

SUCCESSFUL FAMILY MINISTRIES PROGRAMS

The key to successful family ministry programs in the local church includes the following:

- A definition of needs
- A specific target audience
- Adequate planning
- Quality communication with the target audience
- A small team of church members who are willing to learn some essential relational skills, and
- A keen sense of how this ministry relates to the total church program.

With these items in hand, a congregation has the tools for successful family ministry programs.

DEFINING THE NEEDS

Successful programs speak to peoples' needs. Where are people in the congregation and the community feeling their greatest need right now? How many are interested in parenting skills? In grief recovery? In divorce recovery? In improving their marriages? In coping with single life? In strengthening family worship? In friendship and recreation with other Christian families? What kinds of activities would be helpful to them? What are they willing to invest in time, money, and personal involvement?

Statistical data. One way to define needs is simply to assemble the statistical data already available. Use a sheet such as the [Family Life Profile](#) to construct a family profile of your congregation. Census data on file at the public library will quickly give you similar information about families in the local community—the number of teenagers, married couples, single parents, divorced persons, widows, etc.

Felt needs. Statistical data cannot, of course, indicate the degree of interest or the "needs" of these people. A survey will help in uncovering the felt needs of both congregation and community. A simple questionnaire like the [Family Life Activities Interest Survey](#) can be distributed to active members during a worship service. Inactive church members can be interviewed by telephone or personal visits. The [Community Family Life Education Survey](#) can be used for surveying the general public by telephone or door-step visits.

More specific information about the kinds of activities, topics, publicity, and locations that will draw people can be obtained by setting up one or more small group discussions with potential program participants. In one church, statistical data indicated that 22 families in the congregation and 413 in its ministry area had children under six years of age. In surveys, 65 percent of these expressed interest in attending parent education classes. To get more specific information, a discussion group made up of two couples and two single parents with pre-school children was formed. One couple and one single parent were church members; the others were not. Another church member led the discussion, using a detailed list of questions compiled by the program development committee. This method not only helps gather information, it also builds interest in the program under discussion.

TARGETING AND TRAINING

When key needs have been defined, the church board should authorize a planning committee to present a proposal that includes a specific target audience, nominations for program coordinator and the ministry team, program design, curriculum resources, written objectives, a budget and a suggested starting date. In smaller churches, this planning committee may be the Family Life Council itself. In larger settings, specialized planning committees for different events may be sub-

groups within or extensions of the Family Life Council.

Number of participants. Experience with group dynamics indicates that an ongoing class or seminar can expect to sustain a maximum of about forty people. If a church expects to involve more than this number of participants in a family ministry, it must design a program with several groups, perhaps meeting on different nights or in different locations.

Program coordinator. The coordinator for the program need not be an expert or a professional, but it is essential that this person have ability in organizing and carrying through projects, and have the trust of the target audience and the church board. The program coordinator need not be one of the target category, but he must be able to communicate with these people. He or she should be an individual with a clear commitment to the church and to Christ, and a willingness to see this ministry as a long-term activity, an opportunity to learn new skills and be exposed to new ideas. The time it takes to secure the right leadership will eventually pay off in a program with a deep spiritual dimension.

Supportive team. The program coordinator will need a supportive team of volunteers to care for several specific aspects:

1. dealing with paperwork, purchasing, setting up equipment, making phone calls, distributing advertising, etc.;
2. chatting with people as they gather at the events, getting to know them personally, answering questions, listening, setting up personal visits in the home, etc.; and
3. rallying intercessory prayer on behalf of the venture.

In addition, it will be important to have the pastor or a local elder as part of the team to serve as an administrative counselor and a channel of communication between the Family Life Council and the church board. The entire team should meet periodically (monthly or quarterly as needs dictate) for prayer, evaluation, brainstorming, planning, sharing and caring for one another. The quality of relationships within this team will determine to a large degree the success of the program.

DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM

To be effective, the content of the program must clearly and helpfully address the needs expressed by the target audience. But the "packaging" of the program is also vital. This has several aspects:

Meeting place. In settings where the Adventist church is perceived positively, a meeting at the church itself may be best, but sometimes the program will fare better if the "YMCA," a local bank, or some other public facility is used.

Time of year. Every community has its favorable seasons and unfavorable seasons. In the latter, low attendance is guaranteed. For example, one church offered a health screening event on the autumn weekend that the football season came to its climax. Few came out. The same program, with the same advertising, in the same location during the spring attracted ten times as many people.

Time of meeting. A young mothers' group might best meet on a weekday at mid-morning. A teen-parent communications seminar might work well on Saturday afternoons. A couples' group might need to be over by 8:30 p.m., while a singles' group might flourish by starting about 8:00 p.m. And how many times will the group meet? Although single, intensive events (all one day or one weekend) would seem to make it easier for more people to be present, educational research indicates that for a program to have significant impact (especially in changing habits or attitudes) a number of sessions over several weeks is necessary. A smaller, well-planned initial program

can lead to more and perhaps larger events. If a "beginners group" is rewarding, people may be willing to take on a more extended commitment.

Logistics. Refreshments, a notebook or note pad, pencils, audio-visuals and handouts, name tags, etc., tend to make the program more attractive and sophisticated. Arrange for participants to have an opportunity to mix and get acquainted. Plan for printed materials to carry the identification of the sponsoring organization and the program leaders so that recipients of advertising and materials can keep in contact.

Young couples, parents, and especially single parents, may be more inclined to attend a class if child care is provided. Church volunteers can help with this. Teenagers and grandparents may be eager to help. Use qualified non-Adventists if the available pool of Adventist volunteers is low.

Program resources. One reason that family ministries are within reach of every Adventist church, no matter how small, is that a vast number of curriculum resources have been published recently. Most have detailed guides for the group leader and textbooks or other materials for the participants. (See the General Conference Department of Church Ministries publication *Family Ministry Resources*.) If supplies must be ordered, do so well in advance and in sufficient quantity to care for the expected enrollment.

Stated objectives. No plan is complete unless it includes a simple, specific description of expected results. What is the desired effect on those who will be attending? List expectations precisely to help the working team, the church board, and others involved to understand clearly what the activity seeks to achieve. In writing an objective:

1. Make it specific, not general.
2. Make it something that can be accomplished.
3. Make it measurable.

Budget, fees and scheduling. At this point, the planning committee can then work out a budget and schedule for the program. The schedule provides specific deadlines for maintaining accountability, and the budget provides for realistic funding. When you know the total expenses, you can calculate a proposed program fee. The initial calculation may produce a fee that is unreasonable. If so, the church board needs to discuss the possibility of providing a subsidy for the program.

It is permissible to charge a registration fee. Free programs may not always produce the desired results. The public may consider "free" programs as having some kind of "pay-off" or ulterior motive, and may justifiably be unwilling to get involved. When Adventist family ministry programs are offered to the public with a modest registration fee or charge for materials, it enhances the public image of the program and makes it appear more professional. Charging a fee will often increase enrollment. Free programs may be more effective in small towns where the Adventist church is well-known and in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods.

ADVERTISING

After the board has voted approval, the working team is introduced during a Sabbath morning worship and set aside in prayer for their new ministry. Now they must begin to communicate with the target audience. The available mediums of communication can be divided into three major categories:

1. relational media, which feature person-to-person contact;
2. formal media such as direct mail; and
3. public media such as the newspapers and broadcasting facilities.

The level of education, life-style, and residential area of the target audience will indicate what choices must be made in designing the advertising campaign for a special family life ministry.

Relational media are simply organized ways of using "word-to-mouth." The congregation shares information about the upcoming program with friends, neighbors, and working associates. Other ways to use this kind of relational advertising are contacting people by telephone, going door-to-door to distribute information in housing developments with high concentrations of target audience, and arranging to make in-person announcements at community meetings of various kinds (civic clubs, PTA, etc.). Relational media will be much more effective if reinforced with a well-done brochure of some kind—a handout to back up the word-of-mouth communication. Relational media cost little in terms of money but much in volunteer hours.

Formal media, which rely on mailings, are probably the most cost-effective forms of advertising available to local churches. Of these, mass mailings—addressed to "Resident," and done by a mail advertising company—are more costly and less fruitful than other types. However, mass mailing can be useful in starting public ministries in a community where the church has not developed much contact or when the target audience has been unreached. Since a response of about one percent can be expected, large and costly mailings are necessary to get results. Direct mail differs from mass mailing in that it is sent to specific addressees by name. These names may be obtained from an advertising agency according to specification (they will match your target audience), or from the church's own list of contacts and interests.

It is Written, Faith for Today and *Voice of Prophecy* can supply the names and addresses of people in specified zip code areas who have requested booklets on the family.

Public media are the most expensive forms of communication, and the most difficult to utilize. Public advertising can be a complex undertaking for the novice. Furthermore, few advertising professionals understand the unique factors involved in marketing church-related events. Before spending large sums to purchase space for ads in a newspaper or time for announcements on a radio station, seek professional counsel. Public relations firms may be willing to volunteer some advice to church groups involved in humanitarian service. An organization such as United Way might have a professional public relations director who would be willing to share valuable knowledge and information about media advertising. Perhaps an Adventist public relations professional can be found who would assist the church in developing creative advertising in the public media.

All communication experts agree that there is no one best method of advertising. Successful advertising always uses a mix of several media. For example, the family life committee at your church might choose to utilize:

1. Word-of-mouth by the congregation.
2. A telephone committee to contact interests supplied by such organizations as *Faith for Today*.
3. Door-to-door distribution of brochures or flyers, especially in concentrated populations such as apartment complexes with high concentrations of the target audience.
4. A mailing to the names in the church's interest file.
5. A mailing to the pediatricians, PTA presidents, school principals, social work agencies, pastors and family counselors in the area.
6. Posters in such places as supermarkets and laundromats.

Public relations does not end when the first public program has been held. Utilize continuing, supportive advertising to keep people coming back. Use a telephone committee to remind participants of each session in an ongoing class, or regular mailings encouraging those who responded to the initial advertising to continue attending, and reminding them of the topics and benefits available at each session. Again, you must decide how you will do this continued

advertising as you did the initial advertising, giving consideration to the target audience and local conditions.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS—THE MOST IMPORTANT DIMENSION OF PUBLIC PROGRAMS

You have a group of enthusiastic people attending your Family Life Seminar each week. The new family ministry seems like a success. But is it? Your family life ministry may be missing the most important dimension—the building of close, personal relationships between the people attending and the ministry team. Exciting, enthusiastic public relationships, on the one hand, and rewarding, meaningful personal relationships on the other, are two different things. In order to effectively minister to people, one must get beyond superficial, friendly contacts and hear people's deep, inner concerns. Only at this intimate level can spiritual needs be identified and met. Reaching people in this interior, spiritual sphere of their lives adds a vital experiential dimension to the intellectual content of a family ministry program.

If a family life program is going to be a family ministry, then team members must have the depth listening and other relational skills to work with people at the level of their spiritual needs. A variety of training programs as well as books and resources are available which offer training in relational skills.

Creating Pathways Into Church Fellowship

The church should open clear pathways for those who wish to move from the family life event into closer fellowship with the congregation.

Keying on life events. Unchurched people are often motivated to make their first visit to a church by such occurrences as a divorce, the birth of a child, a change of residence, marriage or other similar life events. Genuine caring in family outreach touches many unchurched people who are experiencing such life events, and the interest of some of these people will be aroused to visit the church that has demonstrated its concern for their needs. Sensitive members of the outreach team will hear these spiritual needs being expressed and will be able to refer people to appropriate religious activities within the church which will be of interest to them.

Support groups. Small Bible study and support groups afford one of the most effective pathways to church fellowship for unchurched people. A congregation that has a singles group, a parent-exchange group, a couples' group, a women's group, and so forth, has potential to grow simply because it has "doors" through which new people can find entrance into its social fabric. Those individuals who do not feel comfortable in groups but respond best in one-to-one contact, may be introduced to congregational members who are gifted in relating this way. It would be helpful for these members who are involved in follow-up to have some orientation to the family outreach activities with which the newcomers have been involved.

Family-life oriented worship services. A congregation can enhance the urge on the part of unchurched participants to visit their worship services by having periodic special events during Sabbath worship. One church held a "Rededication to Fathering" which attracted non-member fathers. A Mother's Day event is a natural. A "Singles Weekend" would be another program to address the needs and interests of a special group. The church could invite qualified guest speakers for the worship hour and then conduct a two or three-hour seminar after lunch.

By mailing an appropriate invitation to all previous participants in family life outreach ministries and putting a telephone committee to work, the church can assure a significant number of visitors on special Sabbaths.

Family-related topics in evangelistic meetings. The same principle applies to public

evangelistic meetings. If some sessions are devoted to family-related topics, and the church invites family outreach participants, some unchurched people will attend. As the program relates Bible teaching to family needs, chances improve that these people will return to hear other presentations.

Cultivating interests. Unfortunately, churches may effectively screen out people they do not want as part of their fellowship. Unchurched people who visit a church because of its family outreach are likely to make only one visit, unless the congregation has made specific preparations to nurture their interest. Is your church "user friendly" to the target audience? For example, if your church is offering a parent education class to the public, do parents who visit find easily accessible child-care facilities? Is the congregation accepting of noisy, untrained preschoolers? If the church is conducting a singles' ministry, do single adults who visit find only couple-oriented announcements in the bulletin?

The ministry of hospitality as exercised by the greeters, ushers and other lay leaders helps determine whether or not first-time visitors come a second time. Other key considerations include these:

- Is the building accessible?
- Are the people warm and open?
- Is there a comfortable visitors' class for the first-time attender at Sabbath School?
- Do parents find an attractive children's program in Sabbath School?
- Are people invited to dinner, either in a home or at the church?

The church board needs carefully to think about what a visitor from the target-audience would find during a first visit at the church, and then make the necessary changes in preparation for such visits.

HOW FAMILY MINISTRIES NURTURES THE CHURCH

One of the basic contributions to church growth lies in what family ministry can do for the families already in the church. The concern for people in relationship which family ministries brings can create a climate where people are sustained, strengthened, enriched and nurtured by their church membership.

That concern manifests itself in many ways. Do the pastor's sermons speak to the needs of couples, parents, and singles? Does the Sabbath School and the Bible study program teach people how to apply biblical principles to everyday life situations? Are there opportunities to discuss openly frustrations, concerns, and decisions in confidential, supportive groups?

Every church will experience some family conflict and breakups, and churches that reach out to families in need may even experience a larger number than congregations that ignore family needs. The measurement of successful family ministry is evidenced, not necessarily in a lower divorce rate or fewer family problems, but rather in the climate that exists within the church for healing.

Will church friends stick with the potential member through crisis and misconduct, through pain and joy? Is the possibility of God's being present, loving, and meaningful in his life apparent because of the way He is shared, pictured and spoken of by church friends? Is faith sustained through the struggles of life; does this "family of faith" help its people cope with life? The answers to these critical questions make the difference between a church that ministers successfully to families and a church that does not.

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