



FIVE MISTAKES CHURCHES MAKE IN FAMILY MINISTRY

Why most attempts at
family ministry don't last
and what you can
do about it

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Introduction

The work ahead of you matters. Of course, the work you've done matters, and the work you are doing matters. But what you do next has the potential to vastly expand your ministry's impact on kids, parents, families, and the generations that follow. You're watching families struggle and fall apart, and you know that so much of what families are longing for can be found in the abundant life Jesus offers. You also know that the local church has the potential to share real hope with families in your community, and you want to be a part of something that actually makes a difference far beyond just getting kids to come to your church programs.

When you dream about what could be, I'm guessing you want your church to have a vibrant children's ministry that builds a foundation of faith from birth. You want a dynamic and engaging youth ministry that encourages students to build and deepen their faith. You want an intentional and practical ministry to parents that steps into the real world where families live and helps with everyday issues. You want a long-term plan, an understandable scope and sequence, and clear collaboration between the ministries in your church.

Over the last decade, churches on the leading edge of serving their communities have rediscovered an approach to ministry with families that holds the potential to break down ministry silos, align congregational discipleship strategies, and streamline the ever-growing church calendar. Churches can no longer rely on simply having fun events for children, crazy outreaches for teens, and a packed calendar that says, "Come to us! We have a lot going on!"

This emerging “family ministry” model, as it has taken shape in recent years, has captured the attention of church leaders. In a culture where church attendance among teens (and, even more so, young adults) continues to decline, the growing buzz surrounding the term “Next Gen Ministries” has created a proliferation of churches trying to shift ministry and staffing strategies in search of a silver bullet that might help their congregations attract and keep young families. In the years since Ministry Architects’ president and founder, Mark DeVries, first published [Family-Based Youth Ministry](#), the number of churches in search of a family ministry model that fits their congregation has grown significantly, while clarity around what constitutes a successful family ministry strategy has remained elusive.

In Ministry Architects’ work with congregations across the country, we’ve observed five common mistakes churches make when trying to develop what we are calling a “whole family ministry.” These keep churches stuck and ineffective in producing a sustainable family ministry. Sadly, most church leaders aren’t able to recognize these mistakes for what they are. The last thing we want to do is to keep repeating things that can easily be avoided.

As you read through these common mistakes, don’t feel frustrated if you find yourself relating to one or more of them -- they are, in fact, common. I know them so well because I’ve made them all! I started in youth ministry in 1993 with a fire and a passion to see young people come to know and experience the transforming power of the Gospel. I did youth group, events, retreats, and mission trips, and the churches I served were happy. But I watched so many students graduate (many who were very active in our youth ministry) and become disengaged with a life of faith, viewing it as something they had “outgrown.”

“ *I began researching the patterns most likely to produce lifelong disciples. Again and again, I came back to the incomparable power of the family in the faith formation of children and youth, a power that overwhelmingly eclipses the impact of traditional church ministries.* **”**

That discovery put me on the path to serving as the Pastor of Family Ministries at Port City Community Church in Wilmington, North Carolina. Over the last five years or so, we have leaned heavily into building a ministry for families, not just for children and youth. Through trial, error, experimentation, and grace, a foundational model for family ministry has emerged that I believe can be replicated in almost any church.

But first, we need to stop making the mistakes that keep us from building a thriving family ministry. It's to those mistakes that we now turn. After describing each of the five mistakes, I'll offer proven recommendations for overcoming their negative results.

Mistake #1

Overestimate the Church's Impact

It's Graduation Sunday, and there is a buzz throughout the building. It's the day the entire congregation gets to hear from a group of high school seniors who will share about their amazing experiences in youth group and the church. They'll talk about summer camps, mission trips, and that time the church van got stuck in the mud. They'll gush about the youth pastor and their small group leader, and how important these people have been to their life and faith. Everyone will cheer and go home feeling great about the ministry and the lives that are being changed. And it's all real and true ... sort of -

Fast forward a few years, and these same students who once led Bible studies and served on mission trips have moved on to college, a career, or the military. They've encountered life, made a few bad decisions, and now they can't remember the last time they were in church or a Christian ministry of some kind. Many now question the faith they had in their younger years, and they believe that even if God is real, he's not speaking to them anymore.

As anyone who works in youth ministry knows, this story is much more common than we like to admit. Over the past several decades, many well-intentioned church leaders have bought into a ministry formula that looks like this:

Kids and Teens + Our Church = Lifelong Christians

This gross oversimplification of the faith formation process is the first mistake churches make in family ministry: **overestimating the church's impact.**

Kara Powell, a leading voice in the world of youth ministry and Executive Director at the [Fuller Youth Institute](#), refers to this approach as the “dry cleaner” strategy. Parents view the church as a place where they can drop off their children to be cleansed of sin and bad behavior and picked up in just over an hour. Though we cringe at the image, many churches unwittingly play into this narrative by communicating to parents what they can do for them, rather than what they can do together.

“ All too often, church leaders unintentionally communicate to families that the most important part of a child’s spiritual formation happens at the church. ”

We push parents to make sure their kids attend everything we are doing at church, sometimes with not-so-subtle guilt messages to those parents whose kids find more time for sports or other activities than they do for church and mission trips. We tell parents what they need to know, what’s happening in the church’s ministry, and how much church leaders are doing to serve their children. At best, we might invite parents to join us in the topic or series we are teaching their kids at church.

All of this information is great, but it doesn’t go far enough in providing parents what *they* need to raise kids who have a vital, resilient faith in God. To put it simply:

Church Events + Church Programs + Good Information ≠ Transformation

Too many ministry directors and pastors imagine themselves as Batman and inadvertently treat parents like the slightly-less-heroic Robin. In reality, it should be the other way around.

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Churches who fill their ministry halls with pamphlets, their ministry calendars with endless events and programs, and their staff positions with rock stars who “have all the answers” are working from a formula that has proven not to work. Take a look at the last communication that went out to parents from your ministry. If you find that there is exponentially more written about what the **church is doing** for kids than ways that **parents can engage** in their children’s faith development, there’s a good chance that you’ve been overselling the church’s impact on the formation of young people.

Mistake: Overestimating the church’s role

Solution: Helping parents embrace their God-given role

“Parents have sub-contracted the spiritual lives of their kids to the church.” I heard this statement years ago from Chap Clark, long-time youth ministry professor and practitioner. It hit me hard because I recognized that his words were true for my ministry. These days, I often find myself quoting Chap when I have the opportunity to share with a group of parents.

As a parent myself, I know that I need to embrace the singular truth that my wife and I hold the most influence in our kids’ lives. I want to steward that influence well. Research shows us that parents are the primary shapers of their children’s faith identity and continue to be profound influences even as their children move into adulthood.

“ *One of our responsibilities as church leaders is to help parents believe and embrace the role they play in the spiritual development of their kids.* ”

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What if, instead of putting our best energy into programs we lead for kids, we spent more time equipping parents to live into their role as primary influencers? What if, instead of always inviting parents and families to step into what we are doing, we support their ministry in their homes and in the world they live every day? Ephesians 4:12 reminds us that Christ has called us “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” What if we saw our ministry with kids as secondary to the primary task of equipping parents for the role where they are uniquely positioned to have the greatest impact?

As youth workers, children’s workers, and family ministry leaders, maybe the most important question we can ask ourselves is, “When was the last time we did something just to equip and encourage parents?” Building a thriving family ministry begins with an honest evaluation of whether or not we are really investing in opportunities to help parents embrace their role and offering them the tools to do it. If we learn how to communicate to parents that we care more about what happens in their living rooms than about what happens in any of the children’s or youth ministry rooms at church, we build trust and step into another level of influence in the family.

CAUTION: Before you go out and schedule a parent seminar in reaction to what you’ve read in this section, please read through all the mistakes, particularly Mistake #4.

Mistake #2

Underestimate the Church's Role

“Parents, don’t forget that you are the primary spiritual leaders of your kids!” says the well-meaning youth and family ministry director as they stand before the congregation to give their annual holiday weekend sermon. As we just discussed, this statement is true and can be supported by research and Scripture. However, an overly simplistic understanding of this truth can lead to the second mistake churches make in family ministry: **underestimating the church’s role**.

“*When church leaders underestimate the church’s role in passing on faith from one generation to the next, they implicitly place all the pressure on parents, leading to the unintended consequence of communicating that parents are on their own when it comes to their child’s spiritual development.*”

Telling parents that everything rises and falls on their shoulders can intimidate them, especially those parents who have their own questions about God and the church and walk a rocky faith journey themselves.

Pragmatically, it makes sense that some churches would undersell their role in family ministry, especially if they have tried and failed in the past. A church may have tried a synchronized Christian Education department and found the model to be outdated. Another church may have hired a ministry director or pastor to reach young families, only to find that his or her best efforts yielded few results. Yet another church may have found family ministry was simply too costly or too messy to fit into the predetermined committees and categories of the church. Other churches are prevented from putting too much emphasis on family ministry by a paralyzing set of questions:

- Where do grandparents fit in?
- Isn't the church for singles too?
- If all our events require childcare and costly speakers, where is all that money going to come from?

It makes sense that some churches simply provide the bare minimum in youth and children's ministry, using the excuse that "it's really the parents' job anyway." And yet, most parents are looking for and need help, which the church is uniquely positioned to give. Underestimating the church's role in family ministry can lead to both the church and parents missing out. Parents and their children miss out on being a part of an intentional community with a clear and convergent set of values. The church misses out on enthusiastically engaged families who partner in the mission of the church.

Youth sports programs, extra-curricular school activities, and even popular culture all have values to teach children, many of which are positive. But few have the intentional purpose of building a spiritual foundation in young people, one sufficient enough to help them navigate their increasingly anxious and stress-riddled world.

Mistake: Underestimating the church's role

Solution: Facilitate community and provide safe spaces for families

As I think about my own family and what I desire from the church, I go back to the list of dreams most parents have for their church that I shared earlier. I want my kids to be part of a vibrant children's ministry that gives them a biblical foundation for their future. I want them to experience a dynamic and engaging youth ministry that encourages and challenges them during a critical part of their life and faith development. As a parent, I need help, and I want to be part of a community that is equipping and encouraging my wife and me as we seek to raise our kids in this crazy world. If I'm honest, I want all of the ministries in our family's life to be really good, not a waste of precious family time.

As a church leader, I know that providing quality ministry programs (often on a shoestring budget) is a tall order. Ministry costs money, great ministry requires lots of great volunteers, and there never seems to be enough hours in a day. We live in a time where competition between churches is real, and every church faces the challenges of "keeping up with the Jones" (or at least the church down the street). It's far too easy for parents to download great content from their favorite communicator who lives in another state or country, or to stay on the revolving cycle of perpetually checking out the new church across town that "feeds them" more. As times have changed, gone are the days when adults attended church because "Mama made us." For parents who want their kids to be part of a church, there are an overabundance of choices.

But the solution is not a hyper-focus on creating the highest quality youth or children's ministry in town. Don't get me wrong, as church leaders we should do everything possible to provide welcoming environments and engaging content for the people who show up. But, there is a bigger reason people stay. There is one thing that the church can provide for my family that I don't believe we can get anywhere else in the world. The best way I can describe it is this:

| | | |
|-------|----------|--------|
| Mary | Taylor | Taylor |
| Javi | Brett | Kasey |
| Nikki | Courtney | Kerry |
| Geoff | Matt | Shawn |

These are people who have poured themselves into the lives of our kids (and our family) over the last several years. All of these people are part of the family ministries at our church as both staff and volunteers. Some of them run really great programs, but most of them are just consistently, predictably, and safely there for us.

The solution to underestimating the role of the church is to provide programs that create a safe space for kids and a consistent community that regularly connects the generations. The church that can do these two things well spurs families on and provides a space for children, youth, and parents where they know they belong.

“

Most churches know how to be an institution. But do we know how to be the body of Christ?

”

Obviously, programs can provide a platform for this kind of community to be built. When we facilitate deep relationships while providing quality programs, we create environments where life change can really happen. Too many churches have a habit of “winging” their program planning. Without making the effort to provide a high level of quality, attendees can leave feeling like they wasted their time. It would be better to offer one or two really quality events a year than dozens that fill the calendar but aren’t relevant or helpful. Better to have a single monthly program that is well-prepared, safe, and energizing than weekly programs that simply go through the motions.

Unfortunately, many parents have come to expect very little from the church when it comes to giving them tools that can help them lead their family and be better parents. To get started, we can simply listen to parents. None of us should assume that we are “experts” in what other parents and families need most (ESPECIALLY if we’ve never had kids!). At Ministry Architects, we are often asked to help churches find new staff. One warning we give at the beginning of the process is to stop looking for Superman who can build a great program, but to find a Spiderman who can weave a web of relationships, a multi-layered community of connection.

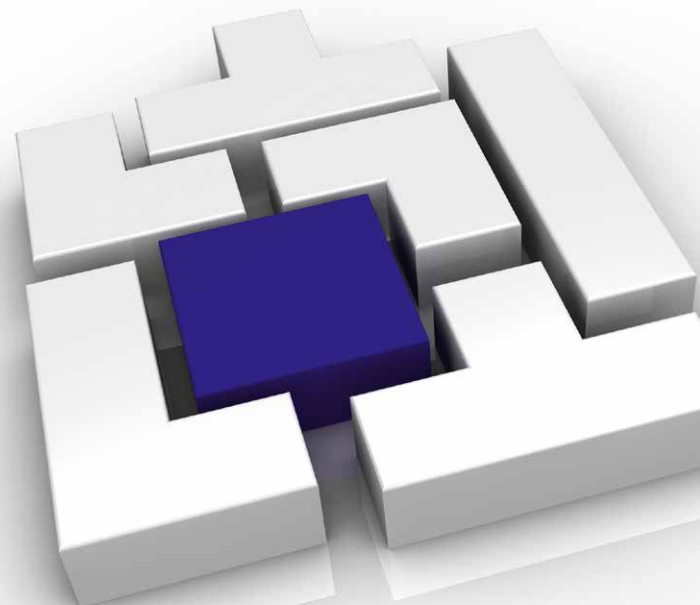


Mistake #3

Change Titles and Not Strategies

After about ten years of hard work and a focus on ministering to youth, I started to broaden my view. I had been attending conferences and reading books pointing to ways the church needed to remove ministry silos and bring all the ministries dealing with families onto the same page. Everyone seemed to agree that we needed to do a better job of “partnering with parents” - whatever that meant. I knew how to run a youth group, plan a mission trip, and engage volunteer leaders. I could get a bunch of kids to come to an event, and we could tell them about Jesus. I obviously knew about our church’s children’s ministry, but I didn’t understand the ins and outs of leading a third grader in faith development.

As I started talking more and more about a vision of an integrated family ministry, people started looking to me to lead the charge towards a new ministry model. Of course, it made sense. I had been on staff for over ten years, and parents trusted me with their teens. It was a natural time for me to take on a bigger role and bring all the various pieces together. I became the *“Director of Youth and Family Ministries.”* That was the easy part.



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There was one tiny little problem though. I didn't have a clue how to do all of the things I had been talking about! Our children's ministry was, like the youth ministry, on its own island with a clear culture and a set of unwritten rules that I dared not break. Both ministries were doing very little for parents, other than printing up "God Time" cards for families (assuming they ever made it off the floorboard of the mini van) and sending weekly email reminders. I was still going to conferences, reading books and blogs, and trying to learn all I could about this new "family ministry" approach. I even took two years of seminary courses working to become a better Christian leader. As a parent of young children myself, I had so much to learn about raising kids.

I quickly discovered that adding "and Family Ministries" to my job title did not give me any more authority with staff and volunteers. It certainly didn't give me the knowledge to help parents train and equip their kids for a life of faith. As churches across the country have adopted a "family ministry" model, pressure from church culture and leadership has led hiring teams and personnel committees to redraft organizational charts in search of the best ways to lead their congregation. You may know of a church like mine that decided to fill the need for more intentional ministry to families by simply adding a phrase like "and families" to someone's title.

Changing titles not strategies is the third mistake that churches make in family ministry.

It's not uncommon to find churches that have fallen into this trap. In an attempt to do more for families, their well-meaning next step is to add this additional task to someone's already unrealistic job description. It almost always falls short.

Churches who have hired ministry specialists find it difficult (if not impossible) to shift a specialist into a different mindset. There is an old adage, “People good with a hammer treat everything like a nail.” Specialists tend to have a passion and expertise in a particular area of ministry and default to what they do well. Children’s ministers and youth ministers naturally treat their original ministry assignment as though it is the most important thing. It’s understandable for all of us to want to protect what we’ve worked to create. To complicate matters even more, there is no well-worn path for a family program, and trying to design new programs that actually connect with parents can be quite a Rubik’s Cube.

“Shifting titles but not strategies often gives ministry directors and pastors a job description they have no power to execute.”

A new title does not automatically give new authority. How does the Director of Ministry to Children and Their Families relate to the Director of Youth and Their Families? And how do both of them relate to the person responsible for adult education and formation? Confusion and lack of clarity abound when multiple people in multiple departments are all given responsibility for family ministry. Like a ship without a captain, a ministry without a clearly-defined leader drifts and eventually sinks.

My experience tells me that some person (singular, not a committee, not a team) has to own family ministry if there is any hope of it ever being established. It's equally as important to establish clarity about where the ministry is heading. It is much more difficult for a congregation to grasp a vision for family ministry than the vision for specialized ministries like children's ministry, youth ministry, or missions. This is all the more reason for a single champion for family ministry in a church.

Mistake: Changing titles not strategy.

Solution: Someone has to have the authority to OWN IT and know how to do it

In healthy churches, ministry teams work together to accomplish common goals. But in many churches, children's leaders and youth leaders tend to operate in silos rather than in partnership. As a result, no one owns the responsibility for leading a coordinated effort toward a ministry that impacts entire families. Simply mandating that children's and youth ministries work together and operate under one umbrella isn't enough to overcome the inertia of ministry silos.

The good news is that churches that have made this mistake are one step closer to being on the right track. They have recognized that partnering with families can no longer be an optional add-on to age-segregated ministries. The next step requires the courage and clarity to identify one person as the champion of family ministry, who will cast vision, coordinate ministries, and partner with parents.

It is almost a guarantee that family ministries will get stuck if partnering with parents is not a MAJOR component of someone's job description (volunteer or paid staff). At this point you may be saying (or finally realizing), "But we don't even have a parent ministry." More on that to come. A church may or may not choose to put children, youth, and adult programming under a single umbrella. But the person who owns the church's ministry to families needs to have the authority to bring the various departments together in the formation of a clear, focused, integrated strategy for ministry to families. This point person can and should drive the collaborative development of clear goals for family ministry. This is a convening and collaborating authority, not a commanding authority. The driver of family ministry ensures that all the appropriate people are at the table for the process of establishing family ministry goals.

Effective family ministry can be difficult to measure, but certainly not impossible. People who have thrived in children's or youth ministry have often learned to measure the things that matter and celebrate wins with their specific teams. These folks can be invaluable ministry partners in establishing family ministry goals. Once goals are established, the battle for ongoing vision alignment in family ministry is won and lost with stories, rather than on a traditional metrics scoreboard. In addition to driving clarity and coordination, the point person for family ministry will ensure that the stories of lives impacted by the ministry are shared and amplified throughout the congregation. Crafting an intentional, consistent narrative is the surest way to make the shift to a congregation with a more deliberate, integrated focus on knowing and responding to the real needs of families.

Mistake #4

Add More Family Events

I had heard people in the church say that the children and youth ministries were “event heavy,” but I had no idea it was so bad. When I first started consulting with First Church, they were in a programming frenzy. When we started to list all the events they had on the calendar, I was quickly overwhelmed by how much they were doing (and asking families to do).

We started a process of talking through all the events for the coming year and building a “preventative maintenance calendar” to help them survive it all. Over the course of a few hours, we filled up flip chart after flip chart of things that kids and teens could participate in. We were just starting to build a ministry to parents, so none of those events were even scheduled yet. It was dizzying to look at the massive collection of programs for children and youth and a little depressing to see that we still had nothing set for parents.

It is easy for churches to inadvertently make families feel like they’re failing. We ask them to attend church every Sunday, lead their children in daily devotions, pray together at home, write a check for every camp on the summer calendar, forgo midweek sports to make space for church programs during the school year, and maybe even knock on a few doors in the neighborhood to get to know and share some good news with their neighbors. Active churches ask for a lot of real estate on a family’s calendar and, when they start getting serious about family ministry, they can easily slip into the fourth mistake: **Adding more family events** to the church’s calendar without taking anything off.

Let's be honest. Most families are not looking for more things to do. Life is crazy enough for parents, even before you add in kids' ever-changing schedules. But adding events to the calendar sometimes feels like the only thing churches know how to do.

“ *Families are looking for connections, not crowds.* **”**

Throwing a large party or massive event once or twice a year can create momentum for a ministry and provide a chance to clarify and reinforce priorities, but too many events can isolate families looking for authentic friendships. In addition, the number of hours required to plan and execute large events can be extremely taxing on the ministry directors, volunteers, and the families of those charged with executing those events. Do churches ever seriously consider what it says about a church that claims to care about families, yet regularly exhausts the families of those in leadership? Sometimes the best thing we can do for the families in our churches and on our leadership teams is to strategically eliminate an event (or two... or three...) to allow a focus on the few key events during the year that have the best chance at actually reaching families in our community.

At their best, family events can be a great supplement to an overall whole family ministry strategy. More commonly though, they mask the fact that, beyond disconnected events, the church does not have a unified approach to partnering with families in raising the next generation of faithful followers. At their worst, family events can turn into a circling-of-the-wagons that insulates Christians from their unchurched and de-churched neighbors.

Too many churches seeking to establish a viable family ministry skip discussing “why” an event should happen and rush to the “what” of calendaring, food, promotion, funding, decorations, volunteers, etc. The typical church will continue to pour investment into maintaining a legacy program the church has enjoyed for years, even if that program has long since lost its effectiveness in achieving the church’s mission. Poorly executed events can be momentum killers, but a growing collection of popular events also have a way of clogging the calendar and exhausting volunteers, leaving little room for new initiatives that might be more aligned with the overall goals and mission of family ministry.

Mistake: Adding family events

Solution: Creating space in the calendar for family ministry

I was meeting with a young youth pastor who had recently been to a conference where the organizers were beating the “partner with parents” drum really hard. On the drive home, his team had some great conversations about how they should add a parent ministry piece to their ministry. After all, parents are the primary spiritual leaders for their children, right? (The key message of the conference.)

Over the next few days, they quickly planned a meeting for parents of middle and high school students where they would identify the big issues teens are facing and talk about how parents could deal with these issues. At the meeting, the youth pastor spent the first twenty minutes talking about how parents could stay connected with the ministry through email and social media, how kids could get signed up for summer camp, and what they would be teaching in the ministry over the next month. He shared the meeting dates of a monthly parent group, and he encouraged parents to invite their friends. He stepped into what I call Parent Ministry 1.0, a “church-centric” approach that focuses on programs the church will provide for parents. When we met, I challenged this youth pastor to explore Parent Ministry 2.0, with a focus on what happens day-in and day-out in the home, instead of seeing family ministry as something parents “come to” away from their homes.

When it comes to building a ministry for the whole family, churches should run all of their events through the filter of a collaborative strategy that spans all three ministries (children, youth, and parents). Sometimes this strategy will prompt ministries to add events. More often though, a clear strategy will prompt churches to stop doing some things (maybe even some cherished traditions), in order to make room for those events that are most “on mission” with the core strategy.

A great starting point is to identify the ideal event capacity for families in your church and community. Maybe your church and volunteers have the capacity for just one event per family ministry area (children, youth, and parents) per quarter. Rather than starting with a blank calendar to be filled, starting with a limited number of events for the year forces strategic focus. In fact, if you are just starting out in family ministry, I would recommend that you limit your focus to the excellent execution of a smaller number of events, each with a specific objective of empowering the parents of children or youth, or both.

Adding family-focused events to the calendar will likely require moving at least an equal number of events off the calendar. This is where it gets hard. No one will complain if you add a new, untried event to the calendar. But huge conflicts can break out when we try to cancel long-held traditions that require an inordinate amount of time. If you find there is intense resistance to removing anything from the calendar, slow your timeline down and simply do one new family-focused event during the year.

As you filter through your programming calendar, ask

- What one event families participated in last year would parents most want to do again?
- Which events and programs did visiting families seem to enjoy the most?
- Which events were less than successful, and can those be eliminated in the coming year?
- Which events and programs most effectively helped us move toward the mission and goals of our church and family ministry?

If your church has chosen a busy calendar over an intentional family ministry strategy, now may be the time to reduce the number of programs and events in a way that is congruent with the natural rhythms of family life rather than be in competition with everything else families are doing. As you consider families' schedules, is it possible that there are community events in your area that families are already planning to attend? Consider inviting families to attend that event together, perhaps with a dinner before or dessert after.

Whatever you plan, you'll want to make sure that you are doing some things JUST for parents. Provide them with opportunities to talk and share in circles more than rows. Fight the urge to do like my young friend did and use all the time parents are together to share information, get volunteers, or push sign-ups. If you take time during the year to find ways to bless parents, and if we limit the number of demands we place on their time, there's a good possibility parents will make a priority of what we do plan for them and for their kids.

Mistake #5

Forget the Modern Family

Have you ever witnessed a family with multiple small children trying to take a family photo? Though highly comical to the observer, there aren't many moments more stressful for a mother of young children than when her youngest child is crying, her toddler is trying to wrestle his Christmas sweater off and over his head, and the self-timer on her perfectly-propped smartphone goes off just in time to capture the mess in all of its glory.

Of course, those pictures rarely make it onto social media feeds or Christmas cards, and even more rarely do they get shown in our churches. Many churches unintentionally project the message that church is a place for families who have it together, so much so that some parents are uncomfortable bringing their imperfect and unpolished families to church. Parents assume, rightly or wrongly, that they will be judged. This is the fifth and final mistake of family ministry: **forgetting the modern family.**

A few years ago, I met with a group of single moms who were really struggling to navigate life with their kids. They talked about how hard it is to get their kids from place to place while holding down a full-time job. They shared about the pain of not having a father figure in the house and their fears about the emotional baggage their kids are carrying. They wondered aloud how the church could help them as they attempt to raise their kids in the faith. And, they confessed feeling out of step with what they perceived as the church's strong preference for two-parent families.

It's highly likely that families in your neighborhood look markedly different than they did in previous decades. Yet the families many churches highlight when they talk about family ministry are now atypical versions of what constitutes a normal "nuclear" family in our country. Recent demographic studies show that fewer than half (46%) of U.S. kids younger than 18 years of age are living in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage. Simple math tells us that the majority of children in our neighborhoods simply cannot identify with the images and stories that the church has grown accustomed to highlighting when it talks about "families."

When visiting churches who are struggling to reach families in their community, it's not uncommon for church leaders to confuse the term family ministry with simply adding a parenting ministry component to what they are already doing. Though programs for young moms and parenting seminars are important additions to a church's family ministry strategy, churches often forget others in the congregation who are or can be stakeholders in passing on faith to the next generation.

Churches who practice taking vows at baptisms and dedications often ask all generations of the church to commit to act as spiritual guides and co-parents to the children growing up in their congregations. Yet, those same churches rarely provide ministries focused on equipping grandparents with skills to pass the faith on to their grandchildren, or giving young adults the opportunity to pass on their faith to children and youth. Some of the key voices in our kids' lives may be other adults who are a part of our church and who want to share their faith with kids and youth. When we limit our understanding of family ministry to parent ministry, many in the church can feel like family ministry has nothing to do with them.

In the mobile world we live in, it's more likely than ever before that even young children spend most of their waking hours away from home. Churches have an opportunity to surround parents with people on either side of their life stage to journey with them in raising their kids – empty nesters who have “been there and done that,” and younger adults who can serve as mentors to children and youth. When we isolate parents from the rest of the congregation as an expression of family ministry, the rest of the church misses out on sharing moments like a young child learning to put their first steps together into a Frankenstein-like run. The parents of these children miss out on the incomparable relief of knowing that they are not alone in the exhausting work of parenting.

“ By forgetting the modern family, many churches have made the mistake of creating a family ministry that isn't actually welcoming to the very families they're trying to reach. ”

By highlighting only monoethnic couples with children who are able to smile at the camera on cue, churches are unknowingly using their social media posts and announcement slides to tell some families they likely won't fit in. By putting an emphasis on Mother's Day and Father's Day in their worship services, churches are reminding children from less-traditional families that their family isn't the kind that gets celebrated by the church.

Mistake: Forgetting the modern family

Solution: Making space for all families

Early in my ministry life I heard the phrase, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” As Ministry Architects has stepped more and more into helping churches build a deep-impact, whole-family ministry, this principle has become foundational and critical to churches that succeed in this kind of work. Families are hurting in so many ways, and they need for us to hear them and join them in their struggles.

In Galatians 6:2, Paul reminds us that we are to “carry each other’s burdens.” Non-traditional families carry a particular burden, often feeling shunned and isolated at their local church. The very place that offers the kind of hope these families really need feels distant and unapproachable, a constant reminder that they are not “normal.” Ministry to the modern family begins with building authentic relationships and welcoming families of all kinds with the kind of love and care that flowed from Jesus so naturally.

Church leaders who notice they are forgetting the modern family can begin by taking an inventory of the story the church's words, pictures, and narratives are telling about who really belongs (and who doesn't). Do our pictures show only the polished-up family? When we make an announcement slide for the all-church picnic, we can include one of a grandparent and one with the kid who has a fistful of mashed potatoes in his hair. If we want to reach the modern family, we need to paint a picture that lets them know that they are welcome.

Next, family ministry leaders can work to include adults who don't have children or who have grown children in the work of family ministry. To check ourselves, we can invite an empty-nester and a college student to look over our ministry calendars and give input about ways that our "family" events might include their demographic as well.

One of the easiest mistakes churches make is also one of the quickest ones to correct. Many churches have great forms to register kids and students for events. Church leaders who care about reaching modern families will make sure that those forms have language inclusive of kids being raised by grandparents, foster parents, or guardians who have shared custody and different addresses.

“ *Effective ministry is not a destination at which we arrive but an ongoing process of paying attention to the untapped resources, unexplored possibilities, and missing voices with whom we hope to share this profound partnership.* **”**

Churches that stay open to the unfolding work of the Spirit will find themselves regularly reimagining how family ministry might be done just a bit more faithfully this year than it has been before.



Conclusion

As the future of family ministry is forged, we simply cannot afford to use the same methods we have for the last 50 years. Most of them will not work, at least not in the wholesale way they did in the past. To effectively minister to families, each church will need a plan specific to its own context, a single champion to own the collaborative implementation of the plan, and the patience to continue working the plan. Step by step, a new culture will unfold in which we find ourselves surrounded with parents as partners, who know we care just as much about them as we do about their children.

If you have finished this e-book with a deeper passion for building a family ministry that actually works but you're wondering where to start, please don't hesitate to email me at Chris.Sasser@MinistryArchitects.com or call at (877) 462-5718. Our team of family ministry coaches is ready to help.