

The Problem and the Promise of Family Ministry

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After decades on the back burner of congregational life, family ministry has suddenly become a hot topic. Type “family ministry” into a search engine, and you computer is likely to crank out more than twenty-five

million results in fewer than ten seconds. Conference after conference claims to provide congregations with the missing key that will enable the church’s staff to launch a successful family ministry.

As a pastor and as a father, this renewed focus on family ministry is at once encouraging and frightening. It’s encouraging because many Christians seem to be regaining a biblical perspective on God’s vision for the role of parents. For too many years, churches and parents have encouraged paid professionals to take the primary role in the discipleship of children.¹ This, even as research continues to reveal that—although other significant adults are also important—par-

ents remain the most influential people in children’s

spiritual, social, and behavioral development.²

Why, then, does this new emphasis on family ministry also present a potential problem? Simply this: In many cases, churches are focusing on family ministry as a reaction to dismal retention statistics. It has been repeatedly reported over the past few years that somewhere between 65% and 94% of church youth drop out of church before their sophomore year of college.³ As a result, many congregations are shifting their ministry models *not* because of convictions that have grown from a seedbed of sustained scriptural and theological reflection. Instead, what motivates them is the supposed crisis of abysmal retention rates—a crisis that they plan to solve by launching a series of family ministry programs. Their focus on family ministry is a pragmatic reaction rooted in a desire for numbers with no standard by which to judge the results other than an increasing number of warm bodies.⁴

In contrast, the goal of this journal is to call congregations to develop theologically-grounded, Scripturally-compelled perspectives on family ministry and then to make Spirit-guided transitions in every ministry to move wisely toward this ministry model. Such shifts may increase the numbers that appear in the spreadsheet



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columns that summarize your congregation's buildings, budgets, and bodies. Then again, these changes could have a negligible or even a negative effect on those numbers! But the spreadsheet numbers aren't the primary point; biblical faithfulness in ministry to families is the goal.

WHERE FAMILY MINISTRY HAS BEEN

Before examining what is promising about family ministry, it will be helpful to take a look at where family ministry has been. Over the past couple of centuries, three distinct trends have characterized church-based ministries to families in the industrialized Western world. Timothy Paul Jones has traced the historical development of these three strands and identified them as *comprehensive-coordinative*, *segmented-programmatic*, and *educational-programmatic*.⁵

Comprehensive-Coordinative Family Ministry

Comprehensive-coordinative ministry seeks to coordinate the church's ministries so that each ministry actively and comprehensively partners with parents in the Christian formation of their children. One historical example of comprehensive-coordinative ministry can be found in the work of a nineteenth-century pastor named Samuel W. Dike. Seeing how Christian parents in his Vermont congregation had disengaged from their children's spiritual growth, Dike developed a plan that he dubbed "the Home Department."⁶

Samuel W. Dike's Home Department equipped parents with needed materials and training to imprint biblical truths in their children's lives. Even when Dike launched the Home Department in the 1880s, he did not intend to supplant efforts such as young people's societies or Sunday Schools. Dike's purpose was for the congregation to partner with parents so that the faith-training of children occurred both in classes at church and in the day-by-day contexts of their households.

Despite early initial acceptance in thousands of churches, the Home Department met a rapid demise, largely due to misapprehension of the original purpose. By 1907, Dike's original design had been nearly forgot-

ten, and the Home Department had degenerated into little more than a program for the distribution of study booklets to shut-ins.⁷ Throughout the twentieth century, a more segmented approach to ministry rose to dominance, especially in American churches.

Segmented-Programmatic Ministry to Family Members

In a segmented-programmatic congregation, every church ministry is segmented by age with little interaction or continuity between them. Ministry to families means having a separate ministry for each member of the family. Segmented-programmatic ministry developed out of the church-based young people's societies that had emerged in the nineteenth century. In some sense, the segmented-programmatic approach in the churches mirrored what was happening in the larger American culture as a growing public education system clustered youth in tightly-graded classes. In the economic boom that succeeded the Second World War, churches solidified segmented-programmatic practices as they increasingly called ministers who focused on particular age-groupings.

Whether or not such an approach ought to be called "family ministry" at all is debatable. What is beyond debate is the dominance of this ministry paradigm, particularly in American churches. Segmented-programmatic ministry so thoroughly dominated church administration in the twentieth century that, even in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, many church members know no other approach. In less than two centuries, the segmented-programmatic paradigm became, at least in people's perceptions, "traditional." It would be a flagrant overgeneralization to blame parental abdication on segmented church programming. At



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the same time, the growth of professional, age-focused ministers may have made it easier for parents to perceive that the training of their children in the fear of God must be someone else's responsibility.

Educational-Programmatic Family Ministry

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the informal family improvement societies of earlier generations gave way to formal "Family Life Education" programs. By the mid-twentieth century, not only universities but also many states and counties featured Family Life Education departments.⁸ Soon, denominations and congregations were establishing Family Life Education departments too. One advantage of this educational-programmatic approach was that it could coexist with segmented-programmatic ministry. Family Life Education could be added quite easily to the existing array of programs in age-segmented churches.

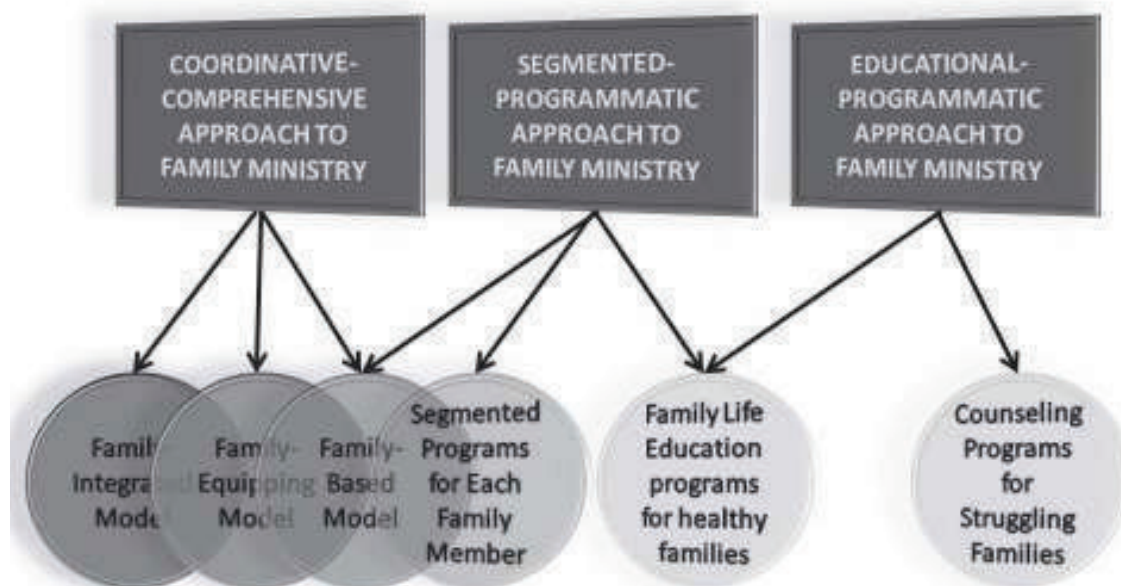
Educational-programmatic ministry was the perspective promoted in some of the most popular twentieth-century textbooks for church-based family ministries. In 1957, Oscar Feucht edited a text entitled *Helping Families through the Church: A Symposium on Family Life Education*.⁹ Feucht's approach provided

practical helps for developing programs to educate families for healthier relationships and to equip parents to train their children. In the 1960s and 1970s, many churches expanded their Family Life Education programs to provide counseling and support groups for troubled family members. Textbooks from Charles Sell and Diana Garland provided foundations for educational-programmatic family ministry that incorporated therapeutic components.¹⁰ While not disregarding parents' responsibility to disciple their children, Family Life Education focused primarily on developing healthy family relationships.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

As the twentieth century faded into the twenty-first, a renewed recognition of the need for biblically-motivated parental engagement in children's discipleship began to emerge among many evangelical pastors and scholars. Now, a rising generation of family ministry practitioners is proclaiming anew the ancient biblical truths that call parents to function as primary faith-trainers in their children's lives. Within this larger movement, three identifiable family ministry models have emerged: *family-based*, *family-integrated*, and *family-equipping*.¹¹ Each of these models recognizes that the

Figure 1: Modern and Contemporary Approaches to Family Ministry



family is a fundamental context for the discipleship of children. Yet none of them ignores the crucial role of the larger faith community in children's Christian formation. Perhaps most important, significant proponents of each of these models have made it clear that what they are pursuing is not a programmatic panacea to improve retention rates but a biblically-grounded partnership between churches and families.

None of these three family ministry models is absolutely exclusive of the others. The worship celebration in a family-integrated congregation, for example, might look a lot like the intergenerational worship in a family-equipping church. Much of the programming in a family-based congregation will likely look like the segmented-programmatic models of previous decades, though family-based churches will involve parents in as many events as possible. Timothy Paul Jones applied the following definition to the common ground that these three contemporary, comprehensive-coordinative approaches share: All of them entail church-wide engagement in a *process of intentionally and persistently coordinating a congregation's proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as primary disciple-makers in their children's lives*. At the same time, each model of family ministry represents a distinct and identifiable approach to the challenge of drawing the household and the church into a life-transforming partnership.

The Family-Integrated Model for Church Ministry: A Complete Break from Age-Segmented Structures

The family-integrated approach represents a complete break from the "neo-traditional" segmented-programmatic church. Proponents of family integration contend that the modern American practice of age segregation goes beyond the biblical mandate—and may even obstruct parents' obedience in discipling their children. As a result, in a family-integrated church, all or nearly all age-organized classes and events are eliminated, including youth group, children's church, and even age-graded Sunday School classes. The generations learn and worship together, and the entire community of faith calls parents—and particularly fathers—to

embrace a primary responsibility for the evangelism and discipleship of their children.

Proponents of family-integrated churches believe that "there is no scriptural pattern for comprehensive age-segregated discipleship, and that age-segregated practices are based on unbiblical, evolutionary and secular thinking which have invaded the church." As a result, family-integrated congregations "reject the emphasis on family-fragmenting, facility-based programs which disregard the Church as a people in community and which displace family outreach." From a family-integrated perspective, "the church's relationships are nurtured primarily through daily discipleship in everyday life, especially fathers and mothers training their families to fulfill the Great Commission, living out the Gospel in ministry to the saints and witness to the lost."¹²

Proponents of family-integrated ministry have sometimes described the local church "as a family of families."¹³ In this, family-integrated churches are *not*, however, redefining the essential nature of the church.¹⁴ When it comes to the nature of the church, family-integrated churches stand with other models of church ministry, affirming the orthodox confessions of faith. "Family of families" is a functional description of how family-integrated churches structure their processes of evangelism and discipleship.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, church planter Henry Reyenga as well as Reb Bradley at Hope Chapel in California were promoting family integration in American churches. Voddie Baucham and Paul Renfro, from Grace Family Baptist Church in Texas, have been some of the most articulate recent defenders of family integration. Other promoters and practitioners of family-integrated ministry include Doug Phillips at Vision Forum and Scott Brown from the National Center for Family Integrated Churches.

Families in family-integrated congregations view their households as contexts for mutual discipleship as well as evangelism of unbelievers. As a result, they are likely to invite unbelievers into their homes for meals on a regular basis. Through intentional hospitality, unbelieving families observe the dynamics of a Christ-centered family, providing opportunities for the believing family to share the Gospel. Small group Bible studies

bring entire families together—including singles, single-parent households, and children of non-believing parents who have been enfolded into believing families.

The Family-Based Model for Church Ministry: Activities and Emphases to Empower Parents within Age-Segmented Structures

The family-based model seeks to merge a comprehensive-coordinative vision for parents with the segmented-programmatic perspective that remains prevalent in many contemporary churches. Mark DeVries pioneered this approach in his book *Family-Based Youth Ministry* after recognizing that “the real power for faith formation was not in the youth program but in the families and the extended family of the church. . . . Our isolated youth programs cannot compete with the formative power of the family.”¹⁵ DeVries identified two key priorities in creating and maintaining a family-based model. First, churches must empower the parents to participate in the discipleship of their children. The second priority is to equip the extended family of the church so that the generations build relationships with one another.

In this model, age-segmented ministries continue with minimal change, but the congregation constantly creates opportunities to involve parents and other adults. The model that Reggie Joiner has dubbed “supplemental family ministry” would probably describe the more programmatic side of family-based ministry.¹⁶ The difference between family-based models and typical segmented-programmatic models is that family-based churches intentionally include intergenerational activities in each ministry and consistently train parents to function as disciple-makers in their children’s lives.

Proponents of the model are quick to assert that the segmented-programmatic paradigm is neither faulty nor broken. The segmented perspective simply needs to be rebalanced so that parents are empowered and intergenerational relationships are emphasized. “There are,” Brandon Shields asserts,

no pressing reasons for radical reorganization or restructuring of present ministry models. There is

certainly no need for complete integration of age groups. What churches need to do is simply refocus existing age-appropriate groupings to partner intentionally with families in the discipleship process.¹⁷

Family-based congregations add new activities and expand existing opportunities so that the generations grow in their appreciation for one another. In the process, the church’s leadership calls parents to engage actively in Christian formation within their household.

The Family-Equipping Model for Family Ministry: Transforming Age-Organized Ministries to Co-Champion the Family and the Community of Faith

Timothy Paul Jones coined the term *family-equipping ministry* to describe the family ministry paradigm that he and Randy Stinson developed for the School of Church Ministries at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Soon afterward, Randy Stinson located and brought together an informal coalition of ministers who were doing in practice what he and Jones had sketched out in theory. Leading early practitioners of the family-equipping model included Jay Strother at Brentwood Baptist Church in Tennessee, Brian Haynes at Kingsland Baptist Church in Texas, and Steve Wright at Providence Baptist Church in North Carolina.¹⁸

In many ways the family-equipping model represents a middle route between the family-integrated and family-based models.¹⁹ Semblances of age-organized ministry remain intact in family-equipping contexts. Many family-equipping churches even retain youth ministers and children’s ministers. Yet every practice at every level of ministry is reworked to champion the place of parents as primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives. Because parents are primary disciple-makers and vital partners in family-equipping ministry, every activity for children or youth must resource, train, or directly involve parents.²⁰ Family-equipping churches cultivate a congregational culture that coordinates every ministry to champion the role of the parents as primary faith-trainers in their children’s lives.

Whereas family-based churches develop intergen-

erational activities within existing segmented-programmatic structures and add family activities to current calendars, family-equipping churches redevelops the congregation's structure to cultivate a renewed culture wherein parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as the primary faith-trainers in their children's lives. As in family-integrated churches, children whose parents are unbelievers are connected with mature believers in the types of relationships that Paul described in his letter to Titus (Titus 2:1-8). Every level of the congregation's life is consciously recultured to "co-champion" the church's ministry *and* the parent's responsibility.

To envision the family-equipping model in action, imagine a river with large stones jutting through the surface of the water. The river represents the Christian growth and development of children in the church. One riverbank signifies the church, and the other riverbank connotes the family. Both banks are necessary for the river to flow forward with focus and power. Unless both riverbanks support the child's development, you are likely to end up with the destructive power of a deluge instead of the constructive possibilities of a river. The stones that guide and redirect the river currents represent milestones or rites of passage that mark the passing of key points of development that the church and families celebrate together.

Most of the authors whose contributions appear on these pages view family-equipping ministry as the ideal. At the same time, the principles that they present will be useful far beyond family-equipping churches, particularly in family-integrated and family-based contexts. Even segmented-programmatic and educational-programmatic ministries may find this journal helpful as they seek to develop theological foundations for their ministries to families.

FAMILY MINISTRY IS NOT THE ANSWER

Before you make plans to launch a family ministry in your church, a few words of warning about family ministry are in order—words that may seem to work against the success of this very journal! Our words of warning are simply these: Family ministry is *not* the answer; fam-

ily ministry will *not* fix your church's problems; and, family ministry will *not* transform people's lives.

The Gospel is what changes people—not programs or practices; not models or methods; but solely and only the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Every local church should be concerned first about how the Gospel is portrayed, presented, and practiced in the congregation. This *includes* considering how local congregations teach on the subjects of marriage and parenting and how they encourage and minister to families. Healthy families are not, however, the goal. To place anything as the church's goal besides the glory of God experienced through the Gospel is to create an idol, and the idol of family ministry is no less loathsome to God than the orgiastic shrines of Canaan or the pantheon of ancient Rome. The believing household *is* a target for the enemy, but Christian families are not the answer to humanity's problems. The Gospel is the answer. Our households are not targeted because Christian families are flawless families. Our households are targeted because they are God-ordained contexts where cross-centered, Gospel-empowered living can be constantly rehearsed and practiced. Through these day-by-day rehearsals of the Gospel, children and parents alike are trained in the fear of God.

ENDNOTES

¹For discussions, see George Barna, "Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child's Spiritual Development but Struggle with Effectiveness," <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/120-parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childrens-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness>; Dennis Rainey, *Ministering to Twenty-First Century Families* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 57-58; Brian Haynes, *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009), 37; Steve Wright, *ApParent Privilege* (Raleigh: InQuest, 2009), 17-18.

²Regarding spiritual development in particular, see Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 261. For the perspective of a family-equipping practitioner, see Steve Wright, *ApParent*

Privilege (Raleigh: InQuest, 2009) 17.

³Kara Powell and Krista Kubiak, "When the Pomp and Circumstance Fades," *Youthworker* (Sept.-Oct. 2005): 51.

⁴David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 221. See also Haynes, *Shift*, 37-38.

⁵Timothy Paul Jones. "Models for Family Ministry" in *A Theology for Family Ministry*, eds. Michael and Michelle Anthony (Nashville: B&H, 2010).

⁶Edmund Morris Fergusson, *Church-School Administration* (New York: Revell, 1922) 124-125.

⁷Flora V. Stebbins, *The Home Department of To-day* (Philadelphia: The Sunday School Times Company, 1907) 3.

⁸M.E. Arcus, et al., "The Nature of Family Life Education," in *Handbook of Family Life Education*, ed. M.E. Arcus, et al. (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1993); Stephen Wallace and H.W. Goddard, *Family Life Education* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005), 3.

⁹Oscar Feucht, ed., *Helping Families through the Church: A Symposium on Family Life Education* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957).

¹⁰Diana Garland, *Family Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999); Charles Sell, *Family Ministry* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹¹In the new edition of *God, Marriage, and Family*, these three distinct models are presented as three variants of family integration, with the family-integrated model—which is criticized sharply—identified as "more purist" in the "conviction and application of family integration" (Andreas Köstenberger with David Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family* 2nd edition [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010] 259-260, see also footnote 20). Family-based ministry, however, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, not as a modification of family integration but as a course correction that assumed the continued existence of age-organized ministries to youth and children (see, for example, the first edition of Mark DeVries. *Family-Based Youth Ministry*. [Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994]). The practice of family-equipping,

on the other hand, grew largely out of a conviction that family-based ministry was well-intentioned but insufficient (Jay Strother, "Responses," in *Perspectives on Family Ministry* [Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009] 127). Throughout this time, family-integrated churches in their contemporary form were developing independently from family-based and family-equipping models.

¹²"A Biblical Confession for Uniting Church and Family": <http://www.ncfc.org/>.

¹³For this quotation as well as a fuller description of family-integrated ministry, see Voddie Baucham, *Family Driven Faith* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2007) 191-195.

¹⁴This point has been repeatedly clarified by proponents of family-integrated ministry; see, e.g., Paul Renfro, "Why Family Integration Still Works," in *Perspectives on Family Ministry*, ed. T. Jones (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic) 89-90. Despite these clarifications, the errant charge that "family of families" entails ecclesiological revision continues to be repeated, most recently in the second edition of Andreas Köstenberger with David Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family* 2nd edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 259.

¹⁵Mark DeVries. *Family-Based Youth Ministry* 2nd edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 61, 67. A new chapter in the second edition of *God, Marriage, and Family* incorrectly states that "family-based ministry" is not widely-known or widely-pursued, overlooking the fact that family-based ministry first made an appearance in the early 1990s, in the first edition of Mark DeVries' *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, and has remained widespread both as a practice and as a terminology ever since. See Andreas Köstenberger with David Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family* 2nd edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010) 372-373 (footnote 20).

¹⁶Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 2009), Concentrate 6.2.

¹⁷Brandon Shields, "Family-Based Ministry: Separated Contexts, Shared Focus," in *Perspectives on Family Ministry*, ed. Timothy Paul Jones (Nashville: B&H,

2009), 98-99.

¹⁸For the model as practiced by these ministers, see Jay Strother, “Family-Equipping Ministry: Co-champions with a Single Goal,” in *Perspectives on Family Ministry*, ed. Timothy Paul Jones (Nashville: B&H, 2009); Brian Haynes, *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009); Steve Wright with Chris Graves, *reThink: Is Student Ministry Working?* (Raleigh: InQuest, 2007).

¹⁹Much that is found in *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 2009) fits in the overlap between the family-based and family-equipping paradigms, at least from an organizational and programmatic perspective; many of the associated publications could be helpful in resourcing the development of family-based and family-equipping ministries, although these materials provide little in the way of theological foundations for family ministry.

²⁰For the “resource, train, involve” principle as well as the term “co-champion,” see Steve Wright with Chris Graves, *reThink: Is Student Ministry Working?* (Raleigh: InQuest, 2007).