

# **FAMILY MINISTRY – Theology, Vision and Principles**

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The purpose of this paper is to establish basic theological foundations for family ministry from a Lutheran perspective, review and critique contemporary conceptions of family ministry, and offer a number of principles to guide and direct ministry to and with families.

## **I. Theological Foundations for Family Ministry**

### ***Word and Sacrament and Family Ministry***

From a Lutheran theological perspective, the family is not a sacrament nor an instituted agency of redemption. God's redemptive "right hand kingdom" work in the world does not essentially depend upon or require families. Thus, Luther writes of marriage that it is 'an outward, bodily thing, like any other worldly undertaking' [LW 45: 25].

However, as an order instituted and established by God in creation, in his "left hand kingdom", the family is a significant context for Christian vocation, the practice, witness and exercise of the faith; and a basic social institution to which the church is called to render loving service in the name of Christ. In this way we can *distinguish but not separate* Word and Sacrament, the means of God's workings in his "right hand kingdom", from family life. Firstly, it can be seen that family ministry involves the church supporting, equipping and partnering with Christians as they live out their new personhood in Christ as "sacramental people" in, with and through their families. In this way we can speak of the church *in* the home, or the Christian home as an expression of the life of the church.

Families within the church are called to function as church in the home, since the impact of relationships within the family is so irrefutably formative, especially for children ... To function "as church" in the home does not mean taking on all the functions of the congregation. Rather it means living together in ways that express

Christian faith and promote spiritual growth within the context of domestic life. The family is not a substitute for the congregation but a vital part of its larger structure [Thompson 1996: 137].

Secondly, family ministry involves reaching out to families in the wider community as the ongoing embodiment of the Word, Jesus Christ, in the world. In this way the church brings the Gospel of Jesus Christ in speech and action into the arenas of human life where people are mostly deeply touched and shaped, responding to the most profound cries of human experience. As a community that bears Christ's presence through Word and Sacrament, the church bears Him to people in and through relationship with them in that most basic of relational communities, the family.

### ***The Sacramental Shaping of Family Ministry***

As the means by which God grants and sustains faith in and for life in the world, the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion give basic shape to the church's ministry to and with families.

In infant Baptism, the child and its family are (i) called into baptismal living as an expression of the church's mission and purposes; and (ii) drawn into the "family" of the church through the promises that are made. This twofold movement is expressed in the baptismal rite. Firstly, those that present the child for baptism are asked to make a 'promise' in response to the following statement:

In Christian love you have presented this child for Holy Baptism. You should, therefore, faithfully bring him/her to the services of God's house, and teach him/her the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. As he/she grows in years, you should place in his/her hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for his/her instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant of his/her Baptism and in communion with the Church, he/she may lead a godly life until the day of Jesus Christ [Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship 1978: 121].

Secondly, the congregation is asked to confess the creedal faith with the family prior to the baptism, and thereafter the following welcome is extended to the child by the congregation:

Through Baptism God has made these new sisters and brothers members of the priesthood we all share in Christ Jesus, that we may proclaim the praise of God and bear his creative and redeeming Word to all the world. We welcome you into the Lord's family. We receive you as fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers with us in the kingdom of God [Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship 1978: 121].

The baptismal shape of family ministry is therefore such that it concerns both the nurture and

growth of persons within the context of the Christian family, and the inter-communion of the baptised within the 'Lord's family', the broader community of the church. That the baptism of the child, surrounded by its family, takes place within the sacred corporate gathering of the church community, points to a close relationship between these two elements. The implication of baptism's place as a sacrament *of the church* is, as Dykstra points out, that we collectively share responsibility for each other's family promises, 'the making and breaking of them, the fulfilling and non-fulfilling of them' [1986: 153]. In baptism the child and its family are brought into the shared mission of the church, which commits itself to support the family in its essential task of living out the Christian faith; and are connected to the church "family" in a way which transcends the family of origin. Notable is that the particular form of the family is not significant; rather the focus is on the way in which baptismal promises are carried out in relation to whatever family situations we are in.

In and through Holy Communion we perceive again a two-fold movement. On the one hand, the Sacrament is received individually. Each recipient receives the body and blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine for the personal forgiveness of sins. In this, the communicant is brought into the life of Christ. This, in turn, leads them directly out into the world, into the vocation of daily life and loving service to the "neighbors" whom they have. On the other hand, recipients share in a common meal. The Sacrament draws communicants together into an organic, intimate interdependency as the corporate body of Christ. Here one's "brothers" and "sisters" are fellow church members. Through the mystery of the sacrament, a mutual responsibility and interdependence is established. We are sent out into the world individually and separately into our diverse vocations - of which family life is a vital and significant part - even as we are joined to one another.

Thus, we see that the Sacraments bring forth two "levels" of family ministry. At one level, the Sacraments form and shape persons for intimate, grace-filled life together in their basic day-to-day relationships. As the most basic human community, this points to the family as a key context for "sacramental living" by "sacramental people". We are members of the household of God *as* members of families, and our relationship with God and one another fundamentally shapes family living. At a second level, the Sacraments transcend and obviate societal structures, drawing together persons from diverse backgrounds and contexts into the one

community of grace, the church of Jesus Christ. In this community, all are “brothers” and “sisters” in Christ, called to intimate, caring relationship with one another in conformity to and in expression of the will of God.

### ***The Family as a Locus of Baptismal Life***

The celebration of baptism as a “family event” within the “broader family” of the church evidences a basic truth: day-to-day family life is a (if not *the*) primary arena where baptismal faith is exercised, shaped and practiced. In the intimate “rub” of interpersonal family relationships, the Christian life takes shape and is given form. In this vein, Luther saw marriage and family life as constituent of the ‘cross’ of the Christian, a God-given vocation in which we experience the daily dying to self, that we might daily rise to life anew in Christ through faith [Wingren 1999: 50ff]. In the intimacy of family life, the Christian faith is practiced and exercised in an ongoing cycle of sin, repentance and renewal.

As the basic community of believers, bound in love to one another, the family is the arena in which the drama of redemption is played out. The dying and rising with Christ is clearly manifested. Here, the cycle of sin, hurt, reconciliation, and healing is lived out over and over again. In family life is found the church of the home: where each day “two or three are gathered” in the Lord’s name; where the hungry are fed; where the thirsty are given drink; where the sick are comforted. It is in the family that the Lord’s injunction to forgive “seventy times seven” is lived out in the daily reconciliation of husband, wife, parent, child, grandparent, brothers, sisters, extended kin [National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1998: 21].

Family living teaches experientially the meaning of grace and love, anger and sin, forgiveness and reconciliation. The family is, as Garland expresses, ‘a particularly significant proving ground for Christian discipleship and a vineyard for the fruits of the Spirit. It is in families that love, forgiveness, grace, long-suffering, patience, kindness and self-sacrifice are often learned and lived most profoundly.’ [1999: 299] In the ‘cross’ of family life, God is at work in and upon us, shaping and moulding us for the service of discipleship in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Recognising the relationship between family life and discipleship serves to energise family ministry in the direction of supporting and encouraging persons to view themselves as disciples

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<sup>1</sup> The validity of family life as a context for discipleship finds biblical support in what Garland calls Jesus’ ‘twofold structure of discipleship’ [1999: 327]. While Jesus called persons to leave home and family to follow him, he also frequently sent new followers back to their homes (cf. Mt. 9:6; Mk. 2:11, 5:19, 8:26; Lk. 5:24, 8:39). The so-called “household codes” in the Pauline epistles provide further biblical witness to the essential place that family life plays in the sphere of Christian discipleship.

in their own homes, and to enrich family life as a vital context for the practice and growth of Christian faith. In this understanding, discipleship is not primarily correlated with involvement in church programs but with the day-to-day struggles of Christians to live out their baptismal faith in their intimate relationships.

### ***Family Life in Sin and Grace***

The biblical account of human beginnings recounts the story of the original family (Adam and Eve) and their fall into sin and brokenness (Gen. 2-3). But it is also the story of God's faithfulness to humanity. In the midst of their naked rebellion, God clothed Adam and Eve (3:22) and provided a promise of ultimate deliverance from the powers of evil (3:14). As the descendants of the original family descended deeper and deeper into the malaise of sin, marked by multiple examples of family dysfunction, God found a way to carry forward his promise of blessing. Finally, God gave the blessing of himself to the world in the person of Jesus Christ, born into the lineage of Adam and Seth (Lk. 3:23-37). In the death and resurrection of Christ, God took upon himself the burden of family dysfunction and once more clothed humankind, this time with the robes of righteousness (Rev. 6:13).

The story of God's workings in and through the family line of Adam and Seth has deep significance for family ministry. In continuity with the family of Adam, all families are broken and dysfunctional in relation to God's original creative intent. While there are certainly degrees of apparent dysfunctionality, there is, in the actuality of human existence, no "ideal" family. Yet, in the person of the resurrected Christ, God has found a way to carry forward his promise of blessing for families. Through faith in Christ, families are holy communities of holy people, grounded in the grace of God. And through this grace, active and present by means of Word and Sacrament, God continues to use a wide variety of family types to extend the blessings of Christ to the world. From the perspective of faith, all families are alike, and equally usable by God for his mission of love to and in the world.

This grace-centred understanding of God's workings with, in and through families shapes family ministry in a number of ways. Firstly, churches become "grace places", where families are not judged according to an "ideal" of family life, but accepted in their very brokenness as holy, forgiven communities of saints. Secondly, families are seen, despite their inevitable failings and

differences, as communities of promise, through whom God can work in remarkable ways.

Thirdly, family ministry serves to help families see themselves in the light of God's grace and to recognise how God is present and at work in the very midst of their trials and brokenness. As they experience God's grace in Christ, they are enabled to take up the mantle of Christ's mission to and in the world, freed from the crippling burden of judgement from self and others.

### ***Family and Vocation***

A significant contribution to a theology of family ministry is offered by the Lutheran doctrine of vocation. For the Christian, vocation encompasses the variety of God-given "stations" in life in which they are called to render loving service to the neighbour whom God has given. Luther held the vocation of marriage and family life in especially high regard, as having been ordered and instituted by God himself in creation.

Of essence to the doctrine of vocation with respect to family ministry, is that families are participants in God's mission to and in the world. In God's "left hand kingdom", families serve God's purposes of continuing creation, order, justice and care. In God's "right hand kingdom", families serve God's purposes of salvation in through the practice and teaching of faith in the home, and through witness to others as communities shaped by the grace of God. The doctrine therefore contributes to the shape of family ministry in a number of ways.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, the doctrine affirms marriage and family as a God-given and God-pleasing vocation. Parents and children serve God's holy purposes in the world as they serve one another in the vocation of marriage and family.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the doctrine affirms the public ministry of the Word carried out by Christian parents in the home. Both home and congregation are acknowledged as spheres in which the ministry of the Word is conducted through the two "offices" of law and gospel. Home and congregation are therefore called into vital partnership in the faith formation of children and youth.

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relationship between the doctrine of vocation and family ministry see my paper 'The Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation and Family Ministry', Luther Seminary, 2001, unpublished.

<sup>3</sup> For Luther, there were sufficient God-pleasing good works to be performed in the home such as to obviate the need to search for them elsewhere.

Thirdly, the doctrine encourages families as units of Christian love and service in community and society. The “idolatry” of the family is therefore precluded. Family life is not viewed as retreat from the world but engagement with it through vocational service for the neighbour beyond the circle of the family.

## **II. Visioning Family Ministry**

Within the church little consensus exists about what the term “family ministry” means. Some churches have used the term as a “catch-all” category of programs that work in some way with families. Some have primarily understood family ministry as those efforts within the church to address or prevent family dysfunction. Some have understood family ministry as the provision of social activities for families. Still others have seen family ministry primarily in terms of Christian education and have focused upon promoting faith sharing in the Christian home in partnership with the church’s educational efforts.

While all of these various approaches to family ministry have validity, no one in and of itself encapsulates the full breadth of family ministry. A fundamental premise of family ministry is that all persons live in relationship with a form of family, that all persons of Christian faith belong to the adoptive “family” of the church through baptism, and that families in society are basic and primary objects of the church’s mission and witness to and in the world. There is, therefore, a sense in which all church ministry is family ministry.

Such an understanding of family ministry transcends particular programs and conceives family ministry as a *perspective* through which the church carries out ministry in its multiplicity of forms. As Garland expresses, family ministry is ‘not only the programs and services congregations target to family needs but, more broadly, the ways our entire congregational life shapes and strengthens family relationships’ [1999: 10]. It includes ‘everything a church and its representatives do that has an impact on the founding, development and ministry of families’ [1999: 374]. Much of congregational family ministry thus ‘happens while we are doing something else.’ [1999: 395]. To some extent it can be said that all churches are engaged in family ministry on a day to day basis, whether they realise it or not. The question is whether such ministry is helpful or effective. Family ministry ‘is not just another ministry added to the

others, but an **awareness** of how all ministry impacts the family as a system within the larger systems of the church and society' [Foley 1995: 19].

While conceptions of family ministry as “perspective” or “awareness” are highly significant, the danger is that family ministry is therefore subsumed into everything or reduced to nothing. It remains necessary to provide some specificity to family ministry. While all church ministry *is* family ministry, some of the church’s ministries clearly impact families more directly than others. In order to put some “flesh on the bones” of family ministry, it is helpful to review and critique three differing conceptions of family ministry offered by contemporary writers.

**A.) Diana Garland**

Summary: Diana Garland defines family ministry as ‘helping persons live as they ought to in family life, according to the purposes and promises of God’. It ‘consists of any activity of a church or church representative(s) that directly or indirectly (1) develops faith-families in the congregational community, (2) increases the Christ-likeness of the family relationships of Christians and/or (3) equips and supports Christians who use their families as a channel of ministry to others’ [Garland 1999: 374]. In correspondence to these three points she proposes three ‘basic tasks’ of family ministry [1999: 328] :

- (1) Developing the church as a community in which every person is ‘woven into family relationships, even those who are isolated and without family as the world sees family’.
- (2) Working on relationships within the church community, ‘keeping the connections strong and repairing damage when it happens’.
- (3) Calling, encouraging and supporting families to engage in God’s mission to and in the world: building families as communities of disciples and helping them fulfill their God-given mission in the world.

Family ministry thus ‘intentionally seeks to influence every aspect of a congregation’s life in ways that encourage the development and transformation of families so that all members of the community of faith have a family, strengthen families so that they can be more effective pictures of and witnesses to the love of God, and develop faithfulness in families as they minister within and beyond their own boundaries.’ [1999: 395].

In fulfilling these three 'basic tasks' Garland proposes four 'methods' of family ministry [1999: 378].

- (1) Developing a congregational life that supports and nurtures all family relationships;
- (2) Organising and facilitating support groups and networks;
- (3) Providing educational programs and resources;
- (4) Counseling.

Within this methodology there is movement from a general focus of ‘developing a congregational life that supports and nurtures *all kinds* of families to more specialized ministry for *particular kinds* of families and family experiences’. Moreover, the goals of family ministry ‘range widely, from *building on the strengths* of families to *helping families cope* with difficult situations that cannot be changed’ [1999: 377]. Family ministry thus has both “macro” and “micro” dimensions, working both at the level of all families and particular families, all situations and particular situations.

Critique: Garland’s approach to family ministry centres on the church’s ministry to and through families of the church. Absent from this approach is a focus upon the ways in which the church, as a *gathered* community, connects with families outside the church, and responds to their needs. Also absent from Garland’s presentation of the ‘tasks’ and ‘methodology’ of the family ministry is the role the church plays in social and political advocacy for family life, and in partnering with the broader community in responding to the needs and concerns of families. Finally, Garland’s recognition of a missional task of family ministry is not reflected in her methodology of family ministry: are families “left to themselves” as communities sent in mission, or are there concrete ways in which the church as gathered community can specifically resource and guide families for mission and service outside their own boundaries?

### ***B.) Richard Olson & Joe Leonard***

Summary: Olson and Leonard outline ‘five basic dimensions of family ministry’ [1996: 67]. These are to:

- create a family friendly culture in its own life and in the surroundings community;
- help families identify their unique missions as members of the larger household of God;
- equip families to be enriching communities for each member;
- strengthen the commitment of couples to their marriage/partnership covenants;
- develop a theology of singleness and ministries of respect, inclusion and support for single adults.

Critique: Significant in this outline is inclusion of the role of the church in building a ‘family friendly culture’, both internally and externally. Marriage and singleness receive attention as particular foci of family ministry. Implicit, but not explicitly developed, is the

importance of developing the whole church as an intergenerational “family-like” community. Absent also from this outline is a focus upon the ways in which families can minister to and support one another in the context of church life.

**C.) *National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Marriage and Family***

Review: The document *A Family Perspective on Church and Society* posits four foundational elements for a “family perspective” in the ministry of the church:

- (i) recognising that the family has a ‘unique identity and mission that permeate its tasks and responsibilities’ [1998: 7];
- (ii) understanding the family ‘not as a collection of individuals but a living and developing system whose members are essentially interconnected’ [1998: 8];
- (iii) taking into account ‘societal trends and diversity’ affecting the roles and activities of contemporary families [1998: 9];
- (iv) developing partnerships between families and institutions, including the church itself, that ‘share family responsibilities’ [1998: 10].

In discussing the ‘unique identity and mission’ of the family, the document outlines four specific tasks of the family as the foundation of family ministry [1998: 8]:

1. The family is to form an intimate community of persons.
2. The family is to serve life in its transmission, both physically by bringing children into the world and spiritually by handing on values and traditions as well as developing the potential of each member to serve life at every stage.
3. The family is to participate in the development of society by becoming a community of social training and hospitality, as well as a community of political involvement and activity.
4. The family is to share in the life and mission of the Church by becoming a believing and evangelizing community, a community in dialogue with God and a community at the service of humanity.

The implication of this outline is that the church’s family ministry consists of assisting and encouraging families in fulfillment of these tasks.

Critique: This approach to family ministry enriches our understanding through its emphasis upon the family's role in the development of persons, both spiritually and socially, for active engagement in the life and mission of the church in the world. In beginning with the family, however, rather than the family in the context of the church, this framework ignores the importance of developing the church as a "family-like" community inclusive of those without operative connections with their family of origin.

### **III. Principles for Family Ministry**

Based on our examination of the theological foundations of family ministry and various conceptions of the church's ministry to and with families, various principles for family ministry can be proposed.

#### **1. *Conforming to the Mission of the Church***

As a ministry of the church, family ministry must be grounded in and flow out of the basic mission and purposes of the church. These are to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and administer the Sacraments in order that persons might come to faith, and worship and serve God in and through the church as the body of Christ in the world. From this perspective, the church ministers to and with families as more than just another social agency seeking to meet the needs of families in society. As Garland expresses, the basic question is: 'How can we best *serve Christ* through our ministry with families? Ultimately, that question must shape what we do' [1999: 302].

#### **2. *Responding to Family Diversity***

Family ministry involves ministry to and with families in their diverse forms in church and society. In so doing, great sensitivity is required to avoid preferencing particular family types (e.g. the conventional nuclear family) as normative, therein effectively excluding those who do not feel part of a so-called "traditional family". As Sell points out:

In very practical ways, church leaders are now compelled to recognise the diversity of family forms in their congregations. A simple announcement that the Sunday school picnic is for "families" creates confusion. A sermon that stresses the joys of married life sends some single adults home feeling hurt and lonely, even angry [1995: 29].

In acknowledgement of family diversity, Olson and Leonard contend that ‘we should not speak about “the family” but about “families”’ [1996: 43]. Family ministry involves listening carefully to and discerning the needs of families, whatever their particular structure, and affirming their various God-given strengths and callings.

### **3. *Defining Family Broadly and Openly***

Concomitant with recognition of family diversity is a broad and inclusive definition of family. Family can be understood in many ways. For many people family means those with whom they are connected through birth, marriage or adoption; for others family means those with whom they share intimacy, whether or not they are legally related. Family ministry involves ministering to persons in the context of what *they* conceive as being family for them. At the same time, the biblical witness calls us to honour, love and be reconciled with our families of origin. Family ministry therefore has a two-fold focus of supporting persons in their relationships with those whom they consider family (i.e. are *functionally* related), and in their relationships with those to whom they are legally (or *structurally*) related.

Family ministry, moreover, recognises that families exist across space and time. A person who lives apart from family still *has* family. Singles for instance are not excluded from family ministry: they ‘participate in messy and chaotic family life as they relate to their parents and married siblings’, and are deeply enriched by “family-like” relationships within the church community [Foley 1995: 2].

### **4. *Developing Church as a “Family-Like” Community***

Jesus redefined family for Christians when he named as his ‘brother and mother and sister’ those who do the will of God (Mk. 3:33-34). In and through fellowship with Christ, a Christian has a large extended “family” in the community of faith. As we have already seen, the Sacrament of Baptism is the means by which the Christian’s adoption into this second and greater family is effected. Family ministry operates then not only at level of distinct family units but takes seriously our status as brothers and sisters and mothers for one another in the church community.

God chose a people to be church, not simply individuals who belong to God in isolation from one another. We are to be immersed in each other’s lives, thus experiencing loving and being loved which allows us to make the radical choice to be intimate with others and thus find meaning, identity and joy in life. Our communion with God involves communion with one another [Foley 1995: 140].

A central challenge for family ministry is to develop churches as “family-like”, intergenerational communities in which the “one another” practices of Christian discipleship are actively practiced and experienced. Family ministry is ‘best done in a church that is family-like’ [Sell 1995: 157]. Through functioning as a caring intergenerational communities, churches provide relationships for those without immediate structural family, ensuring that no one in the family of faith is family-less . Through functioning as caring intergenerational communities, churches facilitate mutual support between families and provide families with a broader experience of community life. Through as caring intergenerational communities, churches provide children and youth with a variety of adult mentors necessary for faith development.

Church life will need to be constructed to allow for intergenerational learning, serving, playing, worshipping, struggling, praying, and living in as many ways as feasible [Sell 1995: 165].

### **5. *Building Upon Family Strengths***

Centred in the grace of God, family ministry begins with recognising, affirming and building upon the God-given strengths and gifts of families. Unfortunately, family ministry has often operated with a “deficit model” of family life, focusing upon families as less than ideal, or broken and in need of repair, and aiming to meet their perceived “needs”. Such an approach usually acts to disempower and marginalise families who are non-traditional in form or fall short of a perceived “norm” for family life.

We should be careful not to view people who are not in traditional families as problems to be dealt with. Widows, singles, and those from “families in transition” often have a great deal to offer to the church body. Besides gifts, expertise and dedication, they often bring a great deal of wisdom drawn from life experiences, some traumatic. If we invite them, they can and will enrich the life of the church [Sell 1995: 147].

One subtle distortion is the assumption that there is some abstract norm for the Christian family, whose secret is know and dispensed by the church. Again the effect is disempowering for the family. It can lead people to believe that if their family is less than perfect, it is unacceptable to the church. When families feel constrained to cover their pain and brokenness in order to present the appearance of an ideal Christian family, real spiritual growth is paralyzed [Thompson 1996: 27].

Even in their brokenness, families are loved and blessed by God and gifted to fulfill their vocation. Although each family is imperfect, God has gracious designs for its life and growth within the church as well as remarkable ministries for it to embody.

A key step in building upon family strengths is affirming the ministry that already happens in families:

Where do we find better models for Jesus' footwashing ministry than in moms washing babies' bottoms and family laundry, dads struggling with budget shortages and patiently listening to teenagers who color their hair orange to get attention, or spouses caring for sick partners? People get all excited about lay ministry in their parish without recognizing the important ministry they perform daily in the family [Foley 1995: 32].

We build family ministry on the strengths and needs of families by ministering to them "where they are at" and not where we would like them to be. In affirming families for what they are already doing, we empower and support them to move onto new and broader dimensions of ministry.

Of course, to say that family ministry builds upon family strengths does not mean that one ignores the reality of family dysfunction: God desires that families grow in the quality of their life together and churches are called to serve as agents of healing for families. The point is that this healing best occurs through an environment of affirmation and grace, not one which inadvertently reinforces negative familial self-conceptions and drives families away from the ultimate source of hope and healing, the presence of Christ Jesus amongst us in Word and Sacrament.

#### **6. *Ministering to Families as Systems***

God's design for this world is such that individuals live not in isolation but in connection to others. Human identity is sourced in and derived from "I-thou" relationships, and primarily through the most basic of relationships, those within our families of origin. As Guernsey points out, this inter-relationship and interdependence was explicit in God's original creation of humans:

This is at the very heart of our understanding of family from the beginning. God created male *and* female and in that act(s) was created the mystery that is known as the family. One cannot understand a family or minister to that family until one understands the nature of "*and*" and the dynamics of relationships that "*and*" implies [Guernsey 1985: 66].

The relational interactions that occur within family systems fundamentally affect the actions and reactions of individual members to any given situation. It follows that families are best ministered to as families, and not just as collections of individuals.

Families, like parishes, are made up of individuals, but members relate to each other in a complex family system usually overlooked in our ministry. The church orients its spirituality and programs toward the individual. ... It fails to give proper consideration, however, to the interconnectedness of family members and tends to fragment the life of the family rather than provide support. ... We do not need more compartmentalized programs and ministries today. We need, rather, to rectify this bias by conscious recognition of the family as a system within the larger systems of the church and society [Foley 1995: 1-2].

A family perspective recognises that church ministries, though often designed for the individual, affect families through their entire life cycle. Ministries, in turn, are affected by the individual's family, which influences the benefits the individual receives, either accepting any conversion and change, or resisting and ultimately shutting down the individual's initial growth. Family ministry therefore considers carefully the impact of church ministries on the individual in relation to their families. Church programs, for example, which remove family members from the home for extensive periods of time inevitably have an effect upon the quality of family relationships. A family perspective may require reducing the demands of such programming or finding ways in which families can participate together.

### **7. *Ministering to Families through Time***

Not only are families found in a variety of forms; they are also involved in different life-stages. Families in different life stages face different stresses and problems and have different needs. A "one size fits all" approach to family ministry is therefore inadequate. Effective family ministry requires that churches develop an understanding of how families evolve through successive life stages, listen carefully to discern their needs at different points in time, and provide stage-sensitive programming and stage-appropriate support for families.

Because, in many instances, it contains whole families over time, the church is in a unique position to prevent and address family problems, and develop family strengths from a "life cycle" perspective. As Sell puts it, 'it is the church's business that people live in Christ-like ways in their families at all stages of the life-cycle' [1995: 21].

### **8. *Reading the Context***

While acknowledging that families themselves are systems, family ministry further recognises that, as distinct social units, they are embedded within broader social, economic and cultural systems which impinge upon family life. Family ministry involves utilising what Garland calls an 'ecosystemic perspective':

An ecosystemic perspective looks at the way a family relates to, changes and is changed by its environment of social relationships and the physical world. It focuses not only on relationships within the family but also on how the family interacts with other persons, social systems and the physical environment. In addition, it looks *inside* the family, not only at the interactions between family members but also at the physical environment of the home, and then to the internal factors of each family member - their biological and psychological and spiritual selves. Thus the ecosystemic approach looks at systems within systems within systems, each system nested in the larger system, and how this complexity of interacting layers of factors create the internal and external environment in which families function. [1999: 56].

One implication of an ecosystemic perspective is that strengthening communities serves to strengthen families. A vital way in which churches can minister with families is to develop strong functional communities, both internally and externally. The faith community can serve as one level of significant support system of for families. Within the church, networks of supportive friends for family members serve as an important means of encouragement, assistance and faith formation. The broader community, of which faith communities are a part, offers further resources and possibilities for family support. By seeking to partner with other community organisations that work with or affect family life, churches can promote the development of such resources and enhance family access to them.

An ecosystemic perspective in family ministry further involves appreciation of and accommodation to the way in which broader economic and social factors affect family life, for better or for worse. A church made up of many two income households, for example, may need to find ways to offer worship experiences that fit family schedules, rather than expecting families to be available at the time of the church's choosing.

But, while demonstrating sensitivity to socio-environmental factors influencing family life, congregations may also be called to perform a prophetic function. Not all economic, social and cultural trends are necessarily God-pleasing. Churches may be required to speak out in society against those factors that detract from God-pleasing family life. Similarly, performing this prophetic function may require churches to address their own member families concerning their interactions with their wider environment, challenging priorities and use of internal family resources.

## **9. *Partnering with Families in Faith Formation***

We have seen the way in which family ministry understands the Christian family as an expression of the life of the church. As “domestic units” of the church, families participate in the calling, mission and purposes of the church under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The family has a fundamental role as an agent of ministry in Christian formation and service parallel to the role of the parish and in partnership with it. To perform this mission and service is itself a ministry of the church [Foley 1995: 25].

Church and family have what Sell calls a ‘symbiotic relationship’ [1995: 14]. In particular, the role the family plays as the primary influence on faith formation of youth and children is increasingly acknowledged in church life. Parents who nurture their children in faith take part in the mission of the church and support, equip and encourage their children to take an active part in the broader activities of the church. As Sell points out:

We can neither ignore nor idealize the family as a nurturing body. Our major task is to integrate the spiritual nurture efforts of both church and home [1995: 152].

Ultimately, family ministry needs to be judged not by what happens in the church but what happens in the home. Family ministry involves the church exploring ways in which to partner with the home in the vital task of faith formation, to the mutual benefit of both home and church and, above all, to the glory of God.

## **10. *Equipping and Sending Families in Mission***

Family ministry, as a ministry of the church, shares in the mission of the church in and to the world. This mission takes place through the mutual sharing of faith and love within the Christian families of the church; through the active service and witness of whole family units in their communities; through the service and witness individual family members with the support of their family units; and through church programs which share the love of Christ in word and deed in response to the needs of families within the broader community.

Central to this missional dimension of family ministry is educating, engaging and encouraging families toward participation in the outward service and witness of the church. The church does not seek to meet family needs or build stronger families as an end in itself, but in order that they might bear witness to Christ in mutual and corporate expressions of discipleship. Family

ministry involves an understanding of families as contexts, vehicles and sites of preparation for ministry and mission in the world. The aim is to ‘stir a lively awareness of family life, not as end itself, but as a base for mission’ [Olson & Leonard 1999: 77].

Leaders must avoid making “ministry to families” an end in itself without at the same time empowering “ministry with families” and “ministry from families” [Olson & Leonard 1996: 61].

Meeting family “needs” in the community and the strengthening of families can be powerful vehicles for the Gospel but must never become a substitute for it. Family ministry leaders must be ever aware of the dangers of unconsciously promoting the “idolatry” of the family.

Family life satisfaction should not necessarily be the *central* focus of ministry with families. Instead family ministry needs to focus on accomplishing the mission of the church. ... In fact, the call to shore up the family may be an attempt to preserve the status quo, a status quo that majors on individualism and self-actualisation, that perceives families simply as the place where persons have their interpersonal and relational needs met. These are important function, but by themselves they miss the meaning of family life for Christians. [1999: 373]

Introspective spirituality has the perverse effect of dulling the growth and vitality of Christian faith. The family is hurt when it becomes *in itself* the goal and object of the church’s ministry, and the focus of the church is contorted inwards. *Close* families are not synonymous with *closed* families.

A closed family becomes an end in itself, failing in those socializing responsibilities which would modify human self-centredness and encourage service to the larger society [Foley 1995: 11].

Family ministry means the family *in ministry*. A central goal is that both the members and the communities of Christian families ‘experience them as a transformative presence’. [Garland 1999: 342] As Cahill writes, ‘the ideal to which Christian faith calls families is a new existence in which marital and kin bonds are the basis for affectionate, mutual, just and generous internal family relations and for compassionate and sacrificial outreach to those beyond one’s own family, especially those who are socially peripheral or powerless’ [2000: 46]. Christian families are called to live by faith and love in relation to those both inside and outside family boundaries. It is necessary for the Christian identity to ‘transform the family’s self-promoting and exclusionary tendencies and to enhance its ability to teach affection, empathy and altruism’ [Cahill 2000: 49].

In many instances, supporting the ministry of the family may necessitate the church *doing less*, not more. An unfortunate consequence of modern times has been that many churches have effectively undercut the ministries of their families by promoting the institution of the church itself as the central arena of Christian life and faith nurture, rather than affirming and enabling the Christian ministry that takes place in the home. Where the church “crowds out” the practice of faith in and through the home, and segregates rather than unites families in its programming, it impoverishes families spiritually and weakens their capacity for internal and external mission.

Despite the church’s historic insistence on the primary role of parents in shaping their children’s spiritual capacities, congregations today often fall prey to the temptation of professionalism. Many well meaning churches have failed to offer families adequate support for the dimension of their vocation related to spiritual growth in the home. Instead the message effectively communicated is that families receive their spiritual nurture *only* at church. Yet at church, family members typically are assigned to age groups, each with specialized resources. The effect can be to undermine parent’s confidence in the value of their home teaching capacities, as well as to imply that “real” Christian education is best achieved by separating family members [Thompson 1996: 27].

A starting point for many churches in supporting the ministries of families must therefore be to “get their own houses in order” by refocusing programs to make them more family-friendly and allocating more resources to support what happens inside the walls of the home rather than the walls of the church.

### ***11. Providing Crisis Support and Ongoing Family Enrichment***

The path of Christian discipleship is not easy or straightforward. The Lutheran understanding is that the Christian is simultaneously saint and sinner. They are caught in an everyday struggle between the old person ruled by sin and the new person born of faith. The process of dying to sinful self is continual, ending only with bodily death. The reality of persistent sin means that many Christians remain trapped in deep-rooted patterns of dysfunction and brokenness. These negative patterns fundamentally affect their basic relationships and the quality of their family lives. This is contrary to God’s will for them and their families, even as they remain in his saving grace through faith in Christ. In fulfilling its call to make disciples of Christ, the church must take seriously the ways in which sin distorts Christian family life, and provide pastoral care and intervention to assist families in dealing with particular issues and struggles which lower their quality of life together and impede their Christian discipleship. As Sell expresses, ‘dealing with a dysfunctional family background has become an essential part of the discipling process’

[1995: 17]. Family ministry needs to ‘include ways to help family members understand themselves and deal with the reasons why they behave as they do in their homes’ [Sell 1995: 141].

Our understanding of families as systems sheds light on the relationship between the therapeutic and enrichment dimensions of family ministry and the church’s faith nurture initiatives with children and youth. In families there are no individual problems: each personal problem is a family problem. Ministry to individuals from families, without an appreciation of or attention to the nature of their family systems, is likely to achieve limited results. All of what happens in family life affects the faith formation of youth and children. Where family ministry can enhance the quality of family relationships, it increases the likelihood that youth and children will experience familial support and encouragement for their personal faith journeys.

A whole and healthy family *is* a service to the world, and the pastoral care that family members provide one another is the *principal* ministry of family life, preceding and undergirding all other forms of ministry’ [Thompson 1996: 129].

Similarly, families marked by strongly dysfunctional patterns are unlikely to successfully integrate models, patterns or principles for faith formation of their children communicated by the church. Once again, effective family ministry requires simultaneous consideration of the *content* imparted to families, the *context* into which it is given, and the consequent interplay between content and context.

### **12. *Balancing Age-Specific and Whole-Family Ministry***

While family ministry involves ministering to families together as whole units, and involving family units with one another in intergenerational programming, it does not preclude or do away with a need for age-specific programming. Children and youth, in particular, have specific developmental “needs” met through involvement and interaction with their peers apart from their families. A family perspective may have certain implications for the practice and scope of age-specific ministries, but cannot and should not replace them.

### ***13. Promoting Family-to-Family Ministry***

Family ministry that recognises the God-given strengths of families, works to release their great potential for mutual support and ministry. Families share in common many hopes, struggles and experiences. Frequently, the best resources that church families have are other families.

The real experts in marriage and family are spouses and family members. Sometimes specialized, professional help is needed, but the basic ministry lies in the day to day support that family members and peers give to each other [Foley 1995: 46].

In bringing families together, communities of faith provide opportunity for them to serve one another in like-to-like ministry. Family ministry therefore requires a balance between programs which support and minister to families apart from one another, and ‘structuring times and places when families can give one another support and care’ [Olson & Leonard 1996: 66]. An ‘active belief in the capacity of Christians to be primary supports to one another is key to developing effective family ministries’ [Olson & Leonard 1996: 67].

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