Collective wisdom from innovative leaders

The senior pastor calls a meeting to discuss an exciting new vision for families in your church. As one who has demonstrated a passion for kids, you eagerly anticipate the dialogue because you’ve felt like a “voice crying in the wilderness” when it comes to the need to engage parents in the faith passing process. You have quoted the statistics that most kids raised in church reject Christian faith by the time they become adults. You’ve insisted that the problem is not what’s happening at church but what desperately needs to happen at home. But until now you have been unable to gain traction with senior leadership. Maybe this will be the day your dream becomes reality. Maybe others will finally come to realize that the home is the primary context for faith formation.

Thirty minutes later, you leave the pastor’s office with mixed feelings. The good news: You’ve been asked to drive a church-wide strategy for families. The bad news: You’ve been asked to drive a church-wide strategy for families. Now what? It’s one thing to identify a problem. It is quite another to be handed a blank sheet of paper and be given the daunting task of creating a workable solution.

Over the past decade, more and more senior pastors have realized the church needs to inspire and equip families if we hope to turn the tide of declining faith in the next generation. More often than not, they look to the children’s and student ministry teams to take the lead. Translation: On top of the endless challenge of recruiting children’s ministry volunteers and preparing curriculum, you must also figure out how to engage Mom and Dad in the spiritual formation process.
What gets measured gets done. Introduce simple measures that will keep you focused on family-centered strategies and drive continual improvement.

Research indicates that the decline of strong families means we are swimming in different water than in the past. Even the more conservative estimates tell us we are becoming a nation of unbelievers as fewer people associate themselves with any form of Christian faith. Be careful to use only credible studies, since many over quoted reports lack veracity. The situation is bad enough without overstating the numbers, such as: most self-described unbelievers in this country are former church kids. Only about half of those who attend church with their parents remain active believers as adults.

Most churches affirm the priority of faith at home, but they struggle to develop workable strategies. Ask your leadership team to honestly assess which of the following best describes the present reality in your church.

Just Starting. We are just beginning to craft a vision for families in order to get these issues on our leadership team radar screen.

Moving Forward. We have begun changing existing or creating new programs that will move family from a third tier to a second or first tier emphasis.

Full Throttle. We have launched a senior leadership team initiative with the goal of developing an integrated strategy for driving faith into the home.

STEP TWO: DISCOVER BEST PRACTICES

The Strong Families Innovation Alliance identified ten components that are essential to building a customized strategy for church-driven, family-centered redemption. Consider these the ten “Lego piece” shapes essential to any model.

Empower a visionary champion. If everyone owns it, no one does. Make it clear which senior leader is responsible for keeping spiritual formation at home objectives on the team’s radar screen.

Establish new success measures. What gets measured gets done. Introduce simple measures that will keep you focused on family-centered strategies and drive continual improvement.

Build upon existing church vision. Do not compete with or criticize the existing vision. Build upon it to drive family-centered strategies. Don’t call the church to change everything, but to make everything more effective.

Build into the existing church calendar. Include experiences on the church calendar that will move people toward greater intentionality, rather than try to squeeze them in as exceptions or special events. The more “auto-pilot” your family emphasis game plan, the easier it will be for everyone.

Use ‘home’ lens. As a priority, every area of the church must own the family ministry vision. And, every department and program needs to apply “faith at home” lenses to what they are doing, rather than creating another program competing for attention and resources.

Define success and call families to commitment. Give families a vision of what success at home means and repeatedly call them to commitment and intentionality. Foster a culture of family intentionality. Find ways to communicate the priority and celebrate the practice of families becoming intentional.

Customization – one size won’t fit all. Every family is unique due to their life-season, ages and number of children, marital health, and special circumstances. Provide tools that make it easy for families to customize.

Invest in tools for families. Just like we invest in curriculum for Sunday school, we need to invest in tools that will make it easier for families to do the right thing.

Two degree strategies. A good plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow. It is better to start small and build momentum than to try to change everything all at once or achieve complete buy-in from all sectors.

Using these ten “Lego piece” shapes, Alliance churches went on to create a variety of models that fit their unique needs.

Keep it Simple

Some strategies are more difficult to implement than others. Intergenerational services, for example, often involve logistical challenges and can face resistance from age-segmented ministries that have an existing agenda. That’s why it is often best to start with low-lying fruit—strategies that will reach the greatest number of people with the fewest leadership headaches.

At Lake Pointe Church, for example, we recognize that most people will only give the church one or two time slots per week—usually a worship service and small group. Asking them for a third time slot (i.e. a Saturday morning parenting workshop), dramatically decreases the percentage of the congregation that will participate. Because our goal is to create a church-wide culture of intentionality, we decided to leverage “main-street” ministries to accomplish two simple strategic objectives.

MAKE IT EASY! for families to do the right thing with “bite-sized” ideas for marriage and family intentionality.

MAKE IT MORE LIKELY that families will become intentional with periodic campaigns that inspire them to create a plan for the next 120 days.

Marriage Ministry = Annual Event

Similarly, when church leaders hear “marriage ministry” they tend to think of an annual retreat or event rather than an ongoing strategy for building God-honoring marriages.

Best Case = Secondary Priority

Most church leaders acknowledge that family-oriented ministry is a second or third tier priority in their church.

Worst Case = Off Radar Screen

Many churches don’t even have a value statement about the home, so programs driving family intentionality are completely off the strategic radar screen.

Need = Integrated Strategies

While many churches have created isolated programs for families—often in the form of life-stage classes, which separate rather than integrate family faith experiences—we need integrated strategies that will create an ongoing culture of intentional families.