



Youth Ministry Stretches to Include Families



Highlights

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Many congregations that have focused on "youth ministry" are widening their view to include ministry to and with families.

This direction is in response to these three realities in our culture:

- a perceived lack of time for parents to engage in family faith discussion
- a deficiency of interpersonal communication skills
- a dramatic limitation in understanding the vocabulary of faith

Problems of Time, Skills and Vocabulary

Time

Family time is devoted to academic, athletic and social activities and careers. Fewer families eat a meal together during the day, even once during the week. One contemporary author claims that in many families, children are being raised by appliances. Often the longest uninterrupted conversation happens in the car as parents transport their sons and daughters to their next event.

When time is available, even the best of families find it difficult to discuss faith issues.

Skills

When discussion does happen, it's hampered by poor communication skills and media modeling. The Apostle Paul's encouragement to the Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," is reduced by the high price of media time to "I can."

Families can't talk about faith and doubt without the fundamental skills of listening, trusting and affirming one another.

Vocabulary

A recent translation of the Bible has avoided the use of the word "grace" because it is not commonly used in daily conversation.

If the word "grace" has left our vocabulary, there is little chance the average person will understand "justification," "redemption," or "salvation." Many families no longer have the background gained from intergenerational conversation that is necessary to talk about the faith.

Models of Youth and Family Ministry

The Hand Off

No matter how good our family ministries are, there will always be a place for age-level ministries. Unfortunately, many parents are not committed to exploring faith issues with their daughters and sons.

Despite their size, most congregations continue to make a place for young people to interact with their peers and caring adults. Many congregations are expanding the traditional high school youth group to offer peer groups for middle school or junior high, even elementary children. These younger "youth groups" provide opportunities for youth from different schools, neighborhoods and communities to develop friendships that will continue into high school. Often these students are willing to bring friends to their activities. Age-level group ministries provide great openings to being new youth into the faith community.

The downside to this facet of ministry is the temptation for families to consider youth events as the total package of faith formation. Ideally, the primary teachers of the faith are found in the family.

Leaders in this style of ministry often plan and implement events for youth. Their contact with parents may be to recruit volunteers for food or transportation. Close personal relationships between leaders and youth often develop, but when the leader leaves, the youth find it easy to spend time in other non-church activities.

If you are offering age-level ministry groups, consider these ways to involve families:

- Hold an annual family picnic with the age-level groups providing games or entertainment
- Send a family devotional resource to each household regularly.
- Offer servant events that include other family members. Intentionally invite non-member families whose youth attend your activities.
- When parents refuse or are unable to become involved, utilize other adult mentors who can teach the faith.

Hand in Hand

Ancient wisdom and modern-day sages tell us "it takes a village to raise a child." Families and congregations working hand in hand can help young people grow both socially and spiritually.

Congregations using this approach typically have both youth groups and ministry with parents. Leadership listens for family needs, coordinates resources and events, and joins the community in celebrating growth. Intergenerational activities and festivals are also ways the faith story is shared in an extended family setting.

In many small rural and urban congregations--particularly African American and others which are ethnic specific--the success of youth ministry is youth and family ministry. What has become a trend has been their approach all along. They function "intergenerationally." Hand in Hand may not even be their approach. They understand and function as a village raising its children.

For congregations that would like to increase family involvement:

- Offer cross-generational events with both structured interaction and time for conversation.
 - Intentionally schedule all ages to lead in worship. Sunday morning is the most important faith formation time for youth and their families, and family involvement is crucial. Help young readers present the scripture lessons. Invite families to write the prayers for a specific week. Ask older adults to share a faith story as part of the sermon.
 - Include older adults in the youth group's activities when appropriate. Involve singles as part of the Sunday school Christmas program.
 - Obtain a copy of "FaithLife in the Home Resource Guide" from Educational Media, 1.800.966.3382
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Give 'em a Hand

A few congregations approach faith education by placing the entire responsibility in the home.

For this to happen, parents need many opportunities to grow in their own faith and learn about faith formation in their children. Here, Sunday school for adults is considered even more essential than classes for children and youth. The entire culture of the congregation has a different "feel" as people talk about home-based learning and servanthood.

Confirmation focuses on mentoring instead of pastor-led classes. The probing faith discussion of a youth group might be overshadowed by relationship-building and fellowship because the faith talk has happened intensely in their own homes. Here the leader empowers families, recommends resources, and celebrates growth as it is reported.

Resources

In addition to encouraging parents' faith formation, have resources available for home use:

- Videos covering the age span--Bible stories for young children, issue-oriented videos for older youth
- Publications which cover current topics and provide opportunities to learn about faith and faith formation from other perspectives.
- Books, commentaries, biographies and storybooks.
- Games that are non-competitive but highly interactive, such as "FaithTalk" (available from Educational Media 1.800.966.3382).

Nearly every congregation is already doing some form of family ministry within their youth ministry approach. But, considering time, skills and faith vocabulary needs of today's families, nearly every congregation still has room to grow.

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