

GETTING



Families involved together in the church

BY LARRY FOWLER

I confess.

That's probably not a good way to start an article, but I want to be transparent. Some may think less of me because of what I am about to share, but here it is.

I'm not working in children's ministry in my local church this year.

I hate to admit it, but it's the truth. It's the first time in many, many years that I've not been involved on a regular basis. I have wanted to be a ministry leader who practices what he preaches. So even with a pretty demanding travel schedule, I've always tried to serve in some capacity in my church. My weekends are pretty packed with conferences and seminars, so for years I have chosen to work in our midweek kids' ministry, Awana. But this year has been even more hectic, and I've decided I just can't do it.

Last year was busy, too. But I adjusted my schedule or even cancelled speaking opportunities. I sacrificed to make sure I didn't miss. But this year? I'm not doing it. Speaking requests have made my schedule even tougher to manage. Every weekend, it seems I'm in a different state. But that's not the reason for my decision.

What is it?

My grandkids moved.

You may say, "You've got to be kidding, right? That's all?"
Yep, that's all there is to it. Remember, I said, "I confess."

I've enjoyed serving for years as a leader in my grandkids' clubs, but last year was really special. My two grandsons served as junior leaders along with me. I've always enjoyed

children's ministry; after all, it's my life's calling. But when my grandsons served with me, I LOVED it! I did whatever was necessary to be there with them. Like I said, I sacrificed.

But now my daughter's family has moved to another city. I love the ministry and the other kids, but my motivation is not so great. Without family there, I'm not so willing to jump through hoops to be involved.

What's the point? Family is a huge motivator. I've been committed to children's ministry most of my adult life. But even for me, family makes a huge difference in my decision about when and where to serve.

Nehemiah knew the value of family in ministry

Nehemiah faced a huge crisis. The wall of Jerusalem was only half done, and the workers were ready to quit. The ministry God had called him to, removing the reproach upon Jerusalem by rebuilding the wall, was in jeopardy.

Opposition had been building, and armies were threatening to annihilate the workers. Even the friends of the laborers from Judah were encouraging them to quit. The workers were physically fatigued, spiritually visionless and had mentally lost their will (Nehemiah 4:10). You know the rest of the story. From that deep valley, Nehemiah inspired his tired, visionless and discouraged workers to finish the wall in 52 days—nothing short of a miracle! But what did he do to motivate the workers? I believe it is deeply significant that the very first action he took was to arrange the workers according to their families (Nehemiah 4:14).

Imagine with me ...

Josef was working on the west side of the wall, his dad on the north and his brothers on the southeast corner. His wife and kids were at home near his brothers, but not too near. As soon as he heard about the threats from the Arabs and the Ashdodites, he had a hard time concentrating on moving the stones. He was anxious to know if his kids were being threatened.

And how about his dad? Josef was ready to quit and go back home when the order came: "Arrange yourselves by families." He could hardly believe it. He was ordered to return home! Josef's motivation for wall building suddenly turned positive.

If Nehemiah knew it was a significant issue back then, we ought to think about enlisting families together in ministry today. It's still true: the more the family is together, the higher the motivation to stay involved.

Getting Families Involved Together (FIT) yields major results

Where do we see this today? Normally, not in church where families are separated. Whole family involvement usually happens with an activity or hobby. When it does happen in serving God, there are incredible benefits.

Families Involved Together increases commitment.

You are much less likely to quit when you are serving next to a family member. If you are in a ministry with your spouse, son, daughter or sister, you have more incentive to stick with it.

Families Involved Together increases conversation at home.

Families talk about what they have in common, especially dads and kids. If it's soccer, that's what they discuss. If it's hiking, vacations, hobbies or their favorite sports team, it gives them a basis for conversation.

I understand how this is especially helpful for dads. You ladies are pretty good at heart-to-heart talks, but we guys need an activity to build conversation around. When families serve God together in a ministry, dads have a foundation for talking about spiritual things.

Families Involved Together improves discipleship.

You've probably heard the verse: "Train a child in the way he should go. Even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). Most people focus on the end of the verse and wonder if it is a promise or a general principle. Also, what does "in the way he should go" mean? Too often, we overlook the first word: train. Is that what happens at church? In your Sunday school?

What is training?

I've heard it described this way:

I will do it; you watch.

We do it together.

You try it; I will watch.

You do it alone.

You do it; someone else watches.

It's hard to incorporate these steps into a weekly one-hour children's ministry. Besides, it is a command first to parents. When a family serves together, it provides opportunities for parents to be the prime trainers of their own children. ►►

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Getting Families Involved Together (FIT) in the church

Cast the vision. If you talk about it regularly, in time, you'll see results. Few people are early adapters; most will need to hear the idea repeatedly before beginning to catch on. Talk about the benefits. Encourage families that are involved together to share with others, publicly or privately, about how meaningful it is.

Evaluate your ministries. Do they lend themselves to family participation? If a dad in your church wanted to participate with his middle-school daughter while his 6-year-old son was there, too, could it happen? Sometimes, whole family involvement doesn't occur because we don't create the opportunities, which is point three.

Create opportunities.

Many churches run evening VBS because the whole family can do it.

Club ministries or sports outreach ministries usually have a variety of positions that family members can fill.

Church-initiated neighborhood ministries, in which church families find a way to minister to neighbors, are becoming successful.

A mission trip to visit missionary friends or a ministry you support will deeply impact their worldview and create a lifelong memory for your family.

Begin recruiting family members of existing workers.

Have a "family day." Invite your workers' spouses, sons, daughters or other family members to minister with them. They might get hooked!

When you recruit other family members, especially older children and teens, speak to them directly. Tell them you want their participation. Don't go through their parents. They need to feel they are personally important to you.

Two cautions about parents ministering to their own children

Your goal should be that children will see their parents serve God, not simply create another time for Mom and Dad to parent. I recommend that they be in the same ministry but assigned to a different small group of children, if possible.

Arrange for special discipline procedures when it involves a worker's child. Parents who must discipline their own children in front of others can be uncomfortable and usually err, either by being too strict or too lenient. Other workers will also be hesitant to discipline when a child's parent is present. Set up simple policies and procedures at the beginning.

Whether you learn from my wimping out this year or from Nehemiah's positive example, follow God's pattern that has existed since the time of the Levites in the Old Testament. Get Families Involved Together in your church ... Get FIT! ❗

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