



The Family-Based Model

Youth and young adults have their genesis in families. This model engages families in the process of youth and young adult ministry. At a time in which age segregation has dominated many forms of ministry, the family-based model returns to what God originated in the Garden of Eden and seeks to restore today.

Congregations empower families to provide religious instruction, worship experiences, service activities, and social interaction rather than segmenting age-specific programming like a giant public school or a department store. Bigger isn't necessarily better. Fracturing families certainly isn't. Those who lack positive family environments benefit from positive functional family settings, which offers a better alternative than removing youth and young adults from their existing family.

Biblical Basis

Families predate the Fall of humanity (Genesis 1:27-28, 31). When it comes to religious education, God gave his people instruction to shape and pass on the faith through families (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). The bridge between the Old Testament and New Testament contains a prophetic message of restoring families by turning the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents (Malachi 4:5-6).

Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains rich, family imagery. The verses often read at

weddings regarding the love and submission of a husband and wife (Ephesians 5:21-33) actually illustrates the great mystery of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32). Paul also includes counsel to children as well as parents (Ephesians 6:1-4), citing the 10 commandments and God's promised blessing. Paul introduces the book by naming God as the "father" of our Lord Jesus Christ and specifying God's love through His unchanging plan to adopt us into His own family through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3-5). In addition to the family metaphor, Paul includes the Body concept in which disparate parts fit together perfectly as each part does its own special work that helps the other parts to grow. This makes the entire body healthy, growing, and full of love (Ephesians 4:16).

It seems that from the beginning, and right through to the end, God's creation of the family posits the ideal setting for the family of God. To the extent we emulate that, we tap into God's original and redeemed environment for spiritual life and growth in community.

What It Looks Like

Expect more small units rather than large ones. Expect multiple generations rather than narrow age differentiated groupings. Expect rough spots, like families. Expect loyalty, maturation, struggle, change, celebration, disappointment, rites of passage, and pulling together for a common cause. Expect fights, forgiveness, changing roles, growth and adjustments. This is family.

Recognizing the benefit of occasional same-age activities, these still will take place in family settings or expanded family settings. When it comes to youth and young adult ministry, the roles young people play must change because they are changing. Instead of passing information and right behaviors from one generation to the next, the youth and young adult years call for new expressions and fresh discoveries. Instead of segregating this into a separate youth group or youth church service, existing leaders offer opportunities and support, feedback and encouragement as youth and young adults find and express their unique relationship with God and creation.

Youth and young adults receive real responsibility with opportunities and funding for them to minister. This includes accountability and more opportunities and additional funding. It also expects accountability to youth and young adults, and not merely accountability from them. Just as youth and young adults must "put up with" adult preferences in music and worship styles, adults must "put up with" youth and young adult preferences as well. The same could be said for children's music and worship. After all, God "puts up with" all of it, since our best falls far short of the worship that takes place in heaven!

The concept of "family" must exceed a nuclear family image of a father and mother and 1.7 children. "Extended family" presents

a more accurate picture for this model, with additional generations, individuals, pairings, changes, uniqueness, love, expectations, traditions, hope, security, and intimacy. In this crucible, God becomes fully integrated in life, growth, change, and consistency.

Keys To Make It Work

The primary key for a family-based model is commitment to engagement. Children usually have no choice in the matter. But as a person "grows up" the possibility of departing becomes real and sometimes expected. Whether it's "finding one's self on your own" or "going away to college" or "needing to get away" such expectations presume that the desired result could not occur in the existing family context. Maybe it could. The current social expectation for many is that children must move away and start something on their own. If this really were true, why have so many young adults boomeranged back home?

A commitment to engagement means working through difficulties instead of running from them. It retains hope in spite of current realities. It renews through forgiveness and second chances. It absorbs another's hurts and intensifies another's joy. It finds its place and aids others to explore and find theirs as well. It gives and it takes. It projects equality while juggling inequality. It sacrifices, shares, and makes demands. It launches beyond the family and yet protects the family.

Change remains constant. A key to make the family-based model work incorporates the changes in the life cycle. Sometimes changes should be stimulated, and other times slowed. Celebrate the present, but don't bronze it so the present actually gets stuck in the past.

Obstacles

The family has been under constant attack, dating back to the Garden of Eden. That hasn't changed today. Sexuality, also a

long-time issue in the history of the world, continues to significantly influence families. Sin in its various forms, including basic selfishness, creates multiple divisive elements that war against families. Divine grace, forgiveness and love are necessities for families. Without these Godly elements, families have little hope.

Opportunities

Based on God's original creation and his on-going creative acts, families might be the most ideal environment for God's presence among human beings. Where or what is "home" for you?

