

Danger, Family Ministry

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If we're not careful, there are pitfalls to family ministry that may threaten effective ministry to children.

Sunny days, sweepin' the clouds away.
On my way to where the air is sweet.
Can you tell me how to get, how to get to...

If those couplets strike a chord in your memories of childhood, you probably watched the American PBS program Sesame Street. Bert and Ernie, Big Bird and Snuffleupagus, Gordon and Susan, and Mr. Hooper -- all of them were recurring characters in my day as a preschooler. But my favorite Muppet was the furry blue monster known as Grover.

What I remember most clearly about Grover is a skit you may recall, too. Grover began by running to the camera, pressing his pink nose toward the lens, and announcing that he was, "Neeeeeaaarr!" Then, Grover scurried into the distance and declared that he was now, "Faaaarr!" Over and over, Grover rushed from one end of the set to another, near and then far. The blue Muppet didn't settle for near, and he didn't stay far. He constantly alternated between the two.

That's how family ministry ought to work too.

Family ministry isn't just about reaching those who are near, and it's not all about reaching those who are far. It's about both.

For some churches, it's tempting to aim their children's and family ministries only at those who are near -- church families who seek to develop discipleship practices in their homes. Families in these churches do tend to develop spiritual habits. Yet such ministries also tend to be the ones to attract intact families with faithful parents who have no recent visits from the Department of Human Services. This sort of family ministry focuses on the development of discipleship habits in Christian households.

Other ministries center on those who are far, designing programs to bypass parents and reach children directly. The focus of family ministry in these churches is the formation of a church family for children whose family lives are fractured and fragmented. The problem is, this focus on reaching children directly can become so thoroughgoing that the church never explicitly expects any parents -- even Christian ones -- to engage actively in their children's spiritual development.

So which form of family ministry is more correct?

Neither one.

Alone, neither incarnation of family ministry has it right. One emphasizes the role of the home at the expense of the church; the other focuses on the church and underplays the need for faith influence at home. In both forms, "family ministry" can quickly become one more program that claws for a spot on the church calendar and a line in the church budget.

When I use the term "family ministry," I'm not talking about this sort of program. What I mean is coordinating what you're already doing so that your ministry (1) prepares parents to function as primary faith influence in their children's lives and (2) equips the entire community of faith to care for spiritual orphans. That's the kind of family ministry that can reach near and far.

FROM THE NEAR TO THE FAR

Of course, this idea of reaching near and far didn't originate with me, and it certainly didn't start with Grover. This principle is part of what Peter was proclaiming on Pentecost when he declared that God's promise is "for you and for your children and for those who are far off" (Acts 2:39 NIV). It begins with those who are near ("you and...your children") then expands to reach those who "are far off."

In this, the big fisherman drew from a pattern that's as ancient as the opening books of the Bible. God chose Abraham to "command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord," but God's goal for Abraham reached far beyond Abraham's clan. Through Abraham, "all nations" would one day gain access to God's blessing. A half-millennium later, Moses commanded the heirs of Abraham to embrace God's Word in their own hearts and then to engrave the same words on their children's hearts. And what would be the result of this God-ordained training within the family? Active compassion for those who were far off -- for orphans, widows, and immigrants in the land.

So how can you develop a ministry to children and families that reaches near and far? First off, the right biblical and theological foundations have to be in place. Without these foundations, family ministries tend to swing back and forth between near and far, depending on the whims of the particular moment. Here are three theological foundations that I've found to be particularly important.

All of us are orphans. From the instant Eve took her first taste of forbidden fruit, we all became orphans. There are no natural-born children of God among us; we're all ex-orphans, brought into God's family through divine adoption. This idea doesn't end with the children who physically lack a father and mother, though. It also includes "spiritual orphans"-children who have one or more parents who aren't yet followers of Jesus. To bypass the orphan in favor of a sole focus on whole and healthy families is to neglect a heartbeat that's long marked the rhythms of God's redemptive plan.