

This is Family Ministry

Stephanie Martin

These days, trying to define "family ministry" is as challenging as trying to define "family." Churches all seem to have slightly different perspectives on this ministry area. But everyone agrees that family ministry has been growing recently -- in size and popularity.

Family ministry isn't necessarily new, but parents have "a renewed awareness of the importance of the family unit," says Reggie Joiner, founder and president of The reThink Group. The church, he adds, now realizes it can't be effective alone and needs the home.

As family ministry expands, it's also evolving. Just being family-friendly no longer counts. The old approach of keeping people of all ages busy with lots of family-specific programming is missing the mark. All the "random acts of ministry" that churches line up for families overload church and family schedules, ultimately "competing with the very families you're trying to help," Joiner says.

Kurt Bruner, executive director of the Strong Families Innovation Alliance, says, "The problem is that the home is in desperate need of fulfilling what it's called to do. So we need to ask, 'How do we equip families?'"

Family Ministry's New Focus

"Equip" is one buzzword associated with the new-and-improved family ministry. Others include "partnership," "intentional," and "simplified."

Attentive churches move away from family ministry that's recreational, educational, or organizational, and move toward ministry that meets more of families' needs, says Art Murphy, founder and president of Arrow Ministries in Orlando, Florida.

Bruner's alliance brought together some of America's leading ministries to explore the family ministry movement. They concluded that the goal is for churches to be catalysts for strengthening marriages, nurturing children's faith, and keeping teenagers in the church.

Mike Clear, family life pastor at Discovery Church in Simi Valley, California, reinforces the importance of intentionality. "Family ministry needs to be about churches intentionally influencing parents to be the spiritual leader for their kids," he says. "No one has more potential to influence a child's relationship with God than a parent."

While a child might be at church 50 hours per year, Clear says, a parent has about 3,000 hours per year "to impact the heart of their child," and that influence will be lifelong. "As good as we might think we are as a church and as electrifying and relevant as our ministries might be, we still don't have the potential to influence children the way parents do," Clear says.

Make the task too difficult for parents, though, and we repel them instead of equip them. "The very idea of spiritual leadership can be overwhelming to many parents," Joiner says, "so it's up to the church to define the parent's role as a spiritual leader in practical, possible terms -- and then actually partner with them to do it."

Family Ministry's Key Players

Coming alongside families in the spiritual upbringing of children is a big undertaking, which might make you wonder, Who's qualified?

Some children's ministers redefine their role as ministry to the entire family -- not just the children. Some churches rely on a point person who's skilled at big-picture planning. And other churches hire family ministry pastors with backgrounds in counseling, marriage, child development, and

parenting. It's crucial to have a credible point person. Bruner says, "If everyone owns the ministry, no one does."

Joiner agrees, saying, "Someone needs to champion the master plan and get everyone in the same room to own the strategy. The best way to get parents on the same page with your strategy is to get the staff on the same page."

Family Ministry in Action

While churches may share a common goal of offering family ministry, here are practical approaches congregations currently use.

Family Worship Services -- Seacoast Church in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, has experimented with a hybrid family service, with children joining parents for family-style worship. Then kids and adults split up for separate teaching times.

"The shared service isn't for all families," says Sherry Surratt, children's pastor at Seacoast. "But we've learned that no matter what model we use, we need to engage the whole family, keep parents in the loop, and let them know how they can participate."

Some churches design special weekly worship productions for children and parents. Discovery Church presents a high-energy, lighthearted experience between the two adult Sunday services. For help with this, Clear turned to Joiner's reThink Group. These interactive productions help synchronize the learning that occurs at church with the learning that occurs at home, Joiner says.

Family-Friendly Curriculum -- Rather than fragmenting families during Sunday school, thousands of churches use Group's FaithWeaver curriculum so everyone in the family learns about the same Scripture.

Sharon Stratmoen, director of children and family ministry at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Stillwater, Minnesota, says, "Our goal is to equip the Christian home as the primary place where faith formation occurs, ultimately encouraging a growing relationship with Jesus. Our role is to partner with families in raising kids in the faith. FaithWeaver has been the perfect partner for us! All our families are studying the same Bible story in an age-appropriate way."

Regular Activities -- Scheduled events, as long as they're not overdone, are important for fellowship and learning. Murphy, who says you "need to give families time to have a life," recommends about five annual big events: two for children, two about parenting, and at least one focused on marriage.

Rites of Passage -- At Kingsland Baptist Church in Katy, Texas, Brian Haynes leads the Legacy Milestones project. The church staff intentionally partners with families through six key milestones in a child's life. These include parent/baby dedication, salvation and baptism, preparing for adolescence, purity for life, rite of passage into adulthood, and high school graduation. Almost every milestone involves a required training component, a church event, and a home event.

Small Groups -- These groups, which provide accountability and consistency, can be for specific ages (elementary children, junior highers, parents) or for entire families. "Through small groups, we try to establish another consistent adult voice, besides parents, in kids' lives," Clear says.

In addition to Bible study and prayer time, small groups provide essential fellowship. "So many families are just trying to survive," Murphy says. "People need opportunities to connect with each other, without churches just adding more activities."

Counseling -- Surratt says, "All families are looking to know that the church is concerned about their issues and is there for biblical support and counseling in times of crisis. They're looking for a church that won't shun their problems or pretend that life isn't messy."

Murphy also emphasizes the importance of helping families deal with problems. "Families are experiencing pain," he says. "A church that focuses on meeting their needs will be a church that everyone talks about. It won't matter what your building is like or what bells and whistles you offer."

Churchwide Initiatives -- Bruner, who's also the spiritual formation pastor at Lake Pointe Church near Dallas, launched an initiative to create a "culture of intentional families." It includes a campaign to call every church family every four months to check how they're being intentional about growth in marriage and parenting. Church members can go online to create a game plan for their family's growth.

Family Ministry Strategies

Churches of all sizes can launch a family ministry -- or change the focus of their current one. Follow this advice to ensure that your program is effective.

1. Make a plan. Set goals so you know what you're trying to achieve, plus measures for success so you know if you're getting there. "Think about a plan from birth through adulthood, and have a strategy for families through each stage," Surratt says. "Keep the end goal in mind when forming your strategy."

As you plan activities, set the calendar around your goals. And after your ministry gets underway, keep clarifying your strategy.

Re-evaluate your church's priorities. Before adding a family ministry, "Decide what you need to stop doing so you have the margin to start doing new initiatives for the family," Joiner says.

Educate yourself and your staff. Read books and explore Web sites devoted to family ministry (see "Family Ministry Resources"). Visit other churches and talk to people with successful programs. Attend workshops and conferences, and consider hosting one at your church.

2. Keep it simple. For the sake of families -- and your own sanity -- start small. "It's about finding a few things and doing them well," Murphy says. "Don't try to keep up with the church down the road; it isn't the competition. If you meet needs, word will get out." On the flip side, "More effective ministry isn't usually easy," Joiner says, so you can't totally avoid difficult issues.

3. Start slow. Family ministers warn against trying to start everything at once or advertising something you can't produce. You might end up with competing, rather than complementary, ministries. For example, Clear's first small group efforts suffered because all the resources went toward the weekly worship production. If he could do it over, he says, he would've first invested properly in small groups.

4. Embrace all families. "Families come in all shapes and sizes, and God has things to say to each," says Surratt. "This is where the church can be huge in representing God's wide arms of love, grace, and healing."

Joiner, also a co-founder of North Point Community Group in Atlanta, says he's amazed at how many single-parent families and grandparents have attended the church's KidsStuf experience -- a family service. "It helps them fit into the life of the church and partner with other parents and leaders, which keeps them from feeling alone," he says.

5. Partner with parents. Invest in parents and offer assistance with their vital role. "Parents want to be able to communicate spiritual truths to their kids," Clear says, citing a recent Barna Group study that 85 percent of parents say they believe they have the primary responsibility for teaching their children about religious beliefs and spiritual matters.

6. Provide resources. A lending library filled with books, magazines, videos, and other family resources is invaluable. "Just like we invest in curriculum for Sunday school, we need to invest in tools that will make it easier for families to do the right thing," Bruner says.

7. Nurture staff members' families. Because church staffers serve as models for the congregation, churches must allow them to have happy, successful families. "How you 'live' families is as important as how you 'teach' families," Murphy says. He recommends that churches protect staff families by sending them away for a weekend, lining up a counselor occasionally, and being an all-around support system.

8. Go beyond the church walls. Stay in touch with what families experience. "People say, 'I wish my pastor had young children again' because life is so different today," Murphy says. "I loved being on the church staff, but it's important to be on the outside, too, where people are hurting and hungry."

By applying this advice, your church can make an intentional shift to a family ministry mind-set. You'll know that has happened, Joiner says, when:

1. You invest quality time and resources creating programs for parents and kids, rather than just kids.
2. You're consumed with answering the question, "How can we get parents to reinforce what we're teaching their kids?" rather than "What are we going to teach kids?"
3. You focus on what you want parents to do at home rather than on what you want parents to know about your program.
4. You believe that what happens at home is as important as what happens at church.

Family ministry boils down to committing to do less for kids and more for the family. "When you make this sort of commitment," Clear says, "it totally changes how your ministry looks and operates."

And, as a result, it will totally change countless families.

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Family Ministry Resources

Looking for more information about ministering to families? Here's a sampling of what's available.

Arrow Ministries -- Art Murphy's conferences include Targets for Successful Parenting. His resources include First Things First spiritual-growth journals for children and preteens, The Faith of a Child, and Step by Step video training for leading children to Christ. (arrowministries.com)

FaithWeaver Bible Curriculum -- This curriculum from Group gets the entire family learning about the same Bible passage each Sunday. With easy discussion starters that leaders email home or hand-deliver, faith conversations become a natural part of a family's life. (group.com/faithweaver)

The ParentLink Newsletter -- With this complete, ready-to-customize monthly newsletter, you can email or hand-deliver a professional quality newsletter to equip parents. It's from the editors of Children's Ministry Magazine. (theparentlink.com)

The reThink Group -- Reggie Joiner and Sue Miller are leaders in this organization that exists to help churches rethink the way they minister to kids and families. They've designed a comprehensive curriculum plan that integrates each age group (First Look, 252 Basics, and XP3), the Orange Conference, and other resources. (theReThinkgroup.org)

Strong Families Innovation Alliance -- Kurt Bruner and John Trent offer the Class 100 and Class 300 DVD series, plus seminars on families and marriage. (strongfamilies.com)

