

Hearts of MERCY *Agents of Compassion*

*Mora church
accompanies
families as they
grow in faith
together*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DIANNE TOWALSKI

SEVEN-YEAR-OLD PATRICK ERICKSON IS CURIOUS. DURING FAMILY FAITH FORMATION SESSIONS AT HIS PARISH, ST. JOSEPH PILLAR OF FAMILIES IN MORA, HE MOVES FROM TABLE TO TABLE ASKING QUESTIONS AND TAKING IN EVERY ASPECT OF WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE ROOM.



Faith formation has been challenging for Patrick's family. He was born with medical complexities and autism, so they often experience social and environmental challenges related to that. Busy



environments are often too overstimulating and noise levels, conversation, smells and excitement are all challenging.

“We expected faith formation class this year to be challenging and our

expectations were low,” said Casey Erickson, Patrick’s dad. “Many times we have signed up for extra-curricular activities only to realize it just isn’t feasible, but once in a while we get a win. This program seems to

be a win for our family.”

For the past few years, Lee Ann King, faith formation director at the Mora location of the parish, has been using the “Pathways for Family Faith Formation” program

produced by Faith and Family Life Catholic Ministries, an organization that creates resources to support and form parents in their role as primary educators of the faith.

In the Pathways program, families receive boxes packed with tools and lessons that they can work on together at home. They follow up with at-church sessions where they share their experiences and then do a large-group activity with parents and children working side by side.

“Our children need to move. With busy environments, Patrick especially needs to stay moving and a typical classroom setting isn’t an effective learning style for him,” Casey’s wife Liz said. “This setting was helpful for our two-year old, Delima, as well because she developmentally doesn’t have the attention span to stay still. Overall, the setting is what works for our family.”

“Pathways has been and continues to be an amazing journey for our families in Mora,” King said. “We [didn’t have] a family formation program here for a long time and many people were used to just dropping their children off on Wednesdays for CCD. Using the Pathways program has helped us teach families how they can intentionally live their Catholic faith every day.”

The Diocese of St. Cloud introduced the ‘Pathways’ program in May 2023, making it available to parishes or ACCs that wanted to transition from traditional faith formation to a family-based program,

according to Christine Pinto, director of faith formation for the diocese.

Through a grant from Bridge Builders for a Thriving Mission, King was able to attend the Pathways Conference in California for training.

Mora also was one of seven faith formation programs to accept an invitation from the Diocese of St. Cloud to participate in “Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation,” a project of the National Community of Catechetical Leaders. As one of 20 dioceses across the country participating in the grant, these local faith formation leaders benefit from the wisdom of national experts, who walk with them and provide valuable resources

to engage a new generation of Catholic families, Pinto explained.

“At first our families were really hesitant to interact with one another at our sessions,” King remembers. “As families have gotten to know one another and have recognized that everyone is on their own particular faith journey, a space for sharing and vulnerability has opened up.”

King says the children love that they have the opportunity to spend time learning with their parents, prompting them to ask questions about Jesus and why we do certain things as Catholics.

“Our parents are gaining confidence in modeling the faith for their children,” she said. “The Pathways

program is helping our parents by providing quality, easy to understand resources. We don’t walk alone as Christians and sometimes it’s the children leading us adults to Jesus.”

As she has helped her families adjust to this new faith formation model, King says she feels supported by the diocesan staff she works with.

“I think our diocese understands that it is important to minister to those who minister to others,” she noted. “OCIA trainings with Christine were also great times when I felt supported. The trainings were thorough and I didn’t feel like I had to figure it all out on my own.”

King admits it’s scary to try new things or confront



Casey and Patrick Erickson work on a project during a family faith formation session at St. Joseph, Pillar of Families in Mora.



Ashley Johnson and her daughter Sadie participate in a table discussion, part of the family faith formation program in Mora.



After lunch with other faith formation families, a coloring project was part of the program for Liz and Delima Erickson.

hard situations, but sometimes just knowing someone is beside you makes a difficult situation a manageable situation.

“I was longing for my Pathways parents to trust themselves as teachers of the faith. So, I asked the families in our program to accompany me by actually leading a lesson for the group,” she said. “Two or more families worked together to present on a saint and a heroic virtue exhibited by that saint. I was amazed at the different perspectives and the creativity that was expressed.”

“Programs like Pathways help parish staff form relationships with their families so they can better accompany them on their

faith journey, even when that journey is difficult,” Pinto said.

One concrete example of that was young Patrick’s first communion.

Because of his medical issues, Patrick has always been tube-fed. He has been in feeding therapy since he was 10 months old and has never eaten any kind of bread before.

“The two DRE’s here, Lee Ann in Mora and Rita [Olson] in Milaca, as well as Father Timothy Gapinski, pastor of St. Joseph Pillar of Families parish, have all gone out of their way to help my son receive communion in a viable way for Patrick,” Liz said.

“It took gentle encouragement, years of discussion, and lots

of practice and even more prayer. With the support and prayers of this community as well as by God’s grace and Patrick’s willful heart, he now actually receives a rice-sized piece of the communion host. He is able to receive Jesus in the Eucharist which he desperately desired and we desperately desired for him.”

Another benefit of the program is the relationships it helps build among participating families. The Ericksons, who previously had mostly casual interactions with others at Mass and parish events, say the program has led to deeper, more meaningful connections. Casey said those relationships have

continued to grow beyond the sessions themselves, noting that the family even vacationed with another family they first partnered with through a faith formation activity.

“Everyone has welcomed us here,” Liz said. “Mass is not easy for neurodivergent and disabled populations. It is one area where mercy is still developing. Jesus modeled it and the St. Joseph’s family has humbly reflected his example.”

“Our parish family here at St. Joseph’s has accompanied us through prayer and support and in such a loving and welcoming way that it has truly reflected God’s nature within the body of Christ,” she added. “It just feels like love.”