new pair of shoes. They remember those children’s names and they cherish the photos that they have. At first my kids were shy and uncomfortable, being surrounded by children who they didn’t completely understand. But once my kids got past that discomfort, they realized that these children had the same hopes and fears, likes and dislikes as any other child.

And, in the end, when the children in need reached out and hugged my kids, my kids realized that they had the power to help others, to make people happy and in a very small way to bring positive change into the world. Working together as a family in service to others is a wonderful way to instill the teachings of Christ into our children. In addition to teaching our children to pray, participating in the sacraments and attend services regularly, family outreach activities are excellent ways to look outward from ourselves and invigorate parish life.

When your family serves alongside other families from your parish, the network of community-family is extended. You become better friends, all families are strengthened and we often learn more about ourselves than any selfie could ever show.

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What Can Your Family Do to Serve Others?

- **START** at home watch Be the Bee (youth.goarch.org) each week, and have a conversation with your kids about the topic covered. Teaching your children to focus on others and be aware of people’s needs is an important step in raising compassionate children.
- **SPONSOR** a food drive at your parish or youth group and let your children be involved. Let your younger children color a poster or flyer advertising the drive. Bring your older children to the food bank or shelter when you drop off the collected items. Local food banks are incredibly strained this year and there is always a need for non-perishable grocery items.
- **CREATE** greeting cards for children or adults who are hospitalized with chronic illnesses.
- **VISIT** the elderly and shut-ins—especially around Christmas time, visit parishioners in their assisted living facilities and sing them Christmas carols. Bring them a small gift—a flower, plant, small icon, greeting card.
- **INVITE** FOCUS to your parish or youth group for a “family day” of service. FOCUS will lead a day-long outreach into your community to help people in need while helping you learn and experience the root causes of poverty and understanding what you can do to help.
- **LISTEN** to your kids, ask them for ideas of how you can help someone in need.
- **LEAD** by example. It won’t do to tell your kids, “go rake Mrs. Pappas’ leaves!” But if you get a few rakes, put them in the hands of your kids and lead them over to her house, you will find that it is wonderful to work together.
- **HELP** FOCUS cook and serve meals to hungry children during the summer months when they don’t have access to free/reduced meals at school.
- **MAKE** outreach a habit. It will take time for your children to be comfortable at a nursing home or serving meals at a soup kitchen. Don’t expect them to feel comfortable on their first volunteer experience. But know that with each time they volunteer, they are building an inner strength that will help them throughout their lives. For more information on FOCUS North America and how you can get involved visit www.focusnorthamerica.org.



Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

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