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Remembering the Family in Youth Ministry

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It has been said that the most segregated hour in America is Sunday morning at ten o'clock. Historically, this saying has been used to describe the American religious experience in which different races congregate in churches made up of single ethnic groups. A less frequently discussed, but also damaging form of segregation, is the separation of generations at this hour. The following example illustrates this point. Mark and Diana Brown arrive at Generic Road Church of Christ in their minivan with their elementary-age daughter, Amber, and their high school son, Alex. As soon as they arrive at church, Alex goes and sits up front with the rest of the youth group for worship while Mark, Diana, and Amber take a seat in their usual place for worship. After communion, Amber is dismissed for children's church where she stays for the rest of worship. After worship, Alex goes to the youth room for Bible class, Amber goes to her fourth grade Bible class, Diana goes to an adult class, and Mark goes to a men's class. At noon they all pile back into the minivan and head home until the midweek meeting where the same exercise is repeated.

Notice how each family member has had a significantly different worship and Bible study experience. There has been little or no shared experience as a family. Amber and Alex had no opportunity to hear what their parents have to say about faith issues or their relationship with God. Mark and Diana had no opportunity to hear the issues with which their children are dealing, and they may have no idea where their children stand in relationship with God.

In the life of most congregations, although dynamic things are being done in training individuals in their faith, no forum exists in which parents and children interact *together* in faith-focused activities. As a result, a child may go through an inspired and creative elementary, junior high, and high school programs in his or her church and graduate without ever sitting down with Mom and Dad at church and sharing spiritual issues together. Obviously, this should be going on at home; but how has the church helped parents "recite [God's commandments] to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deut 6:7)? In an ideal world, this interaction is happening at home; but what about children whose parents are too uncomfortable with the intimacy associated with talking about spiritual matters? Many parents could use a door opened at church, a conversation started, in order to normalize conversations about spiritual matters at home. And what of children whose parents are not Christians—do they receive adult mentoring in the faith?

> **Youth ministry has generally been fad-friendly, grasping at each new idea that comes along. This is dangerous because the direction of the ministry becomes dependent on the next new idea.**

After looking at the data, history, and direction of youth ministry, it is hard to deny the vacuum that the church has left in ministering to families as a unit. Youth ministry has generally been fad-friendly, grasping at each new idea that comes along. This is dangerous because the direction of the ministry becomes depen-

dent on the next new idea. There is no consistent direction or clear vision for the ministry. Fad-friendly ministry is an attempt to grab hold of the new fad without having to change or admit anything is lacking in the old way of doing things.

I believe that it is the church's responsibility to be equipping today's postmodern parents in how to "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (Prov 22:6). Parents need to be equipped within the context of the family of God. This is key to family and youth ministry.

The church has not necessarily been working *against* the family with segregated programming for all ages, but neither has it been proactive in training and equipping parents in their role as spiritual directors. One could argue that the church *has* worked against the family by not upholding the principle that families need to share the disciplines of corporate worship, prayer, and spiritual sharing as a unit. If the church has been neither positive nor negative in its programming for families, then by default it has had a negative effect on spiritual growth within the family. The church must be a positive force spurring parents on, encouraging them and training them to fulfill their spiritual roles more effectively.[1]

A FUTURE OF FAMILY MINISTRY IN OUR CHURCHES

What is the future of family ministry among our churches? How will we respond to the issue of family ministry? There are at least four paths that youth and family ministry could take: the "family-ish" youth ministry model, the family ministry model, the ministry to families model, and family-based youth ministry model.

The "Family-ish" Youth Ministry Model

A "family-ish" youth ministry is one that keeps the traditional (segregated) philosophy of ministry and adds several programs that address the needs of families within the church. This is accomplished by adding such programs as a "family night" program where families come together for an event that is really a youth group activity that includes adults. What has not changed is the programming structure, parental involvement, or family interaction. The regular youth group activities have not been affected in structure, purpose, or style. Parents are not expected to do much more than attend an additional event here or there. The basic structure of youth group life is not affected. A "one-eared Mickey Mouse" model, in which a new module is just attached to the status quo, continues to be propagated (see figure 1).[2]

The "family-ish" model also does a disservice to the youth ministry itself, since most ministers are already overtaxed. Adding a few more programs to an already busy ministry calendar stretches the gifts and the time of the minister as well as the families. If a ministry is already offering events three times a week (Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service and midweek
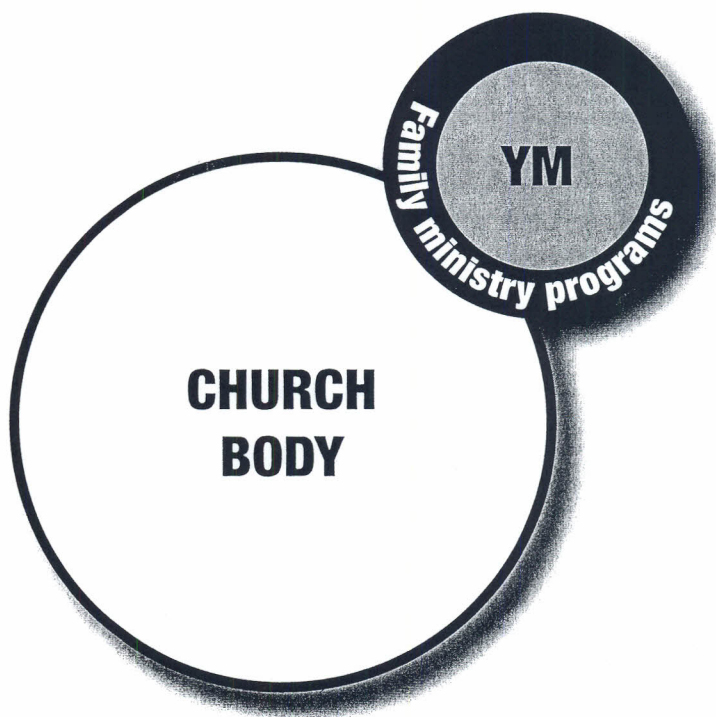
Figure 1

Bible study) and another family program is added on top of weekend events, it pushes the limits of what a ministry can expect from today's family. The current trend of students over-committing to sports, music, and other extra curricular activities already limits the ability of the family to have any "family time" at home.

Figure 2

Youth ministry needs to take into account the competing interests in a family's life and program for the needs of a family without overtaxing it. A family with limited time resources confronted with a new set of interesting choices only incurs dissonance because the family wants to take advantage of everything but cannot.
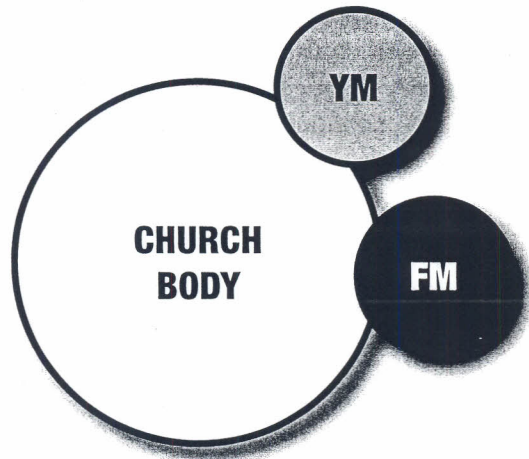
The Family Ministry Model

The family ministry model is defined as an extension of the "one-eared Mickey Mouse" model, where an entirely different mission statement and program structure for family ministry is tacked onto the church. Quite possibly, but not intentionally, this results in competition for youth ministry (see figure 2). Adding a family ministry is a radical response to the call for ministry to the family unit. It is done for two basic reasons. First, the target audience is made up of more than those families represented

by youth ministry alone. Churches program for families of all ages in order to achieve the greatest success. Unfortunately, this results in frustrating youth ministry families in the same way "family-ish" ministry does: by offering more events than that in which a family can realistically participate. Second, this response does not consider the segregation these additional programs cause. Instead, the entire ministry could be streamlined based on purpose and need.

Ministry To Families Model

Dr. Chap Clark of Fuller Theological Seminary describes the purpose of the model of ministry to families as equipping and strengthening individual families in the church.[3] He believes that this model suggests to those involved that the nuclear family should be the primary training ground for spiritual nurture and discipleship.[4] The church's responsibility is to do everything it can to train the nuclear family in the skills necessary to develop faith within that individual unit (see figure 3).

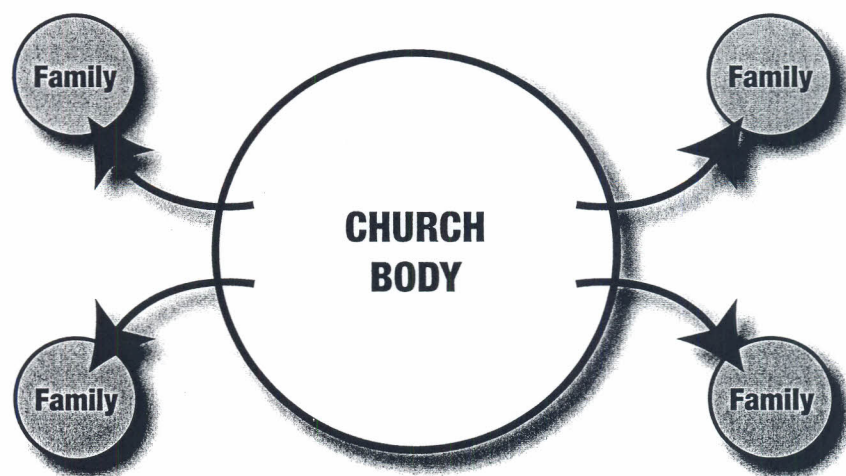This model presents a step in the right direction because many

Figure 3

families lack the will to carry out discipleship training in the home. Ministry to families focuses on the importance of the mother and father being the spiritual heads of the household and raising the children in the faith.[5] The church needs parents to be spiritual heads of their families. Consider Jewish families whose household rituals include weekly Shabbat prayers led by the mother, Hanukah candle-lighting in the home, annual Passover Seders, Yom Kippur, and Rosh Hashanah. All of these present parents with repeated opportunities to model their faith and dependence on God at home within the family unit. Jewish traditions also offer parents opportunities to explain how God continues to act in their lives.

The weak point of this model is that it lessens the importance of the entire community of faith as a family unit. The metaphors of the New Testament that refer to the church as a family or body emphasize the entire community of faith's responsibility to its members.[6] The body must watch out for the body. A mother or father cannot simply mind his or her own needs while neglecting the needs of the children or spouse. This same principle must be at work within the church community. Families must be taught and trained to minister to each other.

Family-Based Youth Ministry

A family-based youth ministry sees the church as *extended family*. It views family ministry in a broader sense than the other models, depending on the entire family of God to draw together to raise children in the faith. Families draw closer within a larger context of community so they do not have to feel that they are raising their children alone.

This model of ministry relies on intergenerational participation. For the community to resemble a family, the youth ministry must include spiritual aunts, uncles, moms, dads, and grandparents in their staffing and programming (see figure 4). Generations need to learn and grow from one another as they journey in faith.

Family-based youth ministry works to expand the church's understanding of family from the individual nuclear family to that of a "clan." It works against the isolationism of a traditional youth ministry model, forcing teens to broaden their worldview to consider the needs throughout the church community.

Figure 4

THE ROLE OF YOUTH MINISTER: TRADITIONAL V. FAMILY-BASED

During the early and middle adolescent years, a teen begins to individuate from his or her parents emotionally and spiritually.[7] It is within the context of a healthy relationship with both parents, especially the father, that this transition is most successfully accomplished. A student needs to develop her faith *herself* during these years. Teens are in need of guidance and direction from their parents to help them make right and wise decisions with regard to their faith. The philosophy that traditional programming promotes is that the youth minister is responsible for seeing that the young people of the church come to know Christ without respect to the parent's involvement. This type of leadership is what we will call a *substitute spiritual parent*.[8] This is not a biblical model.

The substitute spiritual parent model causes the church to fail in three areas. (1) The church does not fulfill the role of teacher and trainer for parents by providing them with resources necessary for them to be proactive in their role as spiritual director. (2) The church has not set benchmarks for parents to reach in the
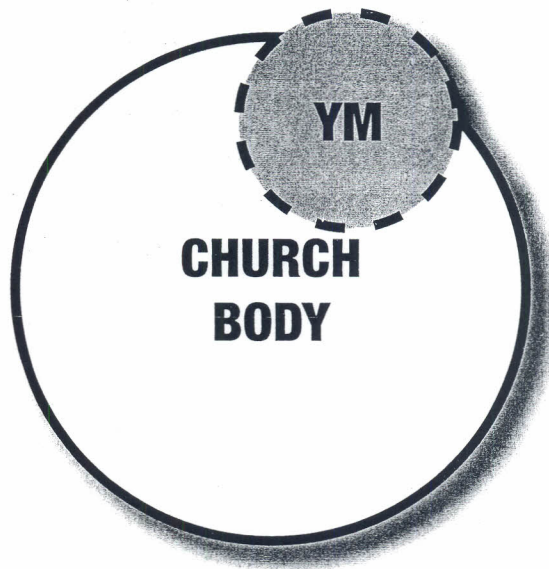
spiritual teaching and training of their children. (3) The church does not provide arenas for families to be exposed to mentors and spiritual "aunts" and "uncles" so long as it continues to separate the generations in a majority of its programming.

Fortunately, "purpose-driven" programming is on the rise and valuable questions are being asked of those traditional ministry programs, such as *why do we do this program or that program? Who are we trying to reach with this event? What should our final product look like after seven years in this ministry?* Churches, parents, and youth ministers need time to stop and evaluate from where youth ministry has come, where it is, and where it is headed. Breaking the cycle of doing things the way they have always been done and returning to church's call to fulfill its role of assisting families is imperative.

> **. . . the role of youth and family minister should be one of a *supplemental spiritual parent/mentor.***

In contrast to the model described above, the role of youth and family minister should be one of a *supplemental spiritual parent/mentor*. A youth minister is in *partnership* with parents in raising young people in their faith through his or her pastoral teaching, equipping, and service to the family unit. A youth minister who views his or her role as supplemental will understand the boundaries and limitations as a minister. For example, teens with difficult decisions about faith choices need to be counseled and helped to discuss these issues with their parents. A teen's decision about baptism in a camp or retreat setting needs to be made in consultation with his or her parents so that they may share in this wonderful experience as a family.

A minister who views his or her role as supplemental will not take responsibility for the teen's spiritual growth out of the parents' hands. He or she will give parents curriculum and opportunities to serve in their role as spiritual parents on a regular basis. For example, the minister might send home or email "talk sheets" for families to discuss at dinner or on family night that contain the relevant spiritual issues being dealt with at youth group. The minister might host a parenting seminar on the stages of adolescence or on positive discipline to help parents gain the confidence, insight, and information needed to raise teens today.

Probably the most effective way to serve the family is to provide access to spiritual aunts, uncles, and grandparents who serve as mentors, teachers, role models, and ministry resources. This could be accomplished by hosting a dating seminar in which couples from all generations give advice on courtship and marriage. Families without youth group children can help bridge this gap by hosting events in their homes. Adopt-a-teen programs and community service projects aid in bringing generations together. Talking on any subject begins to build vital relationships between teens and others in the church.

A family-based ministry, in its role as a supplement to the parents, will not program events in competition with traditional family times such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Mother's Day; it will leave those dates open or program specific events to bring the family together. It might offer classes that bring parents and children together, in a forum for discussing and praying over faith issues with one another. It could encourage and train students to sit with their parents during worship and share that experience as a family.

David Elkind states in his book *Ties That Stress* that postmodernism has brought an entirely new set of problems to the task of raising a child. Psychological, sexual, and cultural expectations within a family have shifted radically in the past fifty years.[9] Family life in a postmodern world is much different from that of the Boomers and Xers. Elkind also addresses the occupational demands that are placed upon teens today, as they relate to after-school and summer jobs. In the 1950s after-school jobs and training programs were common in educational institutions. Today, there are fewer and fewer programs dedicated to teaching teens valuable workplace skills and helpful attitudes toward work. Teens are also not expected to contribute their earnings to the family, as was the expectation fifty years ago. As a result, a sense of responsibility and connection to the family is lost and individualism is increased.

A family-based youth ministry understands that parents need more training and information than ever before to equip them with necessary job skills. It also understands that these issues are best dealt with *within* the home and not outside of it. Friends cannot come close to the effectiveness and credibility that a caring mother or father can provide as they assist their son or daughter in navigating the dangers and temptations of junior high and high school. Communication between parents and teens regarding these issues happens most effectively with a foundation of faith, prayer, and spiritual sharing between parent and child. The model ought to include programs, training, and the providing of information that addresses the following three areas.

1. Faith. Parents and teens need to share in the disciplines of faith *together*, not as separate entities within the same building. This may include discouraging youth groups from sitting together within the corporate worship, and instead encouraging families to sit together again. It may also include some sort of ceremonial symbol of family unity such as having families serve communion, share testimonies together, or read scripture in the corporate worship services. It is important to communicate within the family of faith that the family unit is still a vital and important aspect in the life of the congregation.

2. Prayer. Parents and teens praying *with* and *for* one another is vital. Perhaps the most important relationship that ought to exist between a parent and a child is one of God's child to God's child, reinforced by a time of prayer with one another. Imagine a son going off to college and facing a major life decision. He calls his mother or father in the midst of contemplating the decision to pray together about it. This pattern of behavior can only exist if the foundation was laid many years before. How then does the ministry assist and train parents in this discipline? The ministry could host quarterly "concerts of prayer" where parents and teens are guided in seasons of prayer with one another about family issues. Teens can be enlisted as prayer warriors for parents of the congregation and vice versa. Email can be used to update families regarding prayer needs.

3. Spiritual Sharing. What arenas does the church provide for parents and teens to discuss spiritual issues and share their testimonies *together*? Where can a child hear what his or her mother thinks about theological issues and vice versa? The church could truly capitalize on Sundays and midweek study times to foster this interplay. A weekly parent/teen Bible class would be a natural forum for the church to aid and train parents in their role as spiritual directors. Bringing parents and their teens together in a familiar time slot while engaging in new activities provides a tremendous training ground for families. This also provides a tremendous model for young families and young adults as they are allowed to see and hear the stories of turning points and "watershed moments" in the family. Families could eventually give testimonies in the corporate worship, expressing ways in which God has worked through these relationships.

A model that addresses these three vital means of interaction between parent and child begins to break youth ministry's cycle of being co-dependent with those parents who falter in their role as spiritual directors. This model will broaden the definition of family to include the church body as it is described and portrayed in the New Testament. As family ministry begins to thrive and flourish within the church, may God bless us with growth in the spiritual lives of our young people.

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ENDNOTES

1   See Eph 5:21–6:4, Col 3:18–21, and 1 John 2:12–15, where the writers specifically address the roles of and relationships between parents and children. Throughout the New Testament, the authors were sensitive to the fact that the building block of the church was the individual family unit. In these passages, the authors give relational advice as well as instruction on parents' roles as spiritual mentors. The church needs to follow through in serving this role to which God has called it.

2 Stuart Cummings-Bond, "The One-Eared Mickey Mouse," *Youthworker Journal* (Fall 1989): 76–78. In this article, Cummings-Bond describes the separation of the youth program from the rest of the life of the church in order to address the special needs of adolescents as they began to develop in the early part of the century. What has resulted is a "tenuous" relationship between the youth ministry and the church. Cummings-Bond states that, "Churches with strong youth programs have usually controlled adolescence by corralling it not within the daily rhythm of the church, but outside it" (78). Bond also describes the need for adolescents to hear the "secrets of adulthood" through multi-generational discussions of spiritual issues. A youth ministry that does not allow teens to hear from the rest of the church begins to understand church only from a youth ministry perspective and is not able to make the transition to a normal church experience.

3 Chap Clark, *The Youth Worker's Handbook to Family Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 16–17.

4 Ibid., 17.

5 This model relies heavily on passages like Deut 4:9–10, 11:18–21 that communicate the importance of parents passing the faith down to their children through teaching and training.

6 Cf. 1 Cor 12:14–27, Eph 4:12 and 1 Pet 4:17.

7 See Clark, 117.

8 It must be noted that the model of substitute spiritual parent may allow the minister to serve a vital and necessary role for those teens whose parents are absent, do not attend church, or are emotionally and spiritually absent. In these special cases a *surrogate* spiritual parent serves a teen that is without the necessary spiritual guidance at home and has the need for someone to step in and serve in this capacity.

9 David Elkind, *Ties That Stress: The Family Imbalance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1996), 147–168.