

FOREWORD BY CHAP CLARK

# REIMAGINING CHURCH AS FAMILY



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**D6** FAMILY MINISTRY

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Published by D6 Family Ministry

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D6 Family Ministry  
114 Bush Road  
Nashville, TN 37217  
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ISBN: 9781614841982  
Printed in the United States of America



## WHAT MINISTRY LEADERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THIS BOOK

There is a wind of the Spirit that has brought the need for family ministry to the forefront of church ministry. This book is very much needed and I'm sure will be a valuable resource for church leaders and those studying family ministry. I have such deep respect for all the authors and I'm grateful they included chapters on grandparenting and single parents, which has been missing in some family ministry books. The entire concept of rethinking how we do church as family is spot on. This will be a go to book for our ministry at HomeWord.

—Jim Burns, Ph.D., founder of HomeWord, author of *Doing Life With Your Adult Children: Keep Your Mouth Shut and the Welcome Mat Out*

When a single parent, never married, or blended family walks into church, do they feel at home? It's common for churches to cater toward traditional families (and we certainly want to equip nuclear families), but those with foster kids and different family situations can feel left out. This book has opened my eyes and heart to notice those who aren't happily married with 2.5 kids. Written by a trusted group of experts, this book will help you reimagine church as family—a powerful shift in this lonely age.

—Arlene Pellicane, speaker, author of *Parents Rising*, and host of the *Happy Home* podcast

One of the deepest needs in every human heart is to belong to a family. Part of God's purpose for the church is to be a spiritual family where all are welcome. This book beautifully captures that biblical vision and shows how family ministry is for everyone—single parents, grandparents, foster families, and beyond. This is a timely and needed call to rediscover the church as the family of God.

—Dr. Rob Rienow, Visionary Family Ministries, [www.VisionaryFam.com](http://www.VisionaryFam.com)

*Reimagining Church as Family* gives ministry leaders a primer for widening our lens in regard to family ministry. So often our practical strategies cater to the “traditional family” leaving no room for so many others who need a seat at the family table. As a pastor, I am challenged by the work of Rich Griffith and JJ Jones, and I know you will be too. This concise, practical book brings clarity to the sometimes-confusing practice of family ministry.

—Brian Haynes, D.Min., lead pastor of Bay Area Church, author of *War in The Wilderness: Fight for Your Family When Life Isn't as it Should Be* and *The Legacy Path: Discover Intentional Spiritual Parenting*

Through its emphasis on the foundational truth that believers in Christ are a spiritual family, *Reimagining the Church as Family* challenges the church to expand its vision for ministry. The authors powerfully share their insights for including and equipping those who are often overlooked in traditional family ministry, such as grandparents, adoptive parents, and single parents. Wise, heartfelt, and thoughtful, this book inspires us to see new areas where we can be vessels of God's healing and hope.

—Michelle Lee-Barnewall, affiliate professor of New Testament, Biola University and award-winning author of *Surprised by the Parables*

JJ and Rich remind us that *family* is perhaps the most important metaphor the Bible gives us for the Church. And for good reason—

through this lens we see most clearly its beauty, complexity, and yes, dysfunction. Thankfully, having defined the challenges, they bring decades of their own insights, along with carefully curated solutions from practitioners who are actually building *church as family* communities.

—Lloyd Shadrach, co-founding and teaching pastor,  
Fellowship Bible Church, Brentwood, Tennessee

My mother-in-law was 19 years old and single when my wife, Karen, was born. Karen did not grow up in a traditional family. But as a young teenager she became a follower of Christ and her local church became the place where she experienced hope, love, affirmation, belonging, and identity. She loved her church family, and they loved her. And that's why I really like this book. It is an inviting call to broaden our thinking and approach to family ministry, anchored in the model of the church as family. *Reimagining the Church as Family* is refreshing and hope-giving!

—Dr. Crawford W. Loritts, Jr., author, speaker, founder,  
and president of Beyond our Generation

*Reimagining Church as Family* courageously tackles a crucial truth—family ministry must move beyond traditional models and embrace the diverse realities of those who sit in our pews each week, including single parents who often feel unseen. As someone who has devoted my ministry to championing single adults of all ages and backgrounds, including single parents, I deeply appreciate how this book roots its vision in Scripture, while offering practical and compassionate steps for churches to become a true family of God.

Shelly Melia's chapter on engaging and equipping single-parent families resonates deeply with my belief that the best parent you can be is to be complete in Christ. Single parents deserve a place at the table, not simply as a demographic to be served, but as valuable,

gifted members of the church family. This book provides tools and insights to help churches embody the biblical call to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ (John 13:34–35) and to foster communities where no one walks alone.

I'm grateful to all the contributors for shining a light on the often-overlooked realities of single-parent families and calling churches to reimagine what it truly means to be family. This book is an essential resource for any church leader who desires to reflect Christ's love in the diverse tapestry of today's families.

—Dr. PJ Dunn, founder and minister, Table for One Ministries

Contemporary family ministry presents distinct challenges as well as opportunities for building relationships. This volume discusses how church leaders can foster an environment where family ministry becomes integrated into all aspects of church life, rather than functioning as a separate program. It provides theological perspectives and practical guidance aimed at developing supportive connections within the church community.

—Dr. Ken Baugh, author of *Unhindered Abundance*

## FOREWORD



# A VISION FOR FAMILY MINISTRY

In the late 1990s, 50 pastors from large churches gathered to discuss “Best Practices in Family Ministry.” Up to that point, there had been no high-profile, nationwide summit featuring leaders with “family ministry” in their titles. The phrase had been catching on, but by the late ‘90s, it had become the cutting edge of church ministry.

Since then, while many churches still view family ministry as a vital strategy, there remains no clear, unified definition of what it actually entails—or how deeply it should shape the local church’s mission. Traditionally, family ministry has centered on equipping parents and faith communities to disciple children and adolescents. But beyond that core, much work remains.

### **A Wider Lens for the Church**

This is why *Reimagining Church as Family* is both timely and necessary. Authors Rich Griffith and JJ Jones have invested years researching and practicing family ministry. Along with fellow contributors, they bring the perspective of seasoned practitioners and thoughtful scholars. Together, they guide us toward a broader vision



of family ministry—one rooted in Scripture and shaped by compassion.

This book opens the door to seeing the church's mission in new ways. It urges us to move beyond historical stereotypes and to faithfully engage those who may have been left behind, underserved, or overlooked by traditional models.

## **A Biblical and Comprehensive Foundation**

*Reimagining Church as Family* is a compelling and accessible resource. Though easy to read, it may prompt you to reconsider long-held assumptions and explore deeper truths. From the outset, you'll encounter a biblical theology of family ministry that goes beyond discipling children and empowering parents.

You'll begin to see the church family in broader terms:

- Single-parent households
- Grandparent-led homes
- Families who foster or adopt children
- Even households with all three combined

Most importantly, you'll be reminded of the biblical imperative: family ministry starts with the church as a "family of families" (Ephesians 2:19)—where every person belongs in the household of God, and where we live together as brothers and sisters in Christ (John 1:12).

## **An Invitation to Transformation**

As you read, take time to reflect deeply on the wisdom and vision offered by the authors. Be willing to be challenged—even shaken. And let us, together as the body of Christ, respond to our calling

to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8) to a world longing for reconciliation and redemption.

May the Holy Spirit tear down every wall that keeps us from fully loving others. For every person has been “knit together” by the God of mercy (Psalm 139). Let us welcome, include, and faithfully serve everyone God brings into our path—so they, too, may encounter the beauty of the gospel and the love of Christ.

May the Spirit guide us and use us for His kingdom.

For His sake and His glory. Amen.

Chap Clark, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Institute for Ministry Leadership



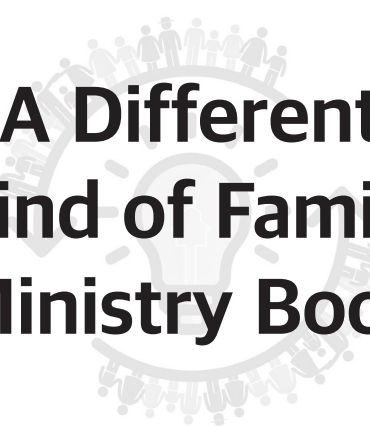
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## Introduction

# A Different Kind of Family Ministry Book



The concept of family ministry is not new. There have been some great legendary advocates and authors for family ministry and if I were to mention some and not others, I would feel horrible for missing some. I (Rich) can tell you individuals who have had a significant impact on my thinking about family ministry. Dr. Ron Hunter of D6 Family Ministry, Mark DeVries, who has written, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, the many conversations I have had with Dr. JJ Jones and Dr. Chap Clark, who wrote *Adoptive Church*. Not only have I read their books, but I also often use them in my classes as a college professor. Even while I have used other family ministry books, I consider Ron, Mark, and Chap incredible friends as well as influencers. This is important because I know their integrity.

The question comes, “So, what makes this book “different”? In recent years there have been significant cultural shifts in defining *family*. When I was exclusively a youth ministry practitioner, my experience with “family ministry” was limited. What I experienced over a span of time is how family ministry was defined. Family ministry tended to be defined by age and stages of life and, frankly, limited to nuclear (or traditional) families with children in kindergarten through fifth grade. (Throughout this book, we will be using the terms

“nuclear family” and “traditional family” as they are synonymous.) I remember having different thoughts about non-traditional families as our youth ministry had a large outreach ministry and these outreach kids could feel left out of our largely traditional family church. Since so many “Family Ministries” were traditional and primarily focused on kindergarten through fifth grade, my next question was, “So, do middle and high schoolers no longer have families?” It was, of course, a hyperbolic and rhetorical question. “What about the students whose parent(s) don’t come to church? Where do they fit in?” There was truth in these observations. Age and stage defined family ministry, where parents were actively involved, were often leaving “other ages and stages” out of family ministry. What about grandparents? What about young adults? More importantly, to the point of this book, what about families that are not “nuclear” or traditional families? The more we dove into the issue, under the influence of the mentors listed above, we started to formulate other questions like, “How would it feel to be one of the ‘other’ families that do not fit in the traditional family role?” and “Why are we only defining family as nuclear (mom, dad, and 2.5 kids) or traditional families?”

Almost a year ago since the time of this writing, JJ and I had a great conversation with Dr. Ron Hunter, Jr. from D6family Ministry. The discussion was on families and discipleship. It suddenly hit all of us: “Why are we not defining family theologically rather than just through social constructs? Isn’t the theological perspective important?” Truth be told, it was also a genuine heartfelt epiphany for it gave some answers to me, a non-traditional, single dad of three adopted sons. Even as a youth pastor, pastor, and professor, I have often felt like a fifth wheel at church functions. I didn’t fit in the “age and stage” model, but I could certainly fit into a theological definition of family! Hear me though, I am a huge proponent of the traditional family. I have had to make up for lacking areas in our family life. However, we must realize that when we constantly shoot

only for “the ideal” (traditional families), we leave out a whole lot of families living in “the real” (non-traditional families).

As I work with children, youth, and families at my church where I pastor, and as I work with young adults at the college where I teach, there is one thing I am convinced of: churches need to become family to each other for a number of reasons:

1. Our culture has a huge problem with systemic abandonment (Dr. Chap Clark). For a quick explanation: systemic abandonment is when the institutions and organizations that are supposed to be meeting the needs of our young are hijacked by adult-driven agendas. Chap has written about this, and I have also written how systemic abandonment has led to a crisis in the juvenile justice system. Just a few years ago, the United States had the highest rate of incarcerated juveniles than any other industrialized nation in the world—including Russia and China. (So much for “Land of the free.”)
2. Generation Z has been labeled, “the loneliest and most anxious generation.” The younger generations have experienced a significant void in meaningful relationships that not only keep them out of trouble but also keep them coming to church.
3. The constant segregation of “age and stage” programming has led to a significant number of young people dropping out of church to never return. They have had a lack of ownership, leadership, mentoring, and multi-generational relationships in the local church.
4. In our culture, there is a significant amount of ephebiophobia (fear of the young) and gerontophobia (fear of the aged) not only in churches, but in our society as a whole. Think about all the news media attention about youth. Most of it tends to be hyperbolic and negative. Here is the



truth: we fear what we don't know. The reason our young and old might not want to get together is because they do not interact enough with each other and are dissuaded by stereotypes.

I am convinced that the church is the best organization to counter all the challenges I have mentioned above, but that will only happen if we begin to practice not just “church and family,” but “church as family”! As someone who has children who were adopted out of brokenness, I can attest to how having a family can make all the difference in the world! Family is a place of joy, growth, challenges, forgiveness, love, and—maybe most importantly—identity and belonging. As children grow and become adolescents, their primary task is identity formation. What better place to belong and form an identity in the family of Christ that we call, “the church”? I am so glad my three sons have always had their local church to call family! The church (and society) misses out when we do not intentionally and frequently bring the young (energy/enthusiasm) together with the aged (experience/insight). As Chap would say (paraphrased), “We need to adopt each other as brothers and sisters in Christ!” I am very blessed because not only did I adopt my sons, but my churches have often adopted us.

We believe that local churches who understand a theological definition of family will become a “church as family” community. In fact, at the time of this writing, there seems to be some research stating that millennials are returning to church post-pandemic.<sup>1</sup> One of the main reasons is that they are seeking community. According to Churchtrac, an organization that shares in some of the Barna research, “Young people are looking for a connection to a faith and a community that will help give them direction while also making

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<sup>1</sup> “A New Chapter in Millennial Church Attendance,” Barna, accessed April 19, 2025, <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-2022/>.

a difference in the world.”<sup>2</sup> It should be no surprise to any church leader that young people are craving what Jesus gave the disciples: an incarnational, authentic community that helped define them and give them purpose.

Millennials are not the only generation who crave community and belonging. Every person in every generation and all walks of life crave community and belonging. We find this declaration to be true in the Garden of Eden. Adam was in a perfectly good working relationship with God and yet God declared, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18, ESV). *Church as family* offers a community of fellowship, belonging, and purpose.

My friend and colleague, Dr. JJ Jones, pastor, co-editor and co-author of this book, has also used the analogy of “adoption” when we “family one another.” It is no coincidence that we are thinking this way. First, we both were in the same doctoral cohort with Dr. Chap Clark. Chap wrote two books on the subject. *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, which is a very academic book while *Adoptive Church* is a great practitioner book. I would highly recommend reading *Adoptive Church*. As churches and other organizations make a move toward *church as family*, the Holy Spirit is clearly behind this movement as there are several organizations embracing and training leaders for *intentional* intergenerational ministry.

A few months ago, I (JJ) sat in my department head’s office with Tracy and John (not their real names), two singles in our church. We were leading them through a process to launch a new ministry to singles in our church by developing a lay-led team. Tracy and John would become the main lay leaders of this team as they completed this several-month development and training. As we progressed over several weeks, however, the layers of the proverbial onion began to

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<sup>2</sup> “The State of Church Attendance: Trends and Statistics,” Churchtrac, accessed April 19, 2025, <https://www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023>.

peel away. We discovered that what this particular group desired was not a new program or an obligatory nod to singles, they just wanted to be seen. To be heard. To have a voice and a place at the table. In a local church that did family ministry very well, we discovered that our singles often felt overlooked, uncared for, and invisible. We championed the traditional family model strongly, but in doing so we often overlooked, not intentionally, other demographics in our church family that did not fit that traditional model. Our singles were not the only ones who felt this way.

Months before this, we began the same process with a group of empty nesters and boomers. Our current “boomers ministry” did successfully launch from this development cohort. But it was birthed from the same desires: to have a place of influence in the local family of faith, to have a voice and place at the table, to be heard and seen. For this group, many in our church were CEOs and entrepreneurs who had started multiple businesses. Now in retirement, they felt that loss of purpose and felt unneeded and unwanted. Many of these church members were key figures who helped start our church 25 years ago. They watched the church grow exponentially as they selflessly gave their time, expertise, and money. They *believed* in the call to start Fellowship Bible Church. Now, many had the question, “Does Fellowship still *believe* in us?” Again, the strong model of family ministry did not have a place to include many who were outside of this traditional family system of a dad, mom, and children.

Our boomer ministry is now a thriving ministry of the church. It is entirely lay led but works with several of our ministry teams. They partner with our young adult ministry to offer “Legacy Nights,” in which older adults and young adults share a meal at the table together and have intergenerational exchanges of what it looks like to follow Christ in their life stages. It is a shared learning and ministry experience. Our singles came to the conclusion that their primary desire was simply not to go to our worship service alone. For the

average single, especially those who have never been married, it can be quite lonely in a service during child dedications or family Advent readings. We are working with them to develop regular single lunches where friendship can be made, and no one goes to church alone. We must also learn to invite them into the life of the church and rhythms in which the body leads one another, especially on Sundays.

Something else that makes this book different is an implicit understanding throughout of *community*. To be a holistic surrogate family as a local expression of Christ's church, the implication is that we must live in deep communion with Jesus and authentic community together. As Rich has stated, in creation, God desired and designed humankind to be in fellowship with Him and community with one another. In Deuteronomy 6:4–9, God charged His people to remember and practice community principles in their lives with Him, their immediate families, and the community at large. There was no concept of individualism in ancient times; individuals understood themselves to be part of a greater whole, part of a community.

As Rich stated above, we have a burden to see the body of Christ operate as a family, including and inviting all who are adopted in Christ as His children. From the youngest to the oldest, we all have something to contribute for the benefit of the whole family of God. This means we must include those in the family who do not feel a part of the family. And there are more who feel this way than we realize. This is why we have invited the voices we have to contribute to the important project in addition to us. While there are certainly more voices within the family of God we must hear from, we have chosen these as they represent primary, larger populations that struggle with our traditional models.

In the ensuing chapters, I will suggest we need a new way forward, a new way of thinking of family ministry and church holistically. A movement to think of *church as family*, where all ages, demographics, and statuses have a place at the table of family ministry

as the extended family of God. To get there I will introduce three pictures and three shifts in our thinking to move us forward. Others will subsequently address how we may engage and equip their chosen population. Their stories will inform and inspire you, the reader.

Shelly will address how to engage and equip single parents. She will lead us to consider three crucial questions as we think about how best to invite single parents and their voice to the table. She will give very practical steps to see, hear, and invite single parents into the life of the church. Larry will address how to engage and equip grandparents as one of the most overlooked and under-resourced people groups in the church. The potential impact of faith formation and legacy that we have (I, too, am a grandparent) as grandparents is more than substantial and, most importantly, biblically encouraged. Rich will address how to equip and encourage foster and adoptive families. No other population has the potential to understand and model our adoption in Christ and what it means for the church to live in community as the family of God than adoptive parents and adopted children. Finally, Kevin will address how to engage and equip perhaps our largest resource in the church, traditional families. As a father, he understands the important role our traditional families have in inviting and welcoming all *kinds* of families to the table as the greater family of God.

As you read this book, ask yourself: Who in your congregation more than anyone needs the church to be a family for them? A young widow or widower with small children? Single parents? The lonely single or divorced person who just wants a place to belong? Senior adults? Grandparents raising their grandkids? The homebound? Special needs? Kids and students from non-churched homes or whose parents are unengaged? In other words, who are the marginalized, the unseen, the forgotten, the lonely in your church? We must think outside the traditional, Western model of family. It is time to see the church through the lens that Jesus and His followers would have seen

through their Eastern, communal eyes. Who else needs to be invited to the table, for whom must we set a place? The table is where family sees, hears, and communes with one another. The table of Christ is not just for the ones who model exemplary forms of family or family ministry. Family ministry is not just for the traditional model of family. The table is for everyone. Family ministry is for everyone. This is how Christ designed His Church to function.



## Chapter 1

# Church as Family: A New Way Forward

JJ Jones, D.Min.

What is a family? In our changing cultural landscape, this question is being asked now more than ever. Traditionally, a family is a group of individuals who are connected by blood or marriage, typically sharing a household and supporting one another emotionally, socially, and often financially. For centuries, the family has been defined as a father, mother, and children with extended family living separately. This post-World War II Western ideal of family has become known as the *nuclear* family, an ideal and social expectation that most aspire to attain as they consider the implications of marriage and parenting.

However, in recent years families in America have experienced noticeable changes that have significantly affected the structure of the consummate traditional nuclear family. Noticeable changes such as the effect of divorce, remarriage, interracial marriages, multi-generational households, fostering and adoption, and births outside of marriage have resulted in significant changes in traditional nuclear American families. The rise in divorce rates has caused an increase in single-parent households and blended families. Remarriages have



become more common, leading to the emergence of stepfamilies and half-siblings.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, our churches have not kept up. We have, unintentionally, championed a traditional model of family while creating environments that can inadvertently exclude other types of families in the church community. Many of us have heard from various demographics mentioned above, such as grandparents, single-parents, and blended families about how hard it is to connect, belong, and find community. This has never been truer than in family ministry. For many, if you do not fit the mold and model of the traditional nuclear family, you just don't belong. If you have never been married, or have been divorced or remarried, you are less than. Again, this is not on purpose, but it is the implicit message many receive when they visit our churches, especially churches with robust family ministries. When other types of families that are not traditional nuclear families see a lack of intentionally planning ministries that include them, the message they receive is, "We don't matter."

In the same way there are multiple definitions of family, there is also no consensus on just what "family ministry" is, much less how it is best accomplished in the lives of parents in partnership with the local church. The church and the family have traditionally struggled to partner together effectively in the spiritual formation of kids and teens, especially since the inception of professionalized age-graded ministries. The philosophies and models that are currently promoted are as multifaceted and varied as the authors, practitioners, and organizations they represent. Likewise, there can be fragmentation of age-graded ministries in churches, resulting in competition for resources and a siloed mentality among ministries that should be working together and complementing one another. This fragmen-

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<sup>1</sup> Alena Demirovic, "The changing face of American families: A 21st century perspective," *Religions*, 18, (April 2024): 18–31. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/changing-face-american-families-21st-century/docview/3064706969/se-2>.

tation was also the result of public education models. Further, the advent of the nuclear family and age-segregation has led family ministry to be defined by age and stages of life rather than a more theological definition of family being comprised of whoever does the will of the Father (Matthew 12:46–50). While we have made very tangible strides forward, many of these models still favor the traditional, biblical nuclear family. And rightly so. Yet, I believe we are still missing an incredible opportunity to minister to the whole of the family of God within our local churches, especially those who feel unseen and unheard.

At the intersection of these current dilemmas, I believe there is a way forward. As stated in the introduction, we need a new paradigm as we attempt to answer this question and move family ministry in the church forward. In fact, what we have discovered is that this is not a new paradigm at all, it is rediscovering a biblical paradigm given to us as adopted brothers and sisters in Christ by Jesus Himself. It is an ancient way, based on the model of how Christ Himself set up His Church to function ... as a family. In the following chapters, you will hear from trusted authors that represent the voices of those in the church who desire to belong, who value family ministry, yet who often feel displaced in our current church landscape. In this chapter, I will set up the invitation to consider a better way forward and how to get there. But before I do, we must remember where we have been and know where we currently are in this short history of family ministry.

## **Where We've Been—Church and Family**

While youth ministry has been commonplace in the local church for over fifty years, it has only been within recent decades that family ministry began to be regarded as a legitimate entity. However, when it came to an exact definition of family ministry, one would have been hard-pressed to find a narrow and commonly accepted defini-

tion. Definitions may depend on denomination, style, preferences, and theological bent. Despite the recent decade's growth in family ministry organization and models, there is no clear consensus and collaboration on exactly what it is. It has been somewhat of a vacuum for practitioners and organizations to decide as they were led.

Yet, over the last twenty years or so, there have been a couple of clear models that have gained support and traction. The first is the Family-Based model, which represents this idea of "church and family." In family-based churches, the youth, children's, men's, women's, and all ministries continued to be maintained, while organizing periodic opportunities for the generations to get together. Priority is put on training parents through various opportunities, and ministries are responsible for planning and pursuing intentional learning experiences that are designed to draw the generations together.<sup>2</sup> However, much of this is planned individually without collaboration of the entire staff. And for many, the only generational influence encouraged is parent to child. While this model has many strengths, some proponents readily admit this is more a particular ministry philosophy than a model and does not go far enough in addressing the disconnect between the church and the family.<sup>3</sup> It is exceptional at continuing age-segregated programming while somewhat including parental involvement. However, there is a danger of adding more to the already busy schedule of kids and parents' lives, at the risk of losing intentionality. Yet, it was an outstanding start in the movement toward family ministry.

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Paul Jones and Randy Stinson, "Family Ministry Models," in Michael and Michelle Anthony (Eds.), *A Theology for Family Ministries* (B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Renfro, Brandon Shields, and Jay Strother, in T.P. Jones (Ed.), *Perspectives on Family Ministry: Three Views* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 98, 129.

## Where We Are—Church With Family

The second model of family ministry has gained popularity over the past several years, and is most likely the most common, practical model to date. This is the Family-Equipping model, which represents the idea of “church with family.” Family-equipping practitioners would argue this model moves the needle further than the Family-Based model by equipping parents to be the primary voices in family discipleship. In this model, the partnership between church and home is seen as an interdependent partnership with mutual benefit since neither is fully able to fulfill the job of spiritually forming the next generations alone. Churches who embrace this model often develop benchmarks such as family milestone markers, rites of passage, or church-wide events and recognitions to bring the generations together to encourage parents and model faith formation to the next generations. Many times, these markers and events are preceded by a parenting class that equips them to practice this particular discipline in the home as well as corporately with their local church family.

Strengths of the Family-Equipping model are plentiful, and it is a model that has served the church well in recent years. This model presupposes a unified vision and structure to accomplish its goal. Family-equipping churches enthusiastically co-champion the faith community in partnership with the family, even to a greater degree than family-based churches. If ministries in the local church can align, collaborate with each other, and guard against silos, a church could live effectively in this model. But this is a difficult task in this model. The primacy of traditional, nuclear families can also be elevated with a temptation to become almost idolatrous and thus alienate congregants who do not fit the standard or meet a certain ideal.

## Where We Must Go—Church as Family

While there are clear strengths in each model and movement above, there is a tendency for both to fit their emphases and strengths primarily within the stages of life encompassing childhood and adolescence. There is not much mutual, reciprocal impact between all generations. The focus is primarily on parents and children. A more comprehensive strategy and philosophy must be developed and championed. A strategy that emphasizes and encourages continued spiritual formation and intentional intergenerationality in the stages of adulthood in addition to childhood and adolescence. A model that also encourages an interdependence between all ministries of the church, working together to ensure family discipleship is not just practiced in the home, but corporately as the family of God. That every brother and sister in Christ belongs in the family, not just those who fit the definition of a traditional family. Especially those who feel on the outside—unknown and unseen—yet long to call the church home.

The most common metaphor for the church in the New Testament is *family*; outsiders were welcomed into churches as brothers and sisters.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the Gospels and epistles, it is clear the New Testament church was created and designed to function as a different kind family, a surrogate family of sorts. Status was determined by our shared adoption into the family by Christ and His finished work on the cross, not by bond of blood, marriage, or social standing. This was the intention of Jesus when He formed His new family as we see in Mark 3:31–35:

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him,

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Bezner, *Your Jesus is Too American: Calling the Church to Reclaim Kingdom Values over the American Dream* (Brazos Press, 2024), 10.

“Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (NIV).

This was also the intention of Paul and other New Testament writers as they communicated to the early church. Paul used sibling language 118 times, father language 40 times, and inheritance terminology 14 times.<sup>5</sup> He clearly adopted Jesus’ model for community, indicated by this extensive use of familial language in his letters. We believe the church today can likewise function in this way, healthy and holistically setting a place at the table for everyone to belong and participate. When the local church views itself as a surrogate kinship group of sorts—a family—it becomes a place where children, teens, parents, families of all kinds, and all generations belong to one another, and generational faith is owned by everyone in the family. And if generational faith transmission was important to the New Testament church, as well as to ancient Israel (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Psalm 78:3–4, 6), it should be even more crucial for faith communities today.

I have come to the conviction that the future of effective family ministry must include not just the traditional family, but every *kind* of family. Also, not only the families of the church, but also the local, holistic body of Christ, in partnerships and in concert together. To that end, I propose a theological and practical way forward that I pray will challenge and encourage us to rethink and reframe how we organize and practice family ministry.

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Fortress Press, 2001), 92.

## A Way Forward—Three Pictures and Three Shifts

In addition to the metaphor of family, Paul also called the community of faith “God’s household,” drawing from strong language and pictures for both Greek and Hebrew traditions and ideas. Ray Anderson acknowledges this new understanding of the church constitutes a new context of belonging as members of God’s family and provides a certain self-sufficiency and mutual interdependence to all who belong to it.<sup>6</sup> I like this idea of “household.” It brings to memory a home full of our family at holidays. It wasn’t necessarily nostalgic, warm and fuzzy all the time, it was mostly chaos. A good chaos. My grandmother, the matriarch of the family, would be cooking Thanksgiving dinner. Aunts, uncles, and cousins, dozens of us, would take over my uncle’s home. Crazyness would ensue as we were bored and waiting until the meal was ready to be shared. My cousins and I fought as much as we laughed and played. Even the most estranged members of the family were present and welcomed on these special days. It wasn’t perfect or pretty; but it was mine, and I miss it to this day. This is what I think of when I hear “God’s household.” The big, crazy, messy, welcoming family of faith.

If the church is indeed a family and we as leaders in the church are the ones tasked to steward and care for this family, then how do we build this household of faith Paul referred to? I believe we begin by painting three pictures that will help us move toward this new way, this ancient way: a theological picture, a relational picture, and a practical picture that introduces a theoretical new model of family ministry.

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<sup>6</sup> Ray Anderson, *Something Old, Something New: Marriage and Family in a Postmodern Culture* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 185.

## A Theological Picture: Framing a House

I love home improvement shows. I could watch HGTV and the DIY channel all day long. The operative word is *watch*. I don't think it would turn out well if I attempted to do my own *Farmhouse Fixer* or "yard crash" my own yard! What I love about these shows is that within one hour, one can see the hard work behind the build and finally experience the door opening to new, warm spaces ready to be inhabited and enjoyed by its owners. Reality is that it takes much longer than an hour. In fact, it can take up to several months. In the same way, building an inviting household of faith where all belong and are a part of the family doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. And it must begin with a proper theological understanding of what it means to be a household of faith, the family of God.

My wife and I are experiencing the joys and struggles of renovation firsthand as I write this. This year, we purchased a log cabin on six acres outside of Franklin, Tennessee. For over 20 years, we have had a God-sized dream of one day, in retirement, owning a property where we could host individuals and couples in ministry for a week of rest, renewal, and spiritual direction. In God's kindness He brought about the property and orchestrated the details much earlier than we had hoped or imagined. But it needed work. It was older, only had two tiny bedrooms, one tiny bathroom, a small kitchen, and a very dark, cold, unfinished basement. Over the last year we (and when I say we, I mean the contractors we hired) have gutted the entire main floor and changed the layout, designed and installed a new kitchen, added new hardwood flooring, new walls, added two bathrooms, a new laundry area, designed my study, and finished out the basement, which will be the future ministry area. Apart from a murphy bed and new wood stove, we are done. It took almost a year, but it seems like a lifetime of storage, Pods, and downsizing (oh, did I mention that we lost a ton of square footage in the move?).



Another favorite home improvement show of mine is *Good Bones*, a show about a mother and daughter team that finds old houses in historic neighborhoods with mostly good foundations and framework (the bones) and flips them. I honestly believe our cabin could be on that show. Apart from the inside, it was in outstanding shape. You see, the bones were there, we just needed to reframe things to accomplish the vision and purpose we have for the space.

I believe this is a great picture as we think about moving forward in family ministry and this idea of *church as family*. We are reminded how important the structural integrity of anything we build is key to its sustainability; and this is also true of any program, strategy, or system we build in our churches. This is where we must start. Family ministry has come a long way; it has grown and become a respected ministry in the church. Over the past twenty years, we have seen how it has changed and grown. It is here to stay and is vital. Yet, there is much work to do. It has “good bones,” we just need to reframe the conversation to fit the vision and purpose I believe we are called to as we move forward. As we build this theological picture of *church as family*, we begin where most builds do, the foundation. We will then move to the frame that holds and shapes the house. Both the foundation and the framing of a house support the stability and sustainability of the home.

We begin with the foundation, which is the new paradigm of *church as family*. What do we exactly mean by *church as family*? I believe there are three ways to think about this, all from three different theological and practical early influencers of family ministry. First, it models the way Jesus thought of and set up the early church to function—as a surrogate family. Joseph Hellerman, professor of New Testament language and Literature at Biola University, helps us understand this from Jesus’ and the first century perspective. He states that when the church is indeed a family, the needs and life of the group take precedence over the individual. This is much of the

way Mediterranean families operated in New Testament times. In fact, this is the very structure Jesus had in mind when He formed His church and called them into relationship with one another. Hellerman believes that Jesus calls the Body of Christ, even today, into a new kind of entity where brothers and sisters of all ages (and I would add all kinds of families, all social statuses, all individuals) in the Lord are a new *primary* family.<sup>7</sup> This makes sense when we understand that in Jesus' day and even in the Mediterranean world today, sibling relationships are the strongest of all family ties.

Second, it calls every believer, from 7–70, from the youngest to the oldest, to change the expression of “family” from a thing to an action. I love this because it means we need to make *family* a verb. It is not just something we belong to; it is something we do! Over 40 years ago, before there were even professional youth and family ministries, Dennis Guernsey saw the church as a “family of families” in which the whole of the church functions as family units and therefore adopts and includes those with no proper family system, those unable to have a family, those who’ve never married, those who’ve lost spouses or children ... you get the picture. He proposed that in our adoption in Christ, we are to “family” one another, especially those with no family or support.<sup>8</sup> Again, it is not just something we are, it is something we *do*.

Third, it requires every ministry to be a part of a holistic family ministry. Diana Garland, pioneer and early voice in family ministry conversations, believed that family ministry is holistic in nature as it involves and depends on the whole of the church community to achieve its purpose. Therefore, family ministry is intentional

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<sup>7</sup> For a more comprehensive treatment of Hellerman's contributions, see his two seminal works, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Fortress Press, 2001), and *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Guernsey, *A New Design for Family Ministry* (David C. Cook, 1982), 100.

and strategic as it purposely partners with the other ministries of the church to help families live on kingdom mission with Christ.<sup>9</sup>

If the foundation of church as family is the *what*, then the frame of this household of faith is formed by the *why* and the *how*. There are two parts that make up the frame: our adoption in Christ (the why), and intergenerational influence (the how). Adoption in Christ is the first side of the frame. When we mention adoption, it does not mean we “adopt” each other, or that adults “adopt” the young or marginalized. Certainly, this is a part of it, but it is much more comprehensive than that. Instead, we recognize that each one of us have been adopted into the body of Christ, the family of God. In Jesus, we are related to each other; we are siblings, Christian kinfolk (John 1:12; Romans 8:15–17). According to Paul, the Holy Spirit moves believers from slaves of sin into freedom as sons of God, with all the rights and privileges that His Son Jesus Christ enjoys. And Paul fully expected his readers in the local churches to live out this metaphor in their day-to-day relationships. What does this look like today? This theological treatment is also called *adoptive theology*, or *adoptive ministry* and was introduced by Chap Clark, a leading voice in theological work; and Rich’s and my theological mentor in seminary. Adoptive ministry is an intentional and strategic process for creating an environment where [everyone in the church] can feel valued and included ... where we are all intrinsically connected to one another and partner collaboratively without regard to gifts, function, power, status, or age. Everything we think, do, and plan should enhance those familial relationships.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Garland’s long-time textbook, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* 2ed. (IVP Press, 2012), is replete with these themes throughout.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough treatment on this line of theological thought, and for a glance into this particular content, check out Chap’s book, *Adoptive Theology: Creating an Environment Where Emerging Generations Belong* (Baker Academic, 2018).

The other side of the frame is, the *how*, intergenerational influence. Referenced above, two foundational Scriptures inform the frame of intergenerational influence:

Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, NLT).

We're not keeping this to ourselves, we're passing it along to the next generation—God's fame and fortune, the marvelous things he has done. He planted a witness in Jacob, set his Word firmly in Israel, Then commanded our parents to teach it to their children So the next generation would know, and all the generations to come—Know the truth and tell the stories so their children can trust in God, Never forget the works of God but keep his commands to the letter (Psalm 78:4-7, MSG).

In Deuteronomy 6:5-9, God charges His people to remember and practice community principles in their lives with Him, their immediate families, and the community at large. He reminds them of the complete oneness of the triune God in perfect unity and community, and that a call into community relationship with God is a call

to love Him with the whole being. Further instructions are given to reach and model this covenant community relationship to the children of the community. Indeed, in the ancient world and mind the task of training and teaching the young was not limited in scope to the maternal parents alone. There was no concept of individualism in ancient times, individuals understood themselves to be part of a greater whole, a community. Likewise in Psalm 78 we see the importance of the community's responsibility to come alongside parents in transmission of faith and "the marvelous things he has done" to the next generation. The expectation was that this model of transmission would continue for generations to come. It was the community's role to "know the truth and tell the stories ... never forget the works of God." If this is done well, future generations would know and trust God. In both passages, it is implicit that faith transmission and community is not just for children and families, but for the whole of the community, for everyone. Intergenerational faith formation not only strengthens traditional families, but it also strengthens families of every kind and everyone who desires to call the local church their family and home.

**SM:** *One of the greatest obstacles we face in moving toward "family as a verb" is hyper-individualism. Intergenerational relationships are crucial for the church to flourish because that is how God intended for the faith to be transmitted. Our kids need to grow up in churches where they know they are part of something bigger than just their peer group. What kind of an impact would we make if every person in the church had someone behind them they were leading, someone beside them to share their stage of life experiences, and someone ahead of them who would mentor them and inspire them to live faithful lives?*

## A Relational Picture: Alloparenting

*Alloparenting* is when children are often cared for by parents as well as other individuals, known as *alloparents*. Alloparents can include a broad range of individuals, such as grandparents, elder siblings, relatives, and non-kin (such as teachers, coaches, and mentors) who may provide support. This communal way of raising children has been seen more commonly in African and Asian countries and in non-industrialized, small-scale societies. The presence of kin, particularly grandmothers and older siblings, has been associated with greater child quality of life including social development, cognitive and language ability, educational outcomes, emotional stability and social behavior and adjustment. Closely related is the Japanese concept of *amae*. *Amae* describes not only parent-child relationships but also relationships with spouses, teachers, and other caring people.<sup>11</sup> I believe there is something there ... it does indeed take a community! Not just to raise a child, but to develop a secure base for everyone in the community to belong and participate.

## A Practical Picture: A New Model— Interdependent Family Ministry

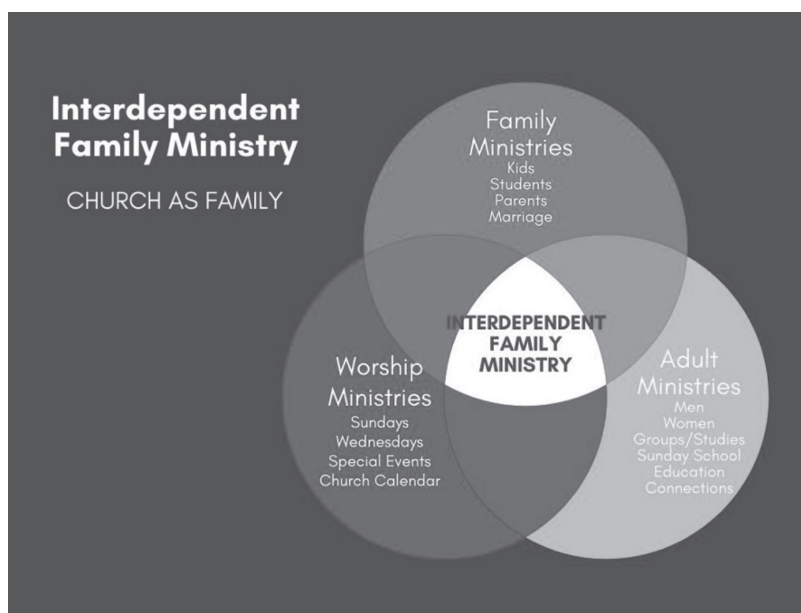
What if fostering a sense of community where the church functions as a cohesive family unit wasn't just the job of your family ministry department? What if *every* ministry within the local church took ownership of nurturing the growth and discipleship of the faith family? What if this new paradigm, this new way of thinking about family ministry, changed what it meant to belong to the local church? What if it healed the trauma and hurt that comes with the term "family" for many who are marginalized and not a part of a traditional

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<sup>11</sup> Heidi Keller, "Attachment and Culture," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44(2), (2012), 187.

family, and brought them into a new, healthy understanding of what it means to belong to a community that is greater than themselves? If we follow Jesus, we are members of God's family and must act that way toward one another. I suggest that this new model, this new way of moving forward, can build a deep mutual interdependence among everyone who belongs to the local church!

When we take a more intricate look at what it means to model *interdependent family ministry*, we learn that it doesn't mean we do away with existing environments for kids, students, and even adults. No, it means that we *intentionally work together as ministries in the local church*, across the table from one another, to live into Jesus' call to operate as a family of faith. This forever, eternal family takes precedence over all others, including bloodline. For Jesus, becoming a part of God's church and kingdom meant aligning family allegiances with the Christian's new family. Thus, no matter what type of earthly family one belongs to, or doesn't, they have a safe, secure place where they will always belong and to which they may always come back. This is the central principle of this new way forward I am proposing with interdependent family ministry. It compels every ministry in the local church to be a part of a holistic way of doing family ministry; not just for families as we understand them, but family ministry for everyone in the church, as the collective family of God. In other words, *church as family* means the collective whole, not just a part of the whole. This is what I mean by moving from the way we have always and are currently practicing toward a new way forward. The graphic below might help with a visual of what this could look like. In the diagram, interdependent family ministry happens where each ministry intersects in concert with each other:



We have already seen Jesus' words in Mark 3 as He began to form this new family of faith. We see another example of this in John 19:25–27, in Jesus' words on the cross just before He died, "Standing near the cross were Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple He loved, he said to her, 'Dear woman, here is your son.' And he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from then on the disciple took her into his home" (NLT). In biblical times with the death of a father or the oldest son, the next oldest brother took care of the widowed mom. Jesus had siblings, but we cannot fully know if they were followers ... yet. Why did Jesus not look at James and say this? Was James even there? You see, what Jesus is doing is changing the narrative for His followers from that of their family of blood to a family of faith.



**RG:** *I love the concept of interdependent family ministry! All of the contributing authors acknowledge the continuance and need for affinity-based discipleship opportunities. A sixth-grade-boys group does not need to be engaged in the discussions of a young married small group. This being said, we are not advocating for an entire pendulum swing, rather we are saying some approaches can be seasonal where church as family comes together occasionally for mutual benefit and growth! Intentional intergenerational ministry opportunities certainly reflect “church as family!”*

I like how Ron Hunter, executive director and CEO of D6 Family Ministry puts it. He proposes a change in the definition of family to “people who share a common bond or experience through biological, theological, or relational means.” Does this not paint a perfect picture of what it means for the church, in Christ, to be a family and to “family” one another regardless of what constitutes those relationships? He goes on to say that “Family ministry is spiritual ancestry; not stopping at biology but expanding to theology.”<sup>12</sup> The common bond we all have as siblings in Christ is and should be what drives how we minister to families and to each other as family. Interdependent family ministry must promote interconnectedness across all church ministries to accomplish this new way of thinking and operating. In this, we nurture mutual relationships with people of all ages. Through this, it cultivates a legacy of faith formation that spans all generations.

But how do we do this, how do we get there? I’ll be honest; I do not know of many, if any, churches that are this intentionally collaborative. I do believe this idea is so new it will require a reframing of

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<sup>12</sup> Ron Hunter articulated these thoughts during his keynote session at the D6 Conference in Orlando, April 2024.

how we do ministry in the local church. To get to this point, we must address three important shifts in thinking that we must engage.

## Three Shifts in Thinking

One of the biggest challenges you will face will be to reframe the church's role from programs to intentional partnerships and intergenerational relationships within each ministry's sphere of influence as we strive to minister together as staff teams in the local church to develop an environment where everyone belongs, regardless of status. This is that interdependent model we saw earlier. It will look different for each church based on their culture and context. However, to effectively move forward in this new way, it will require three fundamental shifts in our thinking.

First, we must shift from thinking *maternally and paternally* to thinking *eternally*. Most of our family ministry programs and emphases naturally gravitate toward a nuclear, traditional family model. But the early church operated as a family system where Christ and the family of faith took precedence over blood relationships. Instead of planning ministry *only* around parents and families, we must begin to plan according to our shared adoption as brothers and sisters in Christ. Now, I am certainly not advocating for doing away with family ministry, kids, and student ministry, nor am I stating a need to abdicate equipping strong, biblical, and traditional families. I am simply advocating for a more holistic ministry that includes, encourages, and equips all members of the local church family. Singles, empty nesters, grandparents, senior adults, college students, co-parenting families, blended families, and divorced singles are all communities that risk feeling marginalized or forgotten when we fail to think in terms of our eternal relationships in addition to our domestic ones. As you begin to engage the rest of this book, you will hear voices from many of these populations, including the tradition-

al nuclear family. We all must work together and be singularly focused this way.

Second, we must shift our thinking from *partnerships* to *partnerships AND relationships*. Over the last several years in family ministry, we have excelled at emphasizing a “partnership” with parents, and indeed this is crucial. Yet, we can still leave the onus of faith formation to them alone, leaving most to feel ill-equipped and all alone in this endeavor. We must make relationships more accessible with those who have traveled this road of faith before us. In our church, we are hearing more and more from young parents who desire to have older parents who are a few steps ahead on the faith trail to speak into their lives. Can you imagine intentional relationships through adult small groups of empty nesters and senior adults with student small groups as they each learn from one another in their own faith journeys?

As churches, we may do well at feeding information, knowledge, and programming to kids, students, and parents; I believe we have fallen short of providing a context of community in which growth, healthy spiritual development, and faith formation can take place with multiple generations learning from one another. Our smaller group environments made up of a multiplicity of folks doing life together as well as generational opportunities are the best, most conducive climates for this to happen together in community.

Which brings us to the third shift in thinking: we must shift from *generational* discipleship alone to also include *intergenerational* discipleship. The term *generational* runs the risk of carrying the notion that all faith formation happens in just the home or through immediate or extended family. It can be a bit exclusive. *Intergenerational* carries an invitation to those outside the immediate family to be an extended faith family for all who call the local church home. It is communal. Intergenerational discipleship can *strengthen* genera-

tional discipleship. As parents of all ages and kinds pass and model their own faith journey to the young, they are not alone.

As a church, family is not just something we are, it is something we *do*. Church as family is not only calling dad, mom, and other family members to pass down faith to the next generations but also calls others in the family of faith to share in this important task. In this way, we all own family ministry, not just church staff and parents. All ministries of the local church can work together to ensure faith formation of all generations—not just the next—belongs to every one of us. We must bring the generations together to learn from one another; we are all formed in Christ best in community.

In as much as there is a need to champion this model, there are also threats that could impede or completely shut down an interdependent move to ministry. First, the size of the local church could be a possible threat. Operating as a family in the local church is much easier in smaller congregations, lending itself to organic interdependent ministry. In fact, it is almost a necessity due to staffing and budget limitations. Smaller churches tend to naturally practice intergenerational ministry beyond the worship service, influencing Sunday Schools, small groups, and other specific church programs. In larger and multi-site churches, ministry silos can be a threat. We all have our area we want to protect, and to practice interdependent family ministry most likely will mean giving up something from every ministry department for the sake of our families and our church family. If we are to truly live into this paradigm shift of church as family, we may have to give up some control, leadership, and preference that comes from owning ministry as a staff.

**LF:** *A practical impediment in many churches (especially newer ones) is the layout of facilities. The children's entrance (and hence young families) is on one side of the church; the older adult wing is on the other side. They simply never intermingle unless there*

*is a concerted effort to make it happen. In a church I attended recently, some older adults admitted that they did not know a single young person in the church—and the facility design was partly the culprit.*

Another threat to interdependence within the body and church ministries is family trauma. For those who have trauma from their family of origin, using familial language to cast a picture of how we operate as the church can dredge up issues of hurt, trust, pain, and even abuse. How can we care for those in our church family who struggle to think favorably in this way? How can we reframe the narrative around our *Abba* Father and our adoption in Christ and His care for them. We must lead our local churches to be a safe, secure base for them. For many of us, we transfer our view of God from the view of our earthly father. Therefore, for many, family might be a big mess they desire to get away from. However, our adoption in Christ as God's children and our safety in Him redeems the term family for us all!

*RG: I am so glad JJ is thinking about the theological implications of adoption. As I write about foster and adoptive families, I was clueless about the effects of trauma on family dynamics and how ill-equipped we often are as churches to address this trauma. As a foster and adoptive parent, I don't expect the church to know how to heal trauma, but I want the church to be a little more understanding of what trauma does to kids. Many of these kids aren't "bad kids," rather they are kids who do not know how to be "the best behaved" because of trauma. I want to remind our readers that the people who are the most difficult to love are the ones who need it the most!*

But where do we start? I suggest you look for your “person of peace.” We draw this idea from Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:11–14,

Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet (NIV).

Let’s be honest: unless we are a senior pastor (and we do hope many of you reading this book are!) we are all leading from the middle and leading when we are not necessarily in charge. How do we reframe the story, the narrative, around what it means to live out church as family? We find that person of peace! That other ministry leader who is like minded or open to thinking strategically and who will welcome us as peacemakers and co-laborers. We find that intersection of our ministry with other ministries and become a bridge. We reach across the table and lead in our ministry areas together in concert with each other.

If you are part of a family ministry staff, children’s, or youth staff, what other ministries outside of your area do you have a great relationship with? Who is that ally as you begin to reframe the narrative? Is it your small groups or Sunday School? Maybe empty nesters or boomers? In our church, we are beginning to work toward this. Our boomer’s ministry is partnering with our young adult ministry to host and provide seasonal dinners in which each generation invests in the other as they journey in their faith. This includes both singles and married couples from both populations, so that everyone has a voice and is included. Our groups ministry is beginning to talk with our family ministry and dream about what it could look like to

partner together and provide group leaders and curriculum for small groups, classes, and studies by developing an age- and life-stage appropriate scope and sequence. Why would we not? The parents we are ministering to make up both of our ministries, it is a shared responsibility. This also ensures we are hearing from *all* parents and their needs, not just from our traditional families.

It will look different in your context than it does in mine. The practical application of church as family is as unique and nuanced as each local church. The key is to start somewhere! Start to make a difference where you can. Take *a* step ... you don't have to take ten steps. Start slowly, pray, have conversations, and reframe the story, and find that one person of peace you can take a small step with. Change the culture of the people in your care, then it will spread.<sup>13</sup>

As the pages of this book continue to unfold, we hope the voices within inspire and challenge readers to think differently, yet more completely about family ministry and what constitutes a "family." We've come a long way in a few short years, and we have great ministries and programs. Yet, how do we call and include everyone in our local churches to embrace and belong to this eternal household of faith? We can and we must! It will take prayer, Spirit dependence, lots of conversations and collaboration, and especially humility.

I am excited and hopeful for the future church, for our leaders that are brave enough to have these important conversations in this book, and for the opportunity before us to finally live into the explicit relationship Jesus has designed for His followers. May we be faithful to this end.

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<sup>13</sup> Scott Cormode, YF730, "Leading Change," lecture at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA in 2013.

## Practical Considerations

1. I mention a new way forward for family ministry called “church as family.” What excites or intrigues you about this theological shift? What might cause you caution or concern? Of the three shifts mentioned in the chapter, which do you most resonate with? Which might be the most difficult for you or your church?
2. I suggest a new model of family ministry: interdependent family ministry, in which *every* ministry in the church (not just family ministry) owns the discipleship of the family of faith. This includes the church holistically as well as all families in the church. If you were designing a new way forward in your church using this model, how would you design it? What might you do the same and differently? In your ministry context, what are some challenges you might face and what might work?
3. Unless you are a lead pastor, most of us are middle management as ministry leaders. This does not mean we can’t begin to make some of these shifts within our sphere of influence. Think about your staff team, who could be that “person of peace” that is like minded and open to this new paradigm? What ministry and leader would be willing to think strategically and collaborate with you?
4. What is one thing that resonated with you in this chapter? What is one, just one, action step you can take to move toward “church as family,” even if it is only in your area of ministry?

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## Chapter 2

# Engaging and Equipping Single Parent Families

Shelly Melia, Ph.D.

I am a planner. I get as much joy from planning vacations as I do from taking them. And it's not just vacations; I love planning my life. For the first 35 years of my life, I felt blessed to see most of those plans and dreams come true. After college, I married my husband, and five years later, we started our family, eventually welcoming three beautiful children. I loved watching my husband in his role as a dad. He was "all in" when it came to parenting our children. Everything was falling into place for our little family of five until June 16, 2005.

I was the children's minister at our church, and we were in the middle of Vacation Bible School. I left the house early that morning as a wife, mom, and children's minister, ready for a full day of VBS. Later that afternoon, I returned to my home with a new identity. I was now a widowed, single parent. I was 35 years old, and our children were just six, four, and two years old when my husband was killed in a car accident. Being a single parent was not something I ever imagined for myself. It was not part of my plan, and I struggled to understand how it could be a part of God's good plan for my life.

**LF:** *Shelly, your personal journey adds so much credibility to this chapter!*

Every single parent's story is unique. But there are at least two things most single parents have in common: they did not plan to be single parents, and their journey almost always includes pain or trauma. One single mom said, "Nobody becomes a single parent because that is a burning desire deep in their soul." While single parents may not have planned to be single parents, the church must develop plans to better minister to single parents and their children.

In full transparency, before June 2005, I was focused on my family, surrounded by two-parent families, and had no concept of what it meant to experience life as a single parent. Regrettably, as the children's minister at our church, I had a voice at staff meetings, but single parents were not on my radar. I certainly had compassion, but my effectiveness in advocating for and ministering to them was lacking. Now, after almost twenty years of being one myself, perhaps the most gracious way to state where I was and where I have observed most churches missing the mark in ministering to single parents is to acknowledge "we don't know what we don't know."

**RG:** *Shelly makes a great point here worth reiterating: We cannot have true empathy with any individual or group until we have experienced what they have experienced. I thought I was a great youth pastor... until I became a parent! In the past I have stated—especially regarding being a single and adoptive parent—"If a person can't have empathy, I would settle for sympathy because that sure beats apathy!" If we haven't experienced life from the perspective of a "fifth wheel family," we should at least engage in conversations that get to know them and their perspective.*

This chapter aims to help pastors and ministry leaders “know what they need to know” to minister more intentionally to single parents. The assumption is there is a desire to reach and disciple this growing population (Matthew 28:19–20) and a willingness to consider a perspective unfamiliar to most pastors and ministry leaders. We will unpack these three questions as we consider the needs of single-parent families in our churches and communities:

1. Do you see me?
2. Do I belong here?
3. Do you need me?

Testimonials are included within each section to bring content to life and provide insight and understanding into what single parents experience in their local churches. (Side note: The testimonies in this chapter come from single parents who actively serve, give, and attend faithfully in their local church).

## **Statistics**

Statistics on single parents are ubiquitous, and this chapter will not attempt to address current data fully. Pew Research (2019) and the Census Bureau (2022) provide data pertinent to the faith community as we consider the prevalence of single parents in our churches and communities:

- Almost 1 in 4 children live in a single-parent home in the United States (Pew, 2019)
- Only 7% of the world’s children live in single-parent homes. This means children in the United States are three times more likely to live in a single-parent home than anywhere else in the world (Pew, 2019)
- Single mothers maintain 80% of single-parent families (US Census, 2022)

An emerging trend that will eventually significantly impact communities and churches is the increase in births outside of marriage. According to a report from The Forum on Child and Family Statistics, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, 40% of all births in 2021 were to unmarried women. The category of 20–24-year-old women came in with the highest rate of births to unmarried women at 68%. Let that sink in for a moment: 68% of babies born to 20–24-year-old mothers in 2021 were *not* born into a traditional family. It is not enough to be pro-birth and support local pregnancy aid centers; we must be prepared to be pro-life for the entire life of the mother and the child. The church has generations of work to keep the long-term commitment required to be fully pro-life.

The potential adverse outcomes for children raised in single-parent households have long been part of the research narrative. These outcomes are typically described in terms of socioeconomic disparity, mental health struggles, academic barriers, attachment and abandonment issues, substance abuse, and even negative health outcomes. The needs of children in single-parent homes cannot be understated. Who better than the church to stand in the gap for children growing up in single-parent homes?

### Stop and Consider

- Which statistics stick out to you as most significant for the church to understand or address?
- What ministries in our local churches could address the potential adverse outcomes the children of single parents experience?
- When mothers choose life, how can the church stand in the gap and minister to both the parent and child for the long haul?

## Do You See Me?

One of the greatest needs of single parents is to be seen. The Old Testament story of Hagar, found in Genesis 16, provides biblical support for the importance and impact of being seen. The story is too complex to unpack here completely, but the message is simple: God saw Hagar's pain. Hagar had little control over her life circumstances. She did not plan to be pregnant by someone who was not her husband, and she was certainly experiencing a lot of shame and pain.

Hagar, an enslaved Egyptian, ran away from the cruelty she experienced at the hands of Sarai. Alone in the desert, the Angel of the Lord came to her and spoke to her. In Genesis 16:13, Hagar did something no other person in the Old Testament did. She gave God the name *El-Roi* or "The God who sees." Hagar goes on to say, "I have now seen the One who sees me" (NIV). Hagar was not invisible to God, and knowing God saw her pain changed her outlook, allowing her to embrace God's purpose for her life, even when it was not what she had planned or deserved.

Do. You. See. Me? Reading the story of Hagar gives more context to why this question is a focus of this chapter. How could we *not* see the increasing numbers of single parents in our churches and communities? If we are paying attention to what is happening in our world, we know the numbers are rising. So why is there even a question about whether we see them? The answer may surprise you: Single parents often carry shame, they may wonder if God sees their pain, and they are not sure the church truly sees them. To see someone as God saw Hagar is to see their pain and choose to focus on the person and their purpose rather than their circumstances, some of which they may have had no control over.

How can the church do a better job of seeing them? Listen to their stories, not to fix them or even to determine who is to blame for their circumstances. Listen to understand their story. Consider

the perspective of these single parents as they describe ways in which they have not always felt seen in church settings.

“Sunday was always the loneliest day of my week. Whether it was my perception or not, I always felt alone and second class at church.” (LR)

“In all my years of attending church, I haven’t heard a sermon affirming or honoring single parents. By default, I am the spiritual leader in my home, and I could use some encouragement from time to time. I know I cannot provide all the things my children need, but I am doing the best I can. Sometimes, I wish my pastor would speak some life and hope into my life as a single mom.” (LM)

“Sadly, people’s biases can play a significant role in the assumptions they make about us. We may be seen as reckless instead of responsible, sinful instead of lost and struggling, or that our current circumstances result from our choices rather than the repercussions of someone else’s choices.” (MH)

Two thought leaders in single-parent ministry, who were also single parents at one time and went on to lead significant single-parent family ministries in their churches and communities, provide valuable insight into understanding the needs of single parents. First, Linda Jacobs, author of *The Single-Parent Confident and Successful* and creator of Divorce Care for Kids (DC4K.org):

Single parents need extra reassurance that they are valued by God and the church. The feelings of rejection and abandonment from a former spouse or parent of their child can be raw and overwhelming, and they can be extra sensitive to anything that feels like rejection or abandonment by the church as well.

Next, Dawn VanderWerf, co-author of *The Daddy Gap*, offers practical and specific suggestions for pastors and ministry leaders:

Speak to them directly in Sunday services. Acknowledge their suffering, their financial struggles, and their unique and difficult calling, and affirm them for their courage in parenting and spiritually leading their family alone. Receiving public acknowledgment and encouragement from male church leaders is incredibly powerful and costs nothing!

If you are still with me, you may be feeling conflicted about these testimonies and suggestions. For some, elevating the needs of single parents could signal a retreat from fidelity to the biblical ideal: a two-parent family. Before becoming a single parent, I might have even interpreted the testimonies as “negative” or “needy.” I had good intentions, but there were significant gaps in my understanding of what it meant to be a single parent. Without meaning to, I prioritized the needs of two-parent families while overlooking and sometimes misunderstanding the needs of my brothers and sisters in Christ who were experiencing life as a single parent. I did not truly see their struggles and discouragement, even while at church.

Striking a balance between upholding the biblical ideal of a two-parent family while also seeking to help non-single pastors, ministry leaders, and parents consider what they might not know about the perspective and needs of single parents is a tightrope to walk carefully. This chapter is not about devaluing the traditional, two-parent family as the desired norm for families in our churches. Dr. Kevin Jones’ chapter on the traditional family does a beautiful job of emphasizing the importance of this biblical ideal. Instead, this chapter aims to shine the light on our blind spots so we “know what we need to know” and so we can make plans to “do what needs to be done” to reach single-parent families.



## Stop and Consider

- What blind spots did this chapter reveal as you considered the need for single parents to be seen?
- Does your church speak directly to single parents from the pulpit? What small step could you take in speaking hope and life into single parents?
- Which of the testimonies spoke to you? What assumptions do you often make about single parents?

## Do I Belong?

Belonging is a primary pain point for all of us, but especially for single parents. Lack of belonging manifests itself in loneliness and isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General's recent report on the mental health and well-being of parents found that 77% of single parents experience loneliness (Surgeon General report, 2023). Even though technology and social media provide ample avenues for connection, "single parents often feel isolated or marginalized within their communities" (Table for One Ministries, 2024).

Belonging is the gateway for single parents to experience genuine biblical community with fellow believers. Throughout Scripture, the importance of relationships and biblical community is emphasized. In the creation story, God declared it was not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18), underscoring the need for connection. In Deuteronomy 6:5–7, in addition to the instructions given to parents, the entire community of faith was expected to reach and teach children collectively (Hunter, 2025). Moving to the New Testament, Acts 2:42–47 describes the early church not as consumer-driven but as a collective community of faith: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, NIV).

*JJ: Shelly brings up an excellent point. Simply because adults have experienced individuation does not mean we do not struggle with belonging. There is a growing body of evidence that suggests attachment continues on into adulthood and “secure bases” of relationships are just as important during adulthood as they are during childhood and adolescence. We ALL desire to have a secure base we can belong to in safety. It stands to reason that for all believers the church, the family of God, should and could provide the best space for belonging. As a current groups pastor, I have seen firsthand how small groups can provide a place for single parents to belong and contribute to the church without judgment or embarrassment. I have seen intergenerational groups that include and welcome families and parents of all circumstances. Groups are a simple, easy onramp for **everyone** to belong.*

The importance of belonging for single parents cannot be overstated. Without belonging, single parents are unable to experience biblical community. To bring the concept of belonging to life, consider two seemingly unrelated images: elephants and bridges. Picture a group of mama elephants moving together in the wild. Next, envision a massive bridge that provides connection and access where none existed before.

## **Mama Elephants**

First, the mama elephants. If you were in the wild observing mama elephants, you might notice some interesting behaviors. For example, when a mama elephant is about to give birth to a baby elephant, there are certain things other mama elephants in the herd do. Mama elephants circle around the vulnerable elephant and close ranks as she prepares to give birth. They kick up dust to throw off

predators and stand together in solidarity to protect the mama elephant while she does the life-giving work of birthing her baby. Once the baby is born, the mama elephants trumpet loudly to celebrate the new life.

I host a women's Bible study group in my home, and we affectionately call our group "the elephants." When I need support, my elephants are there for me. They pray for me, kick up dirt to protect me when I am vulnerable, and maybe, most importantly, celebrate with me when good things happen. I cannot imagine my life as a single parent without the support and love of my elephants. They have stood beside me in times of great sorrow and struggle, prayed me through worries and fears, and are the first to throw a party when there is a reason to celebrate.

My experience as a single parent finding my "herd" is likely more the exception than the rule. I had the benefit of being on staff at our church, and finding belonging was not as challenging as it is for people who come into a community of faith without anyone knowing them or their stories. After a divorce, single parents often lose their sense of belonging due to no longer fitting into the married groups they once enjoyed. A quick look at almost any church website that lists Bible study groups will reveal that the choices for single parents are limited to non-existent, while the lists for married adult groups are extensive.

What is the proverbial elephant in the room? Very few churches make single-parent ministry a mission-critical ministry of the church. There are likely many reasons for this, but here are a few possibilities: Some churches do not identify single-parent families as their target audience, others may not believe single-parents will be a good return on their investment, or perhaps there are even churches who have unintentionally made marital status a barrier for belonging. Acknowledging the diversity in family structures is essential for

creating a church environment where belonging can open the door for biblical community to flourish.

## Bridges

Now, turn your attention to the massive bridge in your mind. Bridges allow people to get somewhere they could not go without the bridge. Bridges are necessary to move people across large bodies of water, through massive canyons, or just from one side of a busy highway to another. What would happen if there were suddenly no bridges? In many places, the lack of bridges would create isolation, and natural barriers would cut off people from essential resources.

What do bridges have to do with belonging for single parents? Think about your church. Are there bridges single parents can easily cross to find their “herd” and experience belonging that leads to biblical community? Or do single parents in your church run into more barriers than bridges, resulting in isolation and loneliness? Are there clearly marked paths to finding biblical community, regardless of their marital status? Is the language used from the pulpit and in publications inclusive of more than just the two-parent family? When ministry events happen at the church, is childcare provided for parents who do not have another dependable adult in the house? For single parents, childcare is often a critical bridge that must be in place for them to participate in the programs and ministries of the church. Below is a compilation of experiences of single parents who either found it challenging to access bridges to belonging and biblical community in their church or experienced hurt when people in the church missed opportunities to step into their child’s pain and maintain strong bridges for belonging:

“When I was a single mom, my church offered a parenting class, and when I went online to register, the system would not let me proceed with the next registration step without listing my spouse’s name. Fortunately, I was cre-

ative and listed Jesus as my spouse, so when I showed up to the class there was a nametag for me and Jesus! While I don't believe the leaders had any intention of excluding me or any other single parents from participating, there are still systems like this in place in many churches that unknowingly exclude single parents from being included in many activities." (DV)

"I wish churches would take steps to ensure single parents feel genuinely welcomed and valued. Many single parents avoid church out of fear of judgment or a sense of not belonging. Most programs are tailored to traditional family structures, leaving those who have a family that looks different from that feeling excluded. By recognizing this, churches can create an environment where every family feels they truly belong." (MK)

"Language is critical. For example, using the term "broken home" to describe single parent families does not communicate hope or belonging. Remember, all people are broken, not just single parents." (SM)

"It is hard for a single parent to feel included. I hate going anywhere and sitting or eating by myself. Some weekends, you might have your child(ren), and the next week, they might be with their ex-spouse. It is hard to attend church when single and without someone else accompanying you. It is also hard on the child(ren) to attend one week and miss the other." (MM)

"When I was a single mom at a small church, nobody did anything. We missed a few weeks in a row, and no one called. My daughters were in the youth group; they shared with the leaders what was happening at home, but no one showed up for them, not one person." (DC)

“My child’s father was a deacon, sang on the praise team, and taught Sunday School. He left us because of an affair. The youth pastor prayed with my daughter one time at a disciple now event three months after he left and that was all the care she ever received from the church. The youth pastor knew the whole story because her dad was one of the teachers.” (RL)

What about when churches get it right? Here are some stories from single parents who found belonging and a biblical community in their churches. What is the common denominator? There were bridges already in place for them. Do you know what else is impressive about their stories? Each one of the single parents below has gone on to become a bridge-building specialist, doing even more for other single parents than what was done for them. In each case below, the person has spent over twenty years dedicating their time and resources to lead and equip single-parent ministries nationwide. You never know who may cross the bridge you build or how God will use their pain for His glory.

“When I was a single mother, I found a church that hosted a single-parent support group once a week. They welcomed me and my children, providing meals and childcare while I attended Bible study. They also adopted our family for Christmas, gifting us with a brand-new winter coat. I felt loved.” (MK)

“I am thankful that the church the Lord led me to knew what to do with me. They were ready (30 years ago). They placed me in a biblical community that surrounded me with friendship, fellowship, and prayer. They helped guide me and welcomed me in with open arms.” (HC)

“I had no funds for presents that first year I was raising my kids on my own. Someone in our church found out, and on Christmas Eve, they came over after the kids were in bed,

and they brought in presents for each of us. The presents were all wrapped and with each person's name on a card. That wonderful family of God continued walking along beside us. The men invited my young son on a fishing trip. One lady brought us a meal on Friday evening. It was just mac and cheese, Jello, and green beans, but it spoke volumes to my children that God's people loved us." (LJ)

"As we were developing the ministry, there was a very significant thing that happened that seemed insignificant but was really very large and could be the crux of the matter ... it was calling them family. If you ask anyone in a single-parent family if they feel like a family, they resoundingly say 'YES.' However, the American church does not always view them as a family. So, instead of a single-parent ministry, we always say it's a 'Single-parent FAMILY Ministry.' This seems insignificant, but in reality, they want to know they are legitimately a part of a family, a church family, and truly belong." (HC)

One final word about bridges: bridges are built over time. Sometimes, they take years to build, but the benefits are multi-generational. When we communicate through both word and deed that we truly see single parents and take the time to intentionally and sacrificially build bridges for them to experience belonging and biblical community, then we will begin to see the transformation and healing God offers through the experience of knowing Him and being loved and cared for by His people.

"With God and a healthy biblical community, healing begins and almost always is not a long road ... but one that He will set out for each family to bring true restoration." (leader of a single-parent ministry for 16 years)

## Stop and Consider

- How has your perspective of single parents been enlarged by reading the testimonies of single parents? Which story resonated with you the most?
- What comes to mind that you might be able to do to ensure that single parents have access to bridges to belonging in your church?

## Do You Need Me?

Being “needed” is a biblical concept, and single parents have an important role to play in the body of Christ. God designed the Church to function as a body, with each part of the body fulfilling an important role. In 1 Corinthians 12:18–26 Paul taught us about the importance of interdependence:

But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” **On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,** and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If



one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (NIV, emphasis added).

Did you catch verse 22 (emphasized above)? Go back and reread it. What does it say about the "weaker parts" of the body? They are *indispensable*! Joni Eareckson Tada, the founder of Joni and Friends ministry, often describes effective disability ministry in this way: "It is not a disability ministry until the disabled are ministering." According to Tada, not only should churches be prepared to minister to those who are disabled, but churches should also encourage and empower those who are disabled to live out God's purpose for their lives by serving and ministering to others. What if we applied that same principle when we measured the effectiveness of ministry to single parents?

*It is not a single-parent ministry until the single parents are ministering.*

Indeed, single-parent families often have significant needs. Some need financial assistance, while others struggle emotionally or spiritually. Recovery from trauma, abuse, abandonment, or addiction may also be a part of their journey and take time to navigate fully. However, a significant aspect of healing for the single parent is to find their purpose (to be needed) and make meaning from their pain. Churches often underestimate the contribution single parents can make:

"The biggest myth is that single-parent families will consume and drain the resources of the church, primarily the staff's time and the church's finances. Yet, with God, the single-parent family will not only heal with a healthy biblical community but will grow and mature spiritually, eventually leading to contributions back into the church and healthy families." (HC)

“When I was a single mom, my church did a great job of making sure I knew I wasn’t disqualified because I was divorced or less useful to God because I was single. They invited me into serving and leadership opportunities, giving me a sense of purpose and belonging during some of my most difficult seasons.” (DV)

This section, which highlights the importance of single parents discovering their purpose and contributing to the local church’s mission, will likely resonate deeply with pastors and ministry leaders. A significant challenge many local churches face is moving members—whether single or married—to transition from consumers to active contributors. However, it is crucial to recognize that most single parents will not make this shift unless they feel “seen” and experience a sense of belonging that draws them into biblical community.

### Stop and Consider

- Are the single parents in your church given opportunities and encouraged to use their gifts? Do you invite them to the leadership table to hear their perspective and benefit from their experiences?
- Do you agree with this statement: “It is not a single parent ministry until single parents are ministering? Why or why not?

### Practical Considerations

Now that you “know what you need to know,” how do you “do what needs to be done?” Where does a church begin when trying to address the needs of single-parent families? Here are a few general principles:

1. No universal plan or program for ministering to single parents will work in every context. Be Spirit-led rather than pro-

gram-driven. Spend considerable time in prayer, asking God to reveal the work He is calling you to do.

2. Start small and know your primary purpose: reaching single-parent families with the gospel. By starting small, you are more likely to sustain the ministry. Determine in advance to train and replicate leaders before expanding the ministry. Too many single-parent ministries have started with a bang, only to eventually die because they were unsustainable.
3. Include single parents in the conversation about ministry to them. Give them a voice and a seat at the table. Tell them they are needed (and wanted!) and equip and empower them to use their gifts.
4. Ask hard questions and solicit honest feedback about the current state of your church's ministry to single parents. Be willing to listen to the answers of single parents, even when it is hard to hear.
5. Do your homework on potential support group curriculums and programs that may be needed to assist single parents in the healing and recovery process. If your church cannot start a support group, find one nearby and refer single parents from your church.

Special consideration for ministering to the children of single parents:

1. Find ways to be more inclusive of the children in activities that rely on the presence of both parents in the home. For example, if your church has a father-daughter banquet or a mother-son event, ask single parents how you can best include their children. There is not one solution that is right for every family. Some will be happy for another dad to include their daughter in the event. For others, it may not be practical, or the child may feel uncomfortable going with someone they

do not know well. The most important thing is to communicate to the single parent an understanding this event is challenging for their child to participate in (you see them), and you want to be someone who fills in the gap for them (you will help them experience the church “as family”). The worst thing you can do is say nothing or assume the child is oblivious that they are missing out. Children feel left out when they see their friends getting to do things they cannot do. One single parent shared that her daughter did not want to go to church during the weeks leading up to the father-daughter banquet because she saw the posters and announcements for it, which made her sad. She avoided church because of the pain of not having her father there to take her to an important event (prior to the divorce, her dad always took her).

2. Use language in sermons and other contexts that communicate an understanding of the different family contexts parents and children find themselves in. I always notice when a pastor talks about the father being the spiritual leader of the home. I often wonder what goes through the minds of children who hear this but do not have a father to take on this role. I have never heard a pastor explain what a single or widowed mom should do when there is no father in the home to be the spiritual leader. The reality is that all parents should spiritually lead their children because the world is already discipling them away from the things of God.
3. Consistently speak hope into the lives of single parents and their children. There. Is. Hope. Single-parent families are not second-class, and their children are not destined to turn out poorly. Kids from single-parent families can experience the same transformational gospel as kids from two-parent families. God can do amazing work in any family. Need an example? Consider D. L. Moody. His father died when he was only

four years old, and his mother never remarried. Moody went on to become one of the greatest evangelists of all time. Dr. Ben Carson and C. S. Lewis also found themselves as young children in a single-parent home with less-than-ideal circumstances. Never underestimate the plan God has for children of single parents. Be part of their story of hope, salvation, and restoration through the local church.

4. Recognize the need for mentors in the lives of the children of single parents. Some churches may have the resources to develop formal mentoring ministries, but most churches need a simpler and more organic approach. Consider this story from a volunteer in a single mom's ministry:

"Christ-following men are needed to step in. Example: I had a man who let me know that he was unable to help with our older kids (he had been an incredible volunteer in the past) because his grandson had games on Wednesday nights; I suggested that he take one of the kids who had outgrown our children's ministry with him to watch his grandson's game. He had never thought of that and said, 'Sure! I can do that!' Moms and dads do not have to miss out on their family things; just incorporate another child in! It also gives the mom a break, AND your kids will learn from your Christ-like example! It really is a win-win-win!" (AB)

5. Prioritize safety and ensure policies are in place to conduct background checks on any volunteer with minors. Require volunteers to complete training in sexual abuse awareness and insist volunteers follow ministry guidelines related to best practices in children's and student ministries. An adult should never be alone with a minor for any amount of time.

## Concluding Thoughts

Chapter One introduced a paradigm shift: moving from an over-reliance on the traditional family structure for implementing family ministry to a model rooted in the ancient (and biblical) practices of interdependence and intergenerational discipleship. For single parents, this shift significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing the church as their primary place of belonging.

As the testimonies throughout this chapter revealed, one of the most significant challenges a single parents faces is the struggle to feel a true sense of belonging. This often prevents them from finding their “herd” and fully experiencing the church as a family.

Dr. PJ Dunn, founder of Table for One Ministries, notes it is not enough to be welcoming, churches must fully include single parents:

Imagine being invited to a feast, only to be escorted to a folding table in the corner with plastic cups and leftover décor. Too often, this is how single adults feel in church spaces—welcomed, but not fully included. They may be offered a ministry “table,” but it’s often separated, minimized, or temporary.<sup>1</sup>

However, this longing for belonging is not limited to single parents. According to research in *Growing Young* by the Fuller Youth Institute, one of the most common phrases young people used to describe thriving churches was that they felt “like family.”

If current statistics are any indication, growing churches must prioritize addressing the needs of single parents—or risk missing the opportunity to reach more than 50% of the families in their communities. By engaging with the three questions outlined in this chapter, churches can shift toward a more comprehensive model of family

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<sup>1</sup> PJ Dunn, Table for One Ministries. [tfoministries.org](https://tfoministries.org/does-your-church-still-have-a-kids-table-for-singles-its-time-to-rethink-single-adult-ministry). <https://tfoministries.org/does-your-church-still-have-a-kids-table-for-singles-its-time-to-rethink-single-adult-ministry>.

ministry, where single parents not only experience the church as *family* but also actively contribute to it. When single parents experience the church as their family, it will transform family from something they simply belong to into something they actively do.

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## Author Biographies

**Larry Fowler** is the founder of the Legacy Coalition. In 2016, his vision for a national grandparenting ministry brought together a gifted team of family, children, and youth ministry leaders to launch this movement of God. His 40 years plus of ministry leadership, including experience as youth pastor, missionary, training staff, international director, and senior executive for Awana, have prepared him for this significant new calling.

Larry has authored books on children's and family ministry and is in high demand as a regular main stage speaker and workshop presenter at conferences. His most recent book, *Overcoming Grandparenting Barriers*, helps grandparents navigate family relationships when things aren't perfect.

In 2012, he was recognized for his lifetime of contribution to Children's Ministry in America by the International Network of Children's Ministry, with their national Legacy Award. Larry and his wife, Diane, live in Riverside, California. They have two children and seven grandchildren.

**Rich Griffith**, D.Min., has over 40 years of ministry experience (30 in youth ministry and 10 as a lead pastor). Rich has been teaching at Toccoa Falls College since 2016 as the associate professor of Youth and Multi-Generational Ministry. Both his Master of Theology and Doctorate (youth, family, and culture) are from Fuller Theological Seminary. Rich completed a second M.A. in organizational leadership from Toccoa Falls College. Rich developed the Youth and Family Doctor of Ministry program for South College and serves on the board of the Association of Youth Ministry Educators.

Rich is a frequent speaker for the D6 Conference, LIFE, NEXT, Intergenerate, and other ministry and leadership conferences. He is a published author in a variety of Zondervan and Youth Specialties materials, and a writer for RootedMinistry.com. He is the author

of, *Voices: Helping Our Children and Youth Listen to Wise Counsel* (2023), which was featured on Focus on the Family. He also wrote *Discipleship Is Leadership* (2024), both books are published by D6 Family Ministry. Dr. Griffith is also a part-time pastor at a local church. His most important ministry is to his three sons. He has a special interest in working with churches and families to equip every generation to disciple each other into becoming life-long disciples of Jesus who make more disciples.

**JJ Jones**, D.Min., is closing in on 40 years of ministry experience youth ministry, family ministry, and discipleship (30 plus in youth and family ministry and seven in discipleship). He is an adjunct professor in the Ministry Leadership Department at Toccoa Falls College where he has taught youth ministry, leadership, and spiritual formation classes for eight years. He holds an undergraduate degree in Religion from Union University, a Master of Divinity from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry in youth, family, and culture from Fuller Theological Seminary.

JJ is also the pastor of groups at Fellowship Bible Church, a multisite church in the greater Nashville area, where he leads a team overseeing adult ministries. He has a heart for the nation of India, and has led pastor's conferences, marriage conferences with his wife Anna, and has taught at local Bible colleges and seminaries in that country. He and Anna still mentor young couples and families and have a desire to see legacies of generational discipleship beginning with their two grown children and grandchildren.

Dr. Jones has spoken over the years at youth camps and retreats, local parent and marriage conferences, and now nationally at the D6 Conference and on the *D6 Family Ministry Podcast*. He has served on writing teams for Fellowship Resources. This is JJ's first book.

**Kevin M. Jones**, Ed.D., joined the faculty at Cedarville University in 2020. He is a native of Louisville, Kentucky, and has varied experience in public school systems, homeschooling, collegiate level teaching, and administration. He previously held posts at Boyce College and Kentucky State University. He has served as a lay pastor at Buck Run Baptist Church, Forest Baptist Church, and Watson Memorial Baptist Church. Jones' longing is to see fathers build resilient sons and to see teachers and leaders influence the lives of students nationally and internationally, teaching and leading unto the glory of God.

Kevin enjoys playing board games with family—wife and high school sweetheart, Demica, and three children: Kennedy, Kevin Jr, and Karsynn.

**Shelly Melia**, Ph.D., serves as the program director for the Master of Arts in Children's Ministry and the Master of Arts in Family Ministry at Dallas Baptist University. Prior to coming to DBU she served for over 25 years in children's and family ministry in Oklahoma, Florida, and Texas. Dr. Melia is also a Licensed Professional Counselor specializing in grief and resilience. She holds an undergraduate degree from Oklahoma Baptist University, two master's degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Philosophy from B.H. Carroll Theological Institute.

Dr. Melia has spoken at national conferences such as ETCH Family Ministry Conference, D6 Conference, and the Children's Pastor's Conference. In addition, she is a frequent speaker for local churches and state conventions in Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Missouri. Most recently, she contributed a chapter titled "The Role of Faith or Spirituality in a Child's Response to Loss" to the new book, *Bridging Theory and Practice in Children's Spirituality*.