

# **Family Ministry**

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## **The Need for Family Ministry**

The family is hurting. You have heard all the statistics from the world outside. Family problems have been editorialized, analyzed, and agonized to death. But the realities of family life from the world inside—inside our own church—might give us pause and make us reconsider the importance of ministering to families:

Only 45% of WELS members attend church on Sunday. Only 11% of our members attend formal Bible study (10% of all Americans go to some form of weekly Bible study - Gallop). By age 19 only 38% of our Lutheran elementary school graduates attend public worship in any Christian denomination as often as twice a month (this figure excludes those who attend area Lutheran high schools). By age 19 only 32% of our public school confirmands worship as often as twice a month. WELS pastors confirm only 67% of the babies they baptize. Only 6% of our councilmen and elders attend Bible study. Only 5% of our WELS homes have daily Bible study or devotions.

Even without these statistics in hand, we have all sensed the pervasive influence of the devil and the world on our WELS families.

In 1991 the WELS Board for Parish Services gathered 85 WELS pastors, teachers, and committed laymen from around the country for a three day planning meeting in Milwaukee. The first question we asked this group to answer was: What is the most pressing need in our parishes today? Seven of eight breakout groups answered: family ministry. The eighth group ranked it second.

One month ago the Media Planning Committee met with 35 WELS professors, writers, pastors, teachers, member ministers, church librarians, and publishers. We asked them to prioritize the needs in publishing for the WELS today. Parish and institutional people alike ranked more and better materials for family ministry the number one need within the church.

The time has come, however, to get beyond statistics and hand-wringing concern. The church must get on with solutions, and we know it. The Good Shepherd told us to feed his sheep. And Jesus told us, his under-shepherds, what to feed the sheep. But he has left to his servants to determine where and how to feed them. So we must ask, "What exactly is family ministry?"

## **The Definition of Family Ministry**

Although WELS pastors, teachers, and member ministers are almost unanimously agreed that we need to minister to our families, we are still struggling to define family ministry.

A number of WELS congregations have called full time staff members to serve as "Family Ministers." Some congregations with more than one pastor have designated an associate as Family Ministry or Minister of Youth and Family Life. Whenever I get the chance, I ask these men what family ministry is. I receive few answers that are definitive enough to put into print.

In response to what we heard in our 1991 planning meeting the Board for Parish Services established a standing committee on Family Ministry. We appointed concerned, capable, and experienced people to this committee. The committee struggled for three months just to define the family. After three years of monthly meetings, the committee has produced a two volume pilot manual, a combined manual and a recommendation for publication of materials. As valuable as these materials are, a terse, cohesive definition of family ministry is still lacking.

Northwestern Publishing House, which heard the crying need for family ministry at the 1991 planning meeting, called a full time Family Devotional Editor. Much of his time goes to producing and promoting the new WELLSRING family devotional magazine. This is a beautiful periodical. It's scripture based, full of applications, attractively formatted, and adaptable to many family situations. In spite of aggressive promotion, however, WELLSRING has been received with apathy. If this is family ministry, families are not responding.

The spiritual needs of our families is not the only thing prompting our search for a definition of family ministry. There is also the need to provide a positive, well defined model for pastors and congregations who are anxious to help families. We have to consider the negative impact of having no biblical definition or evangelical Lutheran model. Some of our congregations—sensing that families need spiritual help and noticing that WELS has no coherent approach—are begging and borrowing from the heterodox.

There is real danger in this. Family ministry approaches in other denominations have serious shortcomings. Because they have no real gospel, social gospel advocates can only fantasize about family ministry (the demise of the nuclear family; alternate family lifestyles). Without a means of grace approach, Evangelicals can only jargonize (“The family that prays together stays together”) and legalize it (James Dobson films). Since mechanics are their means, church growth gurus can only categorize and specialize family ministry (Yuppies, Boomers, Thirty-Somethings, Blended families). Unfortunately, not all who borrow from these ministry models and materials have the ability to adapt them profitably.

We may warn our brothers not to toy with un-Lutheran ministry forms. Yet without our own definition of family ministry, our bellyaching about all the wrong approaches of others has the ring of a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Our criticism may be correct, but it is not constructive. We must do more than saying what family ministry isn't. When we have no alternative to offer, many regard our warning to avoid heterodox materials as the equivalent of being told to do nothing at all.

### **Family Ministry is What We are Doing Now**

Some of our pastors insist that we are already doing family ministry in our congregations. I happen to agree with this assessment.

In a 1981 televised sermon, Billy Graham was bemoaning that the divorce rate in America had climbed to 49%. He went on to point out, however, that fewer than one of twelve nominal Christians get a divorce. Then he quoted a statistic that I have not heard before or since—I don't know where he got it—that the divorce rate in Christian denominations is lowest among Lutherans: only 5%.

Our plain old preaching and teaching ministries are helping families. We must not diminish our solid, everyday evangelical ministry for unproven approaches to the family. The malaise in which even many WELS families find themselves is not a compelling argument for abandoning basic doctrine and reproof. Every sermon and Bible class, every catechism and Sunday school lesson builds faith, inculcates Christian values, and so strengthens the family.

Yet there are ways in which we can better serve our families through these traditional ministries. And we can do that without adopting radical new forms of ministry, adding staff ministers, building new buildings, or changing our constitution.

### **Family Ministry is Adult Education**

One way to bolster our traditional ministry to be of greater assistance to the family is to recognize that family ministry is really a part of adult spiritual growth. This is a biblical observation, not just a practical one. God assigns primary responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the family, not to the church, but to the parents.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

Train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the Word of God. (Titus 2:4,5)

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6: 7-9)

Fathers tell their children about your faithfulness. (Isaiah 38:19)

Martin Luther presupposed the spiritual instruction of the home when he prefaced the Enchiridion with the words: "As the head of the family should teach them in the simplest way to those in his household." Are we using the Small Catechism as Luther intended it?

Yes, God assigns parents the primary responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the family. And parents are adults. When the church neglects the education of adults, it neglects the heads of families. We are working upside down in family ministry if we expect God to produce results through our education of children which God himself seeks to accomplish through our instruction of adults. True, sometimes what children learn in the church's schools flows over to the adult family members at home. But that does not always happen. In many homes it does not happen at all. Since less than half our families are in church on any given Sunday, what children learn in the church's schools may more often than not be set aside by negative home models.

To urge adult education is not to suggest that our parishes should decrease their efforts at youth education. Instead, it is a reminder that we hurt the education of our children when we do not teach adults. The devil impedes what our children learn of Christ when the church does not with similar energy teach the adults into whose hands God has given the primary care of children's souls. As I read Scripture, I see more command and example for the organized church to teach adults and leave the education of the children to parents at home than there is for the church to train children in the hope they will influence the adults at home.

For some time now the Board for Parish Services has flown the banner: "Adult Spiritual Growth is Job One!" This theme is derived from the synod-wide study of spiritual renewal directed by the 1987 convention. This study included many doctrinal papers and pastoral conference discussions. These studies reinforced our conviction that God does not work apart from means. His means is the Word. The strength of faith, the strength of the family, the strength of the church lies in hearing the Word of God and keeping it. Scripture study by adults will strengthen the family. Our parishes will serve the family by strengthening their ministry of adult Bible education.

An important part of family adult education is premarital counseling. Because religiously mixed marriages are the norm today, and many young couples possess only a shallow understanding of what the Bible says about marriage, the old half hour lecture in the pastor's office while arranging the wedding ceremony no longer serves the needs of newlyweds. Many congregations have expanded premarital counseling into regular, repeated Bible courses on marriage. These classes are announced to the whole congregation. Mature couples attend to strengthen their marriages and at the same time lend their Christian common sense to younger couples during the class discussions. Longer classes with discussion time also allows the pastor to explain the Bible principles behind the practices in our Lutheran wedding ceremony: church fellowship principles, selection of wedding music, the focus on God's grace instead of the bride.

### **Family Life is Taught by Example**

Family life is taught by example. This, too is a biblical observation, not merely a practical one. The Bible teaches that the example of all believers, Christian leaders especially, is important.

You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Remember your leaders, who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. (Hebrews 13:7)

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2,3)

The family is the basic unit of God's society. God instituted the family before the church. Even after the Fall the outward strength of the congregation depends on the stability of the individual households that comprise it. That is why God requires of called servants that they are first of all family men:

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife... He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) (1 Timothy 3:2,4,5)

In informal pastoral conference polls in the mid 80s, only 43% of WELS clergy responded in the affirmative when asked if they conducted daily Bible study or home devotions with their own family. Other polls indicate that less than one in four of our teaching ministers study the Bible with their families.

Through the 80s divorce and sexual indiscretion among WELS called workers increased significantly as causes for resignation. To what extent this was a reflection of the sins of society and to what degree these offenses contributed to the decline of other families only God knows.

Just as God instituted marriage before the church, so a public worker in the church must set his marriage and family above service to his divine call. When a man marries, it is for life. The tenure of a call, however, may be interrupted by many factors other than death, including the loss of one's spiritual qualifications for the call due to mismanagement of his family. That, of course, does not mean that family duties are never sacrificed or delayed because of the duties of his ministry. Quite the opposite is true. It does mean, however, that if a

public minister cannot manage both his ministry and his marriage, God has made it clear which he must give up.

Family ministry begins with the minister, with me. You and I will exhort and admonish each other to keep our own homes strong in the Lord. We will also encourage the member ministers in our congregations. Those we elect as officers, elders, board and committeemen are in every biblical sense called workers whose spiritual qualifications include the good management of their families. Are the requirements for a good family example made clear to the candidates who are nominated for part time ministry in your congregation? The Bible holds high the value of a good example and requires exemplary family life of all who serve the church publicly. First our personal life, then our congregation's constitutions, procedures for nomination, and instructions to voters will reflect this.

### **Family Ministry is Conducted from the Pulpit**

Pulpit ministry to the family extends beyond the obligatory Mother's Day sermon or the "Family Life Sunday." Daily family life provides many premises for specific application of the law. Many of the tensions, excesses, grudges, and sorrows our people carry into pew stem from family relationships. We can gain some pulpit guts by addressing issues which the law addresses to families: man and woman roles, the love of money, marital fidelity, sexual purity, a husband's sacrificing love, the evils of divorce, and the discipline of children. We may shy away from these applications because we fear someone who will be offended—socially—by them. We must also consider how many will be offended—stumble in faith—because they did not hear them.

The Bible often expresses gospel truths with family images. The Holy Trinity, the relationship of the believer to God, the formation of the Holy Christian church are all based on family pictures. God and his dealing with us simultaneously provide us motive and model for shaping our own families.

### **Family Ministry is Reinforced by Youth Education**

Children's education programs are not a substitute for adult instruction. Yet, when adult instruction is in place, the instruction of youth can be geared to complement and support it. At a time when parents are deferring to the church for the spiritual instruction of their children, the church must make conscious efforts to help parents understand that the primary responsibility for their child's soul rests with them.

Interactive learning is one way to do that. The student interacts with his parents to complete his lesson.

The religion courses at my son's Lutheran elementary school require at least one interactive assignment per week. My son interviewed me on some point of doctrine or application every week last year. First, he had to get his parent's answer to a question, then he had to write his response to my response before returning to class. This is only one example of interactive learning. It's aim is to make parents active participants in their children's religious instruction. (It also accomplishes the purpose of getting parents to talk to their children regularly about matters of God)

One WELS congregation no longer instructs youth of confirmation age. The parents of confirmands come in once weekly and sit with the pastor to go through the lessons and applications, memory work and music. Parents return home to teach their own children. After two years, the children are publicly examined before the congregation. Confirmation follows. The result? Parents have the privilege of discussing every point of Christian doctrine with their child just before high school.

Another approach is to demand of our children's education programs more parental involvement and responsibility.

My son was confirmed a few weeks ago. There was no public examination. Instead, a few weeks before confirmation, the pastor invited the confirmand and his parents to his office. The “talk” took hours. The class numbered in the forties. It must have taken my pastor months to get through all the interviews. My son was asked what he knew about Jesus and how he was going to put it into practice in his life. The pastor asked me repeatedly if I was going to support my son in living his newly confessed faith in Christ and how I was going to do that. The discussion was frank. My pastor did not excuse me from the interview because I was a pastor. I am glad he didn’t. That way my son was not omitted because his father was a pastor.

Involving parents may include meeting regularly with the parents of confirmation class students. Some of our WELS churches have begun Sunday school Parent Teacher Societies. Many congregations require Lutheran elementary and Sunday school faculties to visit the homes of their students twice a year.

### **Family Ministry Includes Evangelical Discipline**

It’s hard to understand, but removing someone from our fellowship strengthens the individual family as well as the family of believers. Disciplinary work in the congregation is not a part of ministry shaped by Christian freedom or tradition. It is one of the few aspects of ministry specifically commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ. Its process was exemplified by St. Paul at the Corinthian congregation.

Yet, because Christian discipline is a difficult and distasteful work of ministry, we neglect it. When discipline is lacking in a congregation, the word soon gets out among the members: “Living in sin is okay; the pastor married them anyway.” “Divorce is okay; they’re both still members.”

In fifteen years of parish ministry I was involved in 46 excommunications. I can’t remember one that was pleasant. 41 of these involved public, unrepented sins that affected the family: divorce; incest; desertion; marital infidelity.

Because most disciplinary cases revolve around some aspect of family life, the laxity in Christian discipline contributes to the weakening of the family structure. As bad as the sin of commission is—adopting untested heterodox ministry ideas—worse is the sin of omitting a part of ministry that Luther included in the Six Chief Parts of Christian doctrine in the Small Catechism. When family members have given themselves over to Satan, we owe them this debt of love: to publicly let them know they belong to the devil, in the hope that their souls can be saved on the day of the Lord.

### **Family Ministry May Includes New Forms of Ministry**

We are already doing family ministry through our solid Means of Grace approach to parish work. Claiming that we are already doing it, however, sometimes carries a certain defensive, fleshly tone: “I am already doing all I can do. I can’t do anything more or different to serve the families in my care.” Unless I deny my own concupiscence, I must admit that there are always things I can do better in my ministry for the Lord. My sinful flesh can and does put barriers in the way of the gospel. The Word is always efficacious, but, in part because of my inadequacies, it is not always effective.

The Gospel is always efficacious, always able to produce an effect, and to turn the hearts of men to God... The Gospel is not always effective; it does not in every case produce the intended effect. It does not always work faith, because the power of God, operating through the Gospel can be resisted by men. (E. Koehler, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p 193)

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Romans 14:13,19)

Since it is possible for me to put barriers in the way of the gospel—and the Bible asks me to remove them—my ministry has been a constant effort within the freedom of the gospel to reshape the forms I use.

Our WELS Wauwatosa fathers insisted that the gospel creates its own forms. This insistence on part of men like Koehler, Pieper, and Schaller was in direct opposition to Missouri's preoccupation with extrapolations of European dogmaticians and traditional ministry forms. The Wauwatosa gospel rejected both the claim that the local congregation was the only form of the visible church God established and that the local pastorate was the only divinely ordained form of the public ministry.

We believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of everyplace and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God. (*Formula of Concord*, Epitome X, "Of Church Rites.")

The congregation of God of every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right power, and authority... to change [church practices] in an orderly and becoming way as at any time it may be regarded most profitable, most beneficial and best for maintaining Christian discipline [and for the good order worthy of the profession of the Gospel]and the edification of the Church. (*Formula of Concord*, Thor. Dec., X, Of Church Rites, *Triglotta*. p 1055)

There is, however, no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry. The one public ministry of the Gospel may assume various forms, as circumstances demand (Acts 6:1-6). The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads the believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. Various functions are mentioned in Scripture: 1 Timothy 2:2; John 21:15-17 (feeding); Acts 20:28 (watching); 1 Timothy 3:2; 4:11; 6:2 (teaching); 1 Timothy 3:5; 5:17 (ruling). (*Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, p. 11)

Since Scripture does not make the external forms of the ministry a matter of divine mandate, these can change and have changed over the centuries. (*Shepherd Under Christ*, p.22)

How does one go about looking for new forms of ministry? In a sense, you don't. The Wauwatosa axiom states that the gospel creates its own forms. This means:

1. All forms of ministry are adiaphora;
2. Every form of ministry must serve the gospel;
3. New forms arise when the gospel reveals needs not addressed by old forms;
4. New forms must seek to remove barriers to the reception of the gospel;
5. Old forms and traditions must be examined with the same scrutiny and with the same criteria as new forms;
6. New forms should not be adopted nor old ones retained with the hope that they will accomplish what the gospel cannot;

7. Forms must be rejected insofar as they inherently oppose any biblical principle;
8. Untested forms should not take resources away from time tested forms which have demonstrated service to the gospel;
9. New forms are introduced, not to make workers feel guilty, but to offer additional options for setting priorities in service;
10. Old forms should be preserved and new forms adopted as much as possible without offense to faith. This will demand education and patience.

With these things in mind, let us examine some other approaches to ministering to families.

### **Family Ministry is Assisted by Trained Member Ministers**

During most of my parish ministry I was caught up in the chicken and the egg conundrum. I was too busy to train leaders to assist me in ministry. And the reason I was too busy is because I didn't spend enough time training leaders to assist me. This Catch 22 can be resolved only by interrupting the vicious cycle for a while. Stop and train leaders. No one notices your weaknesses more than your in-laws. Moses found this out when he was caught in the vicious cycle of busyness. The concept of delegating and training assistants for ministry certainly has biblical precedent if not command:

The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. (2 Timothy 2:2)

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (St. Paul to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:32)

Christ... gave some to be... pastor and teachers... to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. (Ephesians 4:11,12)

Don't begin too big or complicated. Some of the best training is done informally, hand in hand. Don't envision large classes of eager trainees; it seldom happens. Choose men full of the Holy Spirit. Most of them can be found in Bible class. Take them out on calls with you. Give them good books to read. If one is not apt to teach, take another.

Training member ministers is not a radical form of ministry. As far as we can tell, most New Testament church leaders were part time, not institutionally trained, and members of the congregation they served. Training members for ministry only seems new to those who have neglected this age-old, evangelical approach to ministry.

### **Family Ministry is Done Through Personal Ministry**

Too much of parish ministry today is done through media. You cannot, however, accomplish through a video, newsletter, bulletin announcement, or a form letter what you can through a personal visit. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus speaks first to the individual Christian. Jesus involves the individual believer on two levels before matters of discipline are brought to the visible, organized church. This personal, loving, caring approach to ministry has all but disappeared from our Lutheran piety.

A return to this individual, personal concern is needed in our WELS parishes today.

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (James 5:19,20)



Go and show him his fault just between the two of you. (Matthew 18:15)

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently... Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1,2)

Each one of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4)

“Am I my brother’s keeper?!” (Genesis 4:9)

Personal house to house visitations, individual nurture, mutual encouragement, private rebuke and exhortation, sharing a good example, and personal accountability for the brother’s soul are new only because they have been neglected for so long. Should we receive nominations for the board of elders or the board of education for men who are not willing to give the time to visit homes? Should pastors spend two and a half days at the computer designing the worship bulletin to the neglect of family calls? Should teachers feel that parent counseling can take place only in their classroom office? Should members of Christ’s priesthood respond to single parents, child neglect, and rumors of divorce only with gossip? A new form of family ministry is needed: personal visitation.

### **Family Ministry is Rooted in Family Bible Study**

“The family that prays together stays together.” Catchy, but it is not necessarily true. Even pagans pray. Jesus says his sheep hear his voice. That is, they don’t just talk to him; they listen to him. They read his Word. They study the Bible. In the home they conduct family devotions.

The encouragement for family devotions is not the revival of a Pietism form. It is a basic element of Lutheran piety. God required formal and informal family devotions of his Old Testament people in Deuteronomy. Luther conducted them in his parsonage. My father, a Minnesota prairie farmer with an eighth grade education, led his family in daily Bible study.

Somewhere in the last generation, however, this form of ministry has been lost. With less than half of our called workers involved in daily family Bible study and only one in twenty of our lay families leading family devotions, I think you can say that the daily family meditation is a new ministry form among us. It needs to be encouraged again. Without it our homes will not reinforce the Christian teaching of our schools. Without it our pulpits will be forced increasingly to peddle pablum to the biblically illiterate. Without it many of our families will continue to lead double lives, the godly one for a couple of hours on Sunday, and the real world one the rest of the week.

### **Family Ministry May Include Early Education Programs**

There has been a threefold growth in early education enrollment in WELS last year. These include daycare and preschool programs. Frankly, we don’t like the secular forces that are creating the opportunity for early education programs. What is driving these programs is absent fathers and working mothers. Yet almost every form we today consider traditionally Lutheran evolved in part as a response to needs created by sin.

A small but growing number of our WELS congregations are finding rich mission fields in day care and preschool programs. This form of Christian youth education, like all others, must be guarded right from the start. We do not want to contribute to the sin of parents by leaving them the impression that the church will take care of their child’s soul if only they will bring its body to the door of the church. It is not legalistic to require parents to participate in the early education of their child and ask them to attend courses of basic law and

gospel. Such requirements are in line with the old evangelical Lutheran pastoral practice of denying baptism to children of parents who refused to commit themselves to Christian instruction and church attendance.

What is family ministry? It is a recommitment to the use of good traditional Lutheran forms of ministry with the spiritual needs of our families in mind, combined with the application of forms which promise to serve the gospel in new areas in which Satan is attacking our parents and children.

May God bless us as we strive to serve our own families and the family of God with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*God sets the lonely in families. Psalm 68:6*