

Intentional family ministry can 'transform' congregations

By Linda C. Hoops

Family ministry leaders in the Synod are convinced that intentional family ministry is not another "congregational program" that serves a specific age group. Rather, it is an all-encompassing viewpoint that provides for and encourages the shaping of faith among family members from birth until death.

"It is when congregations and families partner together in specific and measured ways to focus on involving faith-filled people in the support of parents and one another in nurturing homes where faith is built and shared in genuine ways and the next generation is equipped to live out their baptism, passing the faith on to their children," Dr. Steven Christopher, interim associate director of Children's and Family Ministry, LCMS District and Congregational Services, told *Reporter*

To reach that goal, he and more than 50 family ministry leaders met earlier this year in Phoenix for a three-day summit under the theme "Build and Tell." Along with sharing family ministry ideas undertaken in their congregations, participants contributed to, and will be involved in, a National Plan of Action for Family Ministry, providing leadership in their respective regions.

A recently formed Family Ministry Action Team composed of eight professional church workers shared its key elements to help individuals and congregations achieve their plans:

- **Building the Home:** Home is the primary faith-shaping unit. The congregation can strongly impact families by providing support and offering resources that help families grow in faith within the setting of the home.
- **Faith Journey:** The congregation in action -- with programs, events, and growth opportunities for families to participate in -- connects families with the wider Christian family of faith, encouraging mutual support as this community of faith encourages and nurtures one another in developing habits that contribute to vibrant faith, which can



Zion Lutheran Church

Yon Paris brings her grandson Steven Yoon to vacation Bible school at Zion Lutheran Church, Belleville, Ill. They are members of the congregation's "Korean church within a church" that worships at 11 a.m. on Sundays.

then be practiced and lived out in the Christian home.

- **Discipleship:** The personal faith growth process that each family member experiences is supported by the home and the church. It is unique for each individual and draws on the resources of both the home and the church to forge new life perspectives and deeper faith so that faith is passed onto the next generation.

Intentional ministry to and with "family" is critically important, Christopher said, because "it is the foundational means by which to pass along the faith to the next generation. Believing that faith formation happens best within the family unit, we seek to resource ways that are intentional about helping family members grow in the knowledge of Scripture, in the understanding of the Gospel, and in the practice of service in love to one's neighbor."

James Bradshaw, LCMS Kansas District education executive and chair of the Family Ministry Action Team, agreed. "Intentional family ministry is when the church partners with individuals, within the context of a household, to provide support along the various stages of life's journey by providing appropriate Christ-centered resources and training. It is a congregational ministry with families that focuses on faith development of children, youth, and adults."



Ben Freudenburg, program director of family life at Concordia University, Ann Arbor, Mich., said that congregations face challenges in their support of family ministry.

"We must help the congregation see that family ministry is not another program; rather, it is the very heart of all of congregational life," he said. "You can't do Lutheran school and not be doing family ministry. If you are doing children or youth ministries, you are doing family ministry. A big challenge is helping people catch that view.

"No one denies nor refutes the idea that families are important," Freudenburg continued. "Nobody would say anything negative about building strong marriages and families. Yet the models used by our churches don't reflect that belief."

As an example, he said that while the majority of churches have youth programs, many of those programs don't have an element that reconnects them to their parents and siblings in the growing of their faith during this important developmental time.

"During the past 50 years, the shift has been away from the family. The church has changed from a congregational community built on families to a business-style community," Freudenburg said. "Faith is less evident in teens' lives than it's ever been. Families and

marriages are less valued. Kids today define 'family' as those who care for and love them. Many don't define family in terms of their biological family.

"I believe the current church culture has led parents to believe that the church is responsible for faith formation, which I call 'Church Centered -- Home Supported,'" he continued.

"Family ministry is helping the church move toward a new paradigm, 'Home Centered -- Church Supported,' in which the church forms the community of faith in a way that agrees with the biblical view of being a partner with the home, and intentionally shapes the church to be a Christian marriage and family forming center."

Returning to a biblical view of family ministry has benefits, said Christopher. "Children, youth, and parents will share their faith journey together, walking with Jesus and with each other, growing in the trust and belief they share in their Savior. It is congregations equipping parents for their vital roles of faith proclaimers and supporting them on the home front. It is the passing of the faith from one generation to the next."

Jill Hasstedt, family ministry director at Zion Lutheran Church, Belleville, Ill., says her congregation is in the 16th year of intentional family ministry and that it is "in the flavor of all we do -- not necessarily a set of special programs. The church is the only institution in society that connects with people from cradle to grave. The impact we can have for Jesus' sake is amazing."

She offered some examples of the family-ministry-focused change at her congregation:

- made worship more child friendly (provided "wobble-tamers" bags, children's messages every week, worship tips for parents).
- invited parents into youth ministry, and ensured that each youth has four or more positive adult relationships in his or her life.
- offered meals to all new parents and "tweaked" its baptism preparation for parents.
- started Christmas Eve services specifically designed for families with young children.
- offered a Lenten service after school, followed by a meal.
- implemented regular parenting classes and began Parent Networking Teams.
- created a process for students to commune for the first time with their families (tears are normal, she said) on their confirmation day.

"We haven't arrived at where we want to be," Hasstedt said. "Where we need to be is that Jesus becomes the center of every heart and every home."

Freudenburg said congregations experience a change when they return to a biblical understanding of family ministry. "They find a wonderful connection between parents and children. It transforms a congregation. And unchurched people come to church to seek that kind of help."

Christopher says that some of the best resources to help congregations become family-friendly are the leaders in the family ministry movement. In January, the Family Ministry Action Team will invite 20 of these leaders to attend a visioning summit with the goal of expanding an organized network to extend coaching, training, and resources for congregations throughout the Missouri Synod.

Congregations that embrace family ministry, he said, "will enjoy a wider sense of connection with each other as they model a large and accepting family unit of faith."

For more information on family ministry within the Synod, visit www.lcms.org/family or contact Christopher at cnhdce@aol.com or by calling 925-784-1272.

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