

Igniting the Fire in Your Families...Your Church

By Professor Ben Freudenburg

When I get to Heaven, I believe my Heavenly Father will ask me: “Ben, how did it go with the gifts I gave you? Do the daughters I blessed you with know and love Me?” I believe King Jesus will be asking me this question, not the pastor, not the youth worker, not their teachers. He will ask the church a different question: “How did you support parents in shaping children who love and obey me?”

Ministry to families starts with a philosophy that determines one’s actions, guides the journey, and shapes the response. My philosophical view of family ministry reads like this:

Parents are the primary shapers of faith and life in their children; and the role of the church is to partner with the home in that process.

For parents to be successful in their role as primary faith and life shapers, they need a healthy marriage, parenting skills for each age and stage of family life, and skills in teaching the faith. They need resources to shape their family’s view of human sexuality and how to effectively use the resources God has given them. And, if they lose a spouse by death or divorce and choose to marry again, they will need a new set of skills as a blended family.

Therefore, family ministry is creating a Biblical culture at church that impacts the home: a culture that values parents and grandparents as the primary agents of faith formation and a church that sees itself as an intentional training center working to equip them for that role. For me, family ministry is the church equipping the home to be all God intended it to be.

I believe the current church culture has grown parents to believe that the church is responsible for faith formation. I call this “Church Centered-Home Supported.” Family ministry is helping the church move toward a new paradigm, “Home Centered-Church Supported,” in which the church forms the community of faith in a way that agrees with the Biblical view of being a partner with the home and intentionally shapes the church to be a Christian marriage and family forming center.

Listen to what David shares in Psalm 127:3-5. He asks, “*Don’t you see that children are God’s best gift?... Children are the fruit of the womb; His generous legacy.*” Children

were not given just to sustain one's lineage but to be added to God's legacy of faith, and, in so doing, grow God's kingdom. How blessed are you parents! What an honor! What a responsibility to receive this gift from God and make sure His gifts return to him.

We know that lifelong Christian marriage is God's plan and the best environment for raising Godly children. I like how the Message translation of scripture makes it so clear. "And what does He want from marriage? Children of God." (Malachi 2:13). God intended the home to produce children who love God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and their neighbor as themselves.

Scripture clearly articulates that the home is responsible for faith and life formation. My favorite is Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Here God is talking to His people and reminding them to love Him with all they have: heart, soul, and strength. The commandments were not to stay on stone, but to be upon our hearts. Why? So that we, the parents, could teach them to the gifts our Father gave us: our children. We are to impress them on our children's hearts by talking about God's will and ways all the time. The church must not take over for parents what God intended the home to do.

During the past years, there has been an unintentional shift away from the family. The church has moved from a congregational community built on families to a program model that separates children and teens from their families.

The result, faith is less evident in teens' lives than it's ever been. Families and marriages are less valued. Kids today define 'family' as those who care for and love them. Many don't define family in terms of their biological family.

I believe the current church culture has unintentionally led parents to believe that the church is responsible for faith formation, which I call 'Church Centered - Home Supported.'

A family ministry emphasis helps the church move toward a new paradigm, (or back to a Biblical Model for church) 'Home Centered - Church Supported,' in which the church forms the community of faith in a way that agrees with the biblical view of being a partner with the home, and intentionally shapes the church to be a Christian marriage and family forming center.

Congregations experience a change when they return to a biblical understanding of family ministry. They find a wonderful connection between parents and children. It transforms a congregation. And unchurched people come to church to seek help for their family and marriage.

Igniting the fire in the family ministry is about stirring the church to move back to its biblical roots in supporting and equipping the families for their role of shaping faith and life.

The church must build a deliberate and intentional Family Life Education System that supports homes and marriages by way of becoming intentional marriage and family forming centers that partner with the home. The end goal: More kids have a safe and secure place to grow and develop as God's people and finally make it home to the house our Father in Heaven has prepared for them.

Strengthening the Christian family according to God's design in Holy Scripture is the focus of the Family Friendly Partners Network (FFPN), a ministry founded by Professor Ben Freudenburg of Concordia University Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States that has benefited many churches in recent years. It involves an intentional, three-year process to train and equip congregations desiring to be intentional in equipping families to pass on faith in Jesus Christ to the next generation. In 2010, FFPN started the first Singaporean-Malaysian network.

Professor Freudenburg and a team of well-respected family life specialists will be in Malaysia to conduct the 'Igniting The Fire In Family Ministry' conferences on 28 and 29 June (PJ) and 1 and 2 July (Kuching). Please call Focus On The Family Malaysia (PJ office 03-7954-7920 and Kuching office 082-417416) for further information.

Profile: Ben Freudenburg has been a Director of Christian Education for 38 years, working with children, youth, and their families to nurture their love for God and each other through the church and is presently serving as Family Life Program Director and Professor in Family Life Studies at Concordia University Ann Arbor and is the founder of Family Friendly Partners Network. He is married to Jennifer and is father to Cori and Sara and grandfather to Caleb, Markey, Adelaide and Micah. He has served at Shore Haven Lutheran in Cleveland, Ohio; Our Redeemer Lutheran in Hutchinson, Kansas, Concordia Lutheran in Kirkwood, Missouri, and Christ Church-Lutheran in Phoenix AZ as Minister to the Christian Home. He received his BS in ED and certification as Director of Christian Education and Master's of Science –Family Life through Concordia University in Seward Nebraska. He has served as President of Lutheran Education's TEAM department and as President of Lutheran Education Association, a national professional organization for Lutheran educators. He has written for a variety of education and youth journals and magazines and wrote; "The Traveling Guide.... A Vehicle for Youth Ministry"; "Through Children's Eyes", a book of "52 Children's Messages" by CPH and "The Family Friendly Church" by Group Publishing. He has

recently created the Family Friendly Partners Training Network and has led networks of churches in Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio, Wisconsin, Singapore, and Malaysia.