

Nurturing Families, Nurturing Disciples

Effective ministries to and with all configurations of families can greatly enhance the church's mission to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." In a sense, the family is our first church, where we learn the values, attitudes, and behaviors that will shape our lives. This initial experience of community can empower us to live more fully as God intends us to. Unconditional love, coupled with clear guidance and supportive correction, frees us to develop our unique individuality and to learn from our mistakes. Family life inevitably exposes our innate selfishness and can help us learn to understand and empathize with the needs of others. Wise and skillful parents teach their children to identify and own their feelings, to consider the words and actions of others, to make good decisions about how to act, and to find win-win solutions for conflict situations.

Most families, however, also present obstacles and challenges for its members to overcome. Family systems theory helps us understand patterns and dynamics handed down from generation to generation. Alcoholism and other addictions, for example, may perpetuate themselves without or in spite of the conscious intention of the affected family members. A crisis, perhaps a teenager in trouble or a child with a food disorder, may signal unhealthy dynamics crying out for healing. Reactivity, inability to own feelings, fearfulness, ineffective communication, and the need to be in control can contaminate family life and infect the members thereof. The family may either breed continuing dysfunction or, with God's help, serve as a crucible for healing and growth.

The negative effects of family breakdown on individuals and on our society have been well-documented in Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakely's *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth's *Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), as well as other works. Low self-esteem, psychological distress, school failure, delinquency, and interpersonal relationship difficulties have been linked to divorce and family dysfunction. Churches can help to counter these negative trends and bring hope and healing to families and individuals struggling to overcome damage experienced in their families of origin.

Churches nurture disciples by helping parents with the challenging task of raising emotionally healthy and responsible children; by teaching youth and young adults to make good decisions about dating, sex, and mate selection; by equipping couples with reasonable expectations about the stages of marriage and the skills to build a healthy, enduring relationship; by affirming singles as whole persons, nurturing their relationships within the "family" of the congregation, and offering opportunities to strengthen their relationship skills; by preparing individuals and families to cope successfully with life's predictable transitions and potential crises; and by supporting and resourcing those in difficult circumstances. Knowing when and where to refer hurting individuals and families for professional help is important, but providing basic relationship education and ongoing support can be even more influential in "creating disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

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Recommended resources on the reverse

Resources for Nurturing Families

Blessed be the Bond: Christian Perspectives on Marriage and Family, by William Johnson Everett (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1990). Although this book is now out-of-print, in 2011 the author made a free revised and updated version available as a download at www.WilliamEverett.com/books-and-articles-free/. The author explores social changes that have taken place in the way we think about marriage and family life, emphasizing the theological concepts of sacrament, covenant, vocation, communion, and marriage as a “manifestation of God’s redemptive purposes in re-creating our world.”

Boone Center for the Family at Pepperdine University, 24255 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu, CA, 90263-4771, 310-506-4771, www.family.pepperdine.edu. This center offers resources and training for church leaders involved in family ministry, as well as other marriage and family enrichment programs. The website lists retreats, seminars, and online resources for students as well as for the community at large. The Family of Faith Network’s annual conference encourages and prepares church leaders – lay and professional- for the vital field of family ministry.

Nurturing Faith in Families: 425 Creative Ideas for Family Ministry, by Jolene L. Roehlkepartain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002). Recognizing the vulnerability of families with children to stress and challenge, the author proposes that responsibility for nurturing their faith rests with the entire congregation. This book catalogues a wide variety of ideas and resources for becoming a family-nurturing church.

Family Ministries Desk Reference: Holistic Responses to Contemporary Challenges, by Patricia D. Fosarelli (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). The author addresses a number of common challenges experienced by families (addition of new members, loss, single parenting, blending families, caring for aging parents, parenting adolescents, moving, substance abuse, depression). After clarifying physical and emotional aspects of these challenges, the author proposes specific individual and congregational responses and relevant resources for effective ministries in each situation.

National Association for Relationship and Marriage Education (NARME). This organization champions the well-being of children through relationship and marriage education. Interested individuals or organizations can join NARME online and find information about annual conferences at the website, <http://www.narmerconference.com>.

The Association of Marriage and Family Ministries (AMFM), 8283 N. Hayden Rd., Suite 258, Scottsdale, AZ 85258, 480-718-3020, staff@amfmonline.com, www.amfmonline.com. Articles and resources related to AMFM’s mission statement: “Impacting future generations by transforming marriages and families today.”

United Methodist Discipleship Ministries Websites for Marriage and Family Ministries:

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries> (search by topic or title) or www.marriageandlovepower.net (see Home Page menu and especially “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources”). These websites offer a variety of helps for couples, pastors, and mentor couples: a directory of United Methodists trained in a variety of marriage and family programs; schedules of upcoming events and training opportunities; best practices articles; and annotated lists of marriage and family ministry organizations, curriculum resources, books and other publications recommended by United Methodists.

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