

Godparents: A Ministry of Love & Disciple Making

by Daniel Benedict

Amazing grace that loves, forms, and affirms us comes in many ways. One of the ways that such grace comes into our lives is through people who are spiritual parents to the baptized; that is, *godparents* or *sponsors*. Many United Methodists are surprised when they hear that a family has chosen "godparents" for a child. Often pastors are uncertain about what to say or do when preparing for baptism and a parent says, "I want my friend, Clarice, to be the godparent." What is this term *godparent*? Is it appropriate for United Methodists to use such a term?

The United Methodist Book of Discipline uses the term "godparent(s)" in four paragraphs (216, 225.1, 225.3, 225.4, 1120.2). It is always paired with the words "or sponsor(s)." Several things are clear in the Discipline about the work and ministry of those who serve as "godparent(s)."

- *Godparent* is synonymous with *sponsor*.
- *Godparent* as used in the current *Discipline* has always to do with ministry to a child before, at, and after baptism and as a ministry that is an embodiment of the nurture and care of the whole church.
- A godparent is a professing Christian who professes his or her faith at the time of baptism along with the parent(s) or guardian(s) and the whole congregation (216).
- With the parent(s) or guardian(s), the church school and all the membership of the church, it is the "duty" of the godparent "to provide training for the children of the Church throughout their childhood that will lead to a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, to an understanding of the Christian faith, and to an appreciation of the privileges and obligations of baptism and membership." (§ 225.4)
- A godparent is not required by the *Discipline*, but at least one professing Christian is required to affirm the church's faith along with the members of the congregation when a child is baptized. (In cases where no parent can or will fulfill this requirement, then a sponsor or godparent may do so.)

A parent may choose to honor someone by asking him or her to be a child's godparent, but our *Discipline* clearly understands and calls godparents to be people of genuine faith and determination who exercise a ministry of seeing that Christ is formed in the child.

In 1752 John Wesley wrote a tract called "[Serious Thoughts Concerning Godfathers and Godmothers.](#)" Wesley affirmed there that the practice of designating godparents had ancient roots. Having godparents was a common practice in his Church of England. Wesley described the ministry of sponsors and godparents in this way: "These were considered as a kind of spiritual parents to the baptized, whether they were infants or [adults]; and were expected to supply whatever spiritual helps were wanting either through the death or neglect of the natural parents." He was highly critical of people who undertook the role of godparent without serious thought about how they would perform their duty. On the other hand, he said plainly that no serious Christian should hesitate to take on this "office of love for each other's children."

Wesley was specific about what the godparent/sponsor was to do: "You shall call upon [the child] to hear sermons, and shall provide that [the child] may learn the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to [his/her] soul's health; and that this child may be virtuously brought up, to lead a godly and a Christian life."

So the ministry or office of godparent is a ministry of creative and nurturing love, a gentle evangelizer to younger brothers and sisters in the faith so that they come to a place of owning their baptism, professing their faith in the triune God, and knowing the basic disciplines of discipleship. Birthdays, holidays, and sharing in the cycles, seasons, and mission work of the church become occasions for godparents and sponsors to talk, explore, pray, and experience the love and goodness of God.

As Wesley's "Serious Thoughts" implies, the ministry of godparent is not limited to those who sponsor children for baptism. It is also a ministry with adults and youth coming to baptism. Lester Ruth has written a handbook for sponsors (godparents) of youth and adults titled, [Accompanying the Journey](#)

(Discipleship Resources, 1997). As more and more seekers come to our churches with no Christian memory, the greater the need for spiritual parents to birth them from death to life by the grace of God.

Local congregations can encourage the ministry of godparents by including them in baptism preparation sessions, offering training and practical guidance, and recruiting them for people of all ages who seek baptism and the life of faith.

Some interesting web sites follow for those who want to explore this ministry further:

"Serious Thoughts Concerning Godfathers and Godmothers" by John Wesley

For a contemporary Roman Catholic look at godparents, see Godparents by Paul Turner.

For a tips on being godparents from an Orthodox perspective, see Tips & Techniques for Godparents.

For a look at the experience of godparents in medieval times, see The Medieval Child, Part 2 (Page 3: Baptism).

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