

Ministries with Families and Jesus' Great Commission

By Mike Heinz

This brief message underscores the critical importance of family ministry. But let me come at it from an angle you might not expect . . .

If you wander the corridors of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, you can't miss a most compelling concept from Romans chapter 10 painted on numerous hallway walls: "How will they hear?" Taken in context, Paul was challenging his readers, and those of us who have come after them, to take the Good News of Christ's atoning sacrifice to the world. If we don't, how can people outside the church move from spiritual ignorance to saving faith—from death to life?

I invite you to take a look at the seminary-wall-question from a different angle—from the perspective of the ones on the hearing end: "How will they hear?" How they hear the Gospel message has a great deal to do with two things:

1. Their readiness to receive it, and,
2. The effectiveness and timeliness of the message.

A winsome proclamation of the Gospel is easily rejected when the "hearer" isn't ready to hear the message. And the Gospel is far more likely to be welcomed when it comes from a trusted source—e.g., a friend.

That's why God chose to become man: ". . . the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . ." (John 1:14 NASB) and He calls us "friends!" That's also why the Word continues to live in us through His Spirit. When Christ lives in us, our actions and attitudes, and very lives become God's Word to our unbelieving friends—at least as much (and often more) than our words do.

What does this have to do with family ministry? Let's look at some statistics.

Over the past three decades, parents have been fairly consistent in the degree to which they have intentionally, strategically sought to nurture their children's faith. In numerous studies, carried out by diverse researchers, the findings have remarkably been the same: about 10 percent of Christian parents have made consistent efforts to engage their kids in "God talk" and family devotions. Ninety percent make occasional efforts or none at all. In one 1980 study, 43 percent of the teens (all of whose

parents attended church regularly) reported that faith was never discussed in their home. Never.

Another study revealed that teens whose parents consistently, regularly involve them in conversations about God are remarkably different from church-going teens whose parents didn't. They are:

- Nearly four times as likely (13 percent to 52 percent) to try to share Jesus with their non-believing friends.
- Over three times as likely (8 percent to 26 percent) to participate in local or national efforts to promote justice or peace.
- More than twice as likely to participate in projects to help others.

When parents speak about God to their children, consistently and winsomely, something special happens. Their sons and daughters often become "friendship evangelists" and activists for causes close to God's heart. Researcher George Barna calls this kind of parent, a "revolutionary parent." And he calls their children "spiritual champions."

Barna discovered in his research, almost accidentally, this truth about the transference of faith from generation to generation: When conveyed through family spirituality and family love, faith doesn't just take root in the family and stay there, it spreads as though it were a living, breathing organism, from our children to their friends, and then to their friends' children.

Family ministry is perhaps the most strategic initiative the church can undertake to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission.

. . . we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. . . . so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children (Ps. 78:4b,6 NIV).

Mike Heinz serves as Director of Family Ministry at King of Kings Lutheran Church in Omaha, Neb., and leads the Kid's Kount staff. Mike developed the Faith Legacy Series, a parent training series connecting church and home for the faith formation of children from birth through high school. Discover this remarkable series at www.kidskountpublishing.com.

Family Ministry Must Continue!

By James Bradshaw

Agree/Disagree:

Households need family ministry more than ever.

Is there anyone who disagrees with this statement? It is really hard not to believe in something so fundamental when one considers the current statistics, demographics and societal trends regarding family life today. We must conclude: Families need ministry more than ever!

God has blessed The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with a biblical and theological foundation for families. He has granted trained pastors, educators and leaders of this church to help families, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to apply the truths of Law and Gospel in the family setting. He provides families a framework in understanding the sacramental nature of the family rooted in baptism. He has given gifts to the church through the development of Christian resources that further ground households of faith.

The tools are available, yet many churches still do not quite know how to go about family ministry. They struggle with how to program for it and what direction to proceed, when the reality is that it begins with articulating a vision.

The starting place for any family ministry is to see what Scripture has to say about the family. Throughout

the Bible, God provides instruction related to marriage, the family and parenting. God's Word tells us that in the beginning, God created the family. In His infinite wisdom, God chose the family to be the center for faith sharing and practice. In Deuteronomy 6, as well as in other biblical passages, it is clear that His Word is to be taught and lived out through Christian discipleship. Modeling Christ in our relationships is central to who we are, and what He would have us become. The priority of relationships in God's plan is seen from the very beginning of His written revelation.

How might this vision be advanced in congregations? The LCMS Family Ministry Action Team is proactively moving forward, in part, by equipping regional trainers through the Family Friendly Partners Network LLC (www.familyfriendlypn.com) in order to establish additional family ministry networks throughout The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, designed to strengthen congregational ministry with every household. Family ministry training and resources will be available regionally for congregations that inquire. Building family ministry requires congregations and households to walk closely with God, embrace a strong vision for supporting each household, and exercise great patience in the implementation of faith sharing practices. A careful look at the needs and resources available will ultimately shape this ministry.

Why invest in family ministry? God's Word is clear: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deut. 6:6-9 NIV).

Agree? Yes!

Jim Bradshaw directs the educational services ministries of the LCMS Kansas District and serves as chair of the LCMS Family Ministry Action Team.



Family

Cross+Generational Family Ministry

By Robin Fossum

When my husband and I began our adventure in ministry with families, we quickly discovered that some congregation members did not identify themselves with the “family” of family ministry. Invariably, some would react to the invitation to participate in a family ministry experience with, “That’s not for me; I don’t have any kids,” or “My kids are grown” or “I’m not married.”

Our response became: “Whether you are a family of one or a family of many, you are part of the family of God at Bethlehem.” Our mantra must have worked because we began to see many of those same saints get involved in ministry across the lifespan of families through mentoring relationships, small groups, intergenerational congregation events and service outreach, to name just a few.

This intergenerational—or cross-generational—nature is a fundamental core value of Family Ministry. I asked Marilyn Sharpe, a certified family life educator, to talk with our readers about the importance of contextualizing family ministry as cross-generational by responding to these questions:

- What is cross-generational family ministry?
- How does intentional cross-generational family ministry increase the likelihood of passing on faith to the next generation?

Marilyn Sharpe on Cross+Generational Ministry . . .

These are important questions to tackle as we strive to pass on a life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ to the next generation. Cross-generational family ministry begins with



several assumptions:

- Jesus defined “family” as all who believe in and follow Him. Everyone is included. Everyone is necessary.
- Cross-generational family ministry includes all of the opportunities for the generations to come together: to explore Scripture together, to serve together in Jesus’ name, to learn more about our faith from all of the diverse generational perspectives, and especially for us to love one another, know one another as Christ has first loved and known us.
- Jesus was the most radically inclusive one who ever lived. Including all of the generations is simply one important way we follow Jesus.

So, what counts? Worship services, with all of the generations present. Education, in which all of the voices are heard and valued. Family camps and retreats, especially those that include everyone! Singing together. Studying together. But, the generations need to interact and be intermingled.

Let’s explore how doing intentional cross-generational family ministry increases the likelihood of passing on faith to the next generation:

- Each of the generations brings gifts to the body of Christ, the Church. Without all of the generations present, we are all impoverished and are missing some of the essential pieces to the faith formation puzzle.
- Research statistics tell us that our oldest members have the most mature faith, a faith robust enough to be a model of faith, and to share the stories of a long journey of faith to inspire the next generations.
- Children too are sent to us as a gift. Remember Jesus resolving the recurrent argument among His disciples about who would be most important in the kingdom of heaven? He placed a child in their midst and announced, “Unless you become like this little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” We are to learn from children, as well as teach them.
- Perhaps, most importantly, it’s God’s plan. The psalmist proclaims:
. . . we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.
He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,

and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments . . .
(Psalm 78:4-7 NRSV)

One last question: Who's in charge?

Moms and dads, it is up to you to make this happen. In the midst of your more-than-busy lives, make this a priority. Let your congregation, your children, the other adults who already love your kids, and those who will grow to care about them know that this is important. Let them know that you want opportunities to gather cross+generationally: to get to know one another, to learn from one another, to build those lifelong relationships, to tell the stories of faith, to serve together in Jesus name, to build memories. Then volunteer to help it happen. Invite others. Put it on your calendar. Live it! Celebrate what God is up to with all of you.

And did I mention it is fun! Embrace cross+generational family ministry as a deeply faithful, effective and joyous way to pass on faith from one generation to the next.

Marilyn Sharpe is a favorite author for Home Base and the founder of Marilyn Sharpe Ministries, LLC with the goal of "helping congregations equip households to nurture faith in all of life together." She is also author of For Heaven's Sake: Parenting Preschoolers Faithfully. Read reviews of this family faith resource at MarilynSharpeMinistries.com.

A Vision for Family Ministry

Building Strong Families

By Bob Fossum

Building strong families in relationship to Jesus and one another. Twelve years ago, that became my personal vision and mission. The primary family that I seek to build strengths in is my own. My wife and I have become quite intentional about regularly evaluating how we're doing at making our family strong.

But what would be the marks of a strong family? We have built our ministry around the research of Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain. In their book, *Secrets of Strong Families* (Little Brown & Co., 1986), they use excerpts from 3,000 questionnaires to discuss and illustrate six qualities they pinpoint as basic to strong families: appreciation, commitment, communication, time together, living faith and conflict resolution.

There are many family strength theories, but the thing I most appreciate about Stinnett and DeFrain's is its simplicity, focusing on six key targets for building strength



in families!

I have led dozens of workshops and retreats on this Family Strengths Theory. What I find interesting is that many of the family strengths identified by Stinnett and DeFrain's research are very intuitive. I'm sure as you read each of those strengths, you thought, "Makes perfect sense to me!" But, it is also very easy to find support for the importance of these healthy family traits in the Scripture. *Fantastic Families*, by Nick Stinnett and Joe Beam (Howard Books, 1999), is a useful tool for connecting the validity of this theory with the truths of Scripture while providing a variety of illustrations for families to practice these strengths within their relationships.

But what I most appreciate about these "secrets of strong families" is the framework they provide for a congregational vision for Family Ministry. I believe these six strengths are true for congregations, and become healthy benchmarks for measuring and building strength in the family of God in all of our churches.

Most certainly, these strengths are true for the individual families of our congregation. I don't believe there has been a more opportune time for us to prioritize ministry to families than today! In my ministry experience with families, it is apparent that people sitting in our pews hunger for the truths and skills that will enable them to realize hope in their relationships here and now, as well as for eternity.

We know that our communities are filled with hurting families. Family ministry becomes one of the best ways we can reach into our communities with the love of Jesus. Offering parenting classes, family education, support, and family fellowship events are safe environments for our neighbors to make their initial connection with us as a congregation.

Building strong families. A simple vision that drives powerful ministry to families at home, in the church and beyond.

Bob Fossum is a family life minister serving at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Aloha, Ore. Among his specializations are marriage and parenting ministry, small group, connecting ministry and visioning.

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