

Growing the Church by Strengthening Families

A growing church must be God-centered, love-based, Word-focused, and—family-friendly. Without the last of these criteria, a church may be faithful but it cannot be fruitful. And honestly, if it ignores the needs of families, it probably isn't faithful either. Healthy churches are purposeful and strategic in supporting families. So, what is your congregation's plan? Every church has good intentions but few have written plans. As James remarked, "Be warmed and filled," is sweet to the ears but unsatisfying to the stomach. A promise without a plan is a disappointment.

My purpose is to whet your appetite for creating specific plans for ministering to families in your congregation. Forget perfection. Just get started. Ask for your elders' blessing, assemble a group of dedicated friends, and let the ideas flow. You will be amazed what is possible when you come together in prayer with a holy purpose. Heaven will rally around you when you translate passion into action.

Large churches have dedicated staff to address the needs of families in the local church. Small and medium sized churches rely on volunteers to do this work. People just like you (Esther 4.14). The challenge volunteers face has less to do with expertise than energy (you are smarter than you think). So how do you stay focused and fired up over time? Let me share a few suggestions.

First, do not overcommit. No one can be effective when they have too many irons in the fire. There are many good things you can do but only a few make the best use of your time. Cut back, learn to say no, and pour your soul into this vital ministry. Nothing turns out well when your commitments exceed your capacity.

Second, do not go it alone. Build a team to make the work fun and sustainable. Monthly meetings are vital for success, and different kinds of meetings keep things interesting. Ideas and energy are released whenever people come together. Most meetings can be held at the building, but gather in homes for a meal occasionally. An offsite retreat can build your team's morale and momentum. Spend time praying, bonding, brainstorming, planning, assessing, and celebrating. The goal is to get clear and get going. Remember, no meetings, no motion.

Get Clear

Once your team is on board, get clarity around a few key issues.

1) Agree that everything you do will be biblical. Don't keep your elders up at night wondering what you are up to. Set them at ease by assuring them of your commitment to God's word and the unity of the church. The success of your ministry is built on trust. Without trust, everything becomes harder than it needs to be. Besides, the best options are always biblical.

2) Decide to build an intergenerational church. Rather than dividing age groups all the time, bring them together (see Craig Evans excellent article in this issue). A healthy family ministry takes into account the entire church family. Older members have invaluable wisdom to share

with younger Christians if we create opportunities for them to interact. Younger Christians inspire those who are older with their enthusiasm and dedication. A fun way to build ties is to hold workshops where teens teach seniors the most current technology (social media, digital photography, the latest apps and operating systems). When age groups spend time together, the church is stronger.

3) Determine to bless and not stress families. In a healthy church, families should grow closer as their faith grows stronger. Respect the need for family time. Create opportunities for parental involvement and family bonding. It is challenging to find the right balance, but the goal is non-negotiable.

4) Help youth make a smooth transition to adult membership in the church. Long-term goals mean nothing if our youth fall between the cracks between ages 18 and 21. To help teens turn the corner, three things are essential: Biblical literacy, servant heartedness, and a deep appreciation for the local church. How will you ground teens in New Testament Christianity? Without a purposeful approach, teens are unprepared for encounters with charming wolves in contemporary sheep's clothing. Help them love and respect the authority of God's Word. Help them understand that pleasing God requires obedience and not just emotion.

5) Equip Christians to live abundant lives (John 10.10). Your ministry should help families members meet life's demands. So, in addition to core knowledge and values, Christians need biblical life skills that help them relate effectively and live responsibly. Where will these skills be taught and practiced? By helping them live well, their lives are made attractive as well as abundant. The light of the gospel shines brightly when Christians live well-rounded lives. So how do Christian principles apply to driving a car, balancing a budget, making decisions, and handling conflict. Without real life applications, we are missing the mark (and the boat).

Instruct Families

The most basic thing a family ministry does is ground people in God's Word. A well planned curriculum is needed to accomplish this goal. Teaching on marriage and family life should be part of your plan every year or two. Cecil May, Lonnie Jones, Ben Hayes, and I have just finished a new Bible class book that can fill this need: *The Best Husband Ever*. Do not let the name scare you. It is a group study for men and women that can help you become the best "family" ever.

Churches committed to developing strong families can also host a weekend marriage, parenting, or family seminar. This is also great for outreach into the community. Wayne and Tami Roberts do a superb job with their "His Shoes, Her Shoes" workshop. A specialized seminar is not always necessary. Just invite your favorite guest preacher to come and share his best sermons on the subject.

Encourage your own preacher to make sermons on family matters a regular part of Hispanic preaching rotation. Out of 100 sermons a year, 12 would not be too many in light of the pressures families face today. Elders can encourage ministers to write frequent articles on the Christian Home.

I recommend that families subscribe to Christian Woman and the Gospel Advocate Magazine. Issues and articles on family themes appear frequently in GA publications. Supplementing your

daily Bible reading with Christian literature is a wonderful way to unite your family and the church at the same time (1 Corinthians 1.10). Call the Advocate and they will be happy to recommend helpful books on marriage, parenting, and family life you can share with your congregation.

Involve Families

In addition to study, a healthy family ministry provides opportunities for putting Christ's teachings into practice. We must be doers and not merely hearers of the Word. Nothing discourages young people more than adults who are all talk and no show. Biblically sound churches cannot put all their eggs in the Bible School basket. Soundness means health, and health means being active doing good (Galatians 6.10). Exercise is the way to develop God-given potential and strengthen new skills, so get busy and you will get stronger and closer at the same time.

One way to avoid becoming one dimensional is to appoint an activity director for each Bible class. In addition to arranging social gatherings, he can lead the class in service projects. Why not have adult classes (older and younger) combine once a year to spend time in fellowship and service. The benefits of studying, eating, and working together are immeasurable, but to reap those benefits, you must be intentional. Close-knit churches do not happen by accident. You must plan for it.

Leadership training activities like Lads to Leaders, Timothy and Dorcas Classes, and KidSing (westhuntsville.org) will bless your youth, their families, and the church. They also bless our brotherhood and the world. These ministries provide outstanding opportunities for adults and young people to be involved together in ways that accomplish God's purpose for His people.

Youth deacons can bring parents and teens closer through service to the church and community. Deacons over worship can let fathers and sons serve together on the Lord's Table or other parts of the service (what an inspiration to the congregation and a joy to the men). Deacons over missions can encourage families to go on mission trips together. Ask the leaders of all your church's ministries to consider ways to involve families.

Influence Families

Influence refers to your capacity to impact others' character, behavior and development. A comprehensive family ministry builds closer relationships between all members. When young people have significant adults in their lives, they are more likely to stay faithful. A youth minister may come and go, but members are like extended relations. Their love and influence anchor us in the faith.

Caring elders bring their influence to bear by being involved in the lives of families they oversee. Elders, do you know children's names and hobbies? Do you visit in homes and invite families to your place? Do you visit classes before spring break to pray with teens who will be facing special temptations. Do you check on people going through times of uncertainty and difficulty. You cannot be everywhere and tend every need in real time, but you can assess and invest your influence where it can do the most good.

Deacons can enlist teens as interns and involve college students when they are home for the summer. Do not let them shelve their talents. Put them to work. Education directors can ask

parents and children to teach together in Bible classes. Before they graduate, ask baptized teens to teach or assist in a class. Inviting teenage girls to ladies' retreats and inspiration days make them feel special. Making them a part of the program and planning is a delight to all.

Social media is a great way to extend influence. College deacons can stay in touch with students in different cities and states (don't forget to send care packages from the folks back home, especially during exam week). Youth deacons can do more than send reminders about the next group activity. Throughout the week, send Bible verses, inspirational quotes, meaningful pictures, and an occasional clean joke: "What do you call fake macaroni? Impasta! Don't be an impasta this week, Matthew 23.37," (compliments of Greg Tidwell).

Get Going

This article has reached its end but for you this is just the beginning. The ideas here are like a tasting menu: A small sampling of soul-nourishing possibilities. You can create a culture where families not only remain faithful, but flourish. Imagine what is possible with God's power behind you.

Jesus said, "Ask and it shall be given to you." Ask God to bless your ministry. Ask for your elders' support. Ask for volunteers to join you. Ask for advice from sister congregations. Ask yourself for your best effort (don't just try to squeeze in another commitment in your overloaded life). James said we do not have because we do not ask (James 4.3). Paul said when we do ask we seldom ask enough (Ephesians 3.20). The point is that we should combine big dreams with big prayers to make a big difference in the world. And where could you make a bigger difference than in growing the church through strengthening families?