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A Family Ministry: Every Family Needs One!

There are certain things every family needs: basic food and shelter, health care, love and a living faith in Jesus Christ. And there's one more thing to add to that list: a family ministry. It offers a family great benefits and costs very little. Every family needs one.

It's true that families are very different. Every family can't have, perhaps won't want, the newest house or fanciest car. Every family can't take an expensive family vacation or even enjoy a spat-free family dinner each night. But every family, and any family, can have a family ministry. Whatever that ministry turns out to be, it will be as unique as your family and a way for your family to work together using your gifts and opportunities to share the love of Jesus Christ.

Don't let the term "ministry" frighten you. Ministry isn't something done only by the "minister" or even just by adults. Everyone in the family can love, share and serve- even (and especially!) children. Just look for ways to serve those around you in his name. Be alert to opportunities and needs and pray about those your family can meet. Then, be ready to minister together!

We Stumbled Into It

Our family wasn't looking for a family ministry; we just "stumbled into" some as we tried to respond in a Christ-like way to some needs around us. For example, one Christmas, we found ourselves with no close family nearby to invite to Christmas dinner. We'd heard that the City Mission needed folks to help serve its annual Christmas dinner so we volunteered. Our youngest son, seven, helped me set and clear the tables (much more enthusiastically than at home) while my wife and older son, thirteen, served meals. It was hard work. We helped serve nearly 400 meals that day. But, tired as we were, we all experienced the truth of the Apostle Paul's words that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35)

That busy Christmas at the City Mission became an annual tradition—just one of a number that we've "stumbled into" over the years. After all, we weren't intending to have a family ministry when we provided temporary housing for some young singles. They had a need. We had the room. It seemed right for us to respond. We hadn't even thought about having a foster child—until the Assistant pastor brought us a young girl who'd been abandoned (along with her sister) on his doorstep. She needed a family to care for her and we only had one child of our own at the time. It seemed right for us to respond.

The Benefits of a Family Ministry

Although we didn't start out with the intention of having a family ministry, we quickly learned from experience how beneficial they can be. Our family's busy schedule made it

important to squeeze the most from every minute we spend together. A family ministry allows your family to witness to Christ's love and to spend time doing something worthwhile together, also.

In this "me first" age, we want to help our children develop caring and compassionate spirits. A family ministry can help nurture attitudes of caring and service in our children. These attitudes, in turn, become part of their identity as a member of our family—and God's.

Ministries of Hospitality

"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so, some people have entertained angels without knowing it." (Heb. 13:3) Hospitality is a time honored Christian ministry that just about any family can practice in some form.

When I was a freshman in college, away from home for the first time, I guess my loneliness must have shown on my face. I'll always be grateful to one family at the church I attended there. They could see I was a bit homesick and desperate for a home cooked meal. They warmly invited me to have dinner after church with their family. I was pleased and excited. Then, when I arrived, I saw they'd invited a half dozen other students, too! Some were already my friends. Soon, it seemed we were there almost every Sunday afternoon.

Theirs was a family ministry of hospitality that touched my life deeply. Along with the meal there was always a lively discussion of spiritual things. I came away from those Sundays a little less homesick and a lot more ready to face the challenges of a secular campus.

If college students attend your church, your family has a ready made family ministry. Or there may be some single folks who would appreciate a family meal on occasion. The same goes for some of the elderly folks in the church or neighborhood.

Our church makes an attempt to reach out to international students. What international student can resist the offer of dinner with your family, especially at Christmas, Easter or Thanksgiving? As you give a try at one of their native dishes, you can also respectfully share what the holiday means.

Children can Be Involved, Too

When our children were young, we lived in what often seemed like a very tiny three bedroom townhouse. So when a young friend, in his early 30's needed a place to stay for a few months, it was a challenge. In addition to accommodating one more person with one bathroom, we had to adjust to his nocturnal schedule ("late" in our house in anytime after 10 p.m.). Since each son had his own bedroom, one of them would have to share. In fact, our eight year did that for the six months our friend was with us. Our son had a very important part in this family ministry.

Perhaps you have a spare bedroom that's just collecting boxes. Could it be used to temporarily accommodate a friend or someone the church refers to you? For the sake of your family's safety, of course, be sure anyone you take in is known by you or someone whose

judgment you trust. And be sure a ministry of hospitality is really a family ministry, not one whose burden falls primarily on Mom. Even children can make beds, help straighten up and set and clear the table. As they share in the serving, so they will also share in the blessings. Our family is convinced that, a ministry of hospitality can not only witness powerfully to Christ's love but very effectively help our children learn the joy of serving others and putting their needs first.

Visiting shut-ins is a ministry even young children can do and enjoy. My wife remembers warmly how, as a child, she would go with her father to conduct worship at a local nursing home one Sunday afternoon a month. Maybe your family doesn't have the talents for that but you can visit. Many of the folks there are lonely—and they love to see children. When my son was a teenager, he developed a warm relationship with elderly woman in a local nursing home whom he visited weekly as part of a service project. If you go to a nursing home, be sure to call ahead and learn the rules. Plan brief visits so you don't stretch the limits of the resident's energy and your children's good behavior.

Your family may also choose to visit folks from your church who can't get out much. Take them a small gift that your children have made or perhaps a large print book or some stationary or postcards to write with. You can even do this ministry together with other families, especially if you go to a nursing home to visit. It's a practical way to witness to your faith and teach our children the virtue of respect and care for the sick and elderly. Of course, the children will enjoy being the center of attention!

Family Ministries to Children

When our sons were young, I'm sure my wife and I complained to each other more than one that the neighborhood children always seemed to pick our yard to play in. Some days, the noise and confusion would get to us. But we knew that ours was probably the only yard in which they felt really welcome. One of my son's young friends said he enjoyed being at our house because "everybody in your family is nice and doesn't yell at each other." (Boy, did we fool him!)

That's the heart of family ministry—opening your home to people right on your block. They need to see stable, loving Christian families---families who love Christ and serve others in his name. Today, the most dangerous hours for children are the after-school hours when they are home alone and unsupervised. Here's another ready opportunity for family ministry. Welcome some of those children into your home to play with your children (you may need to set specific times for coming and leaving). Provide some interest and caring and a good snack. They're hungry after school but God's love through you can satisfy an even deeper hunger.

One other ministry that some busy families are trying today is combining a family vacation with ministry. That can range from helping with building a house for a poor family in your area to an overseas mission trip. For years, our family has gone to both urban or resort areas to help conduct open air vacation bible school type programs for children. It's a great way to minister together and have a vacation, too.

Getting Started

How do you choose the family ministry that's right for your family? Our family began by looking at the needs around us that we knew we could meet. Who could we, as a family, serve together in the Lord's name? Take as your model the Lord Jesus who "did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45).

You might want to begin by getting everyone together and giving a brief explanation that ministry together is one important way that your family can show their thankfulness and obedience to God. Keep the language clear and simple. Have ready a few examples of ministries that might be right for your family and ask for opinions and other suggestions. Then, pray and ask God to show you the ministry for you. Next, take the most important step of all-get started!

Getting started with a family ministry may seem like a big step and may take some courage. But our family is convinced that the effort is well worth it. Through a family ministry, God nurtures in each family member a caring, sharing spirit of Christlike service. Just as wonderfully, through our little family ministries, he allows us to show the world something of Christ's presence, power and enduring love. Now what is your family waiting for!

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