



WHAT FAMILIES IN YOUR CHURCH ARE DOING—AND NOT DOING— WHEN YOU'RE NOT LOOKING

Cosmic combat occurs every Friday morning at a coffee shop a few blocks from my home. If you happen to be ordering your mocha latte during this episode of intergalactic warfare, you might not even notice. Neither arms nor armor can be seen at the epicenter of this celestial struggle. No lightsabers are visible, and no voices are raised. At the nexus of the battle, there is only a man of not-quite-average height in one chair, a bubbly and beautiful middle school girl in another, and a Bible and a couple of ceramic mugs on the table between them.

Do not let such mundane appearances misguide you: This is

cosmic combat. When I sit at that table with my daughter, building on a week of family devotions and father-daughter discussions, I am at war. This is not war *with* my daughter; it is war *for* my child's soul.

Even as I train Hannah to take up her cross and root her identity in Jesus Christ, the surrounding culture calls her to celebrate immaturity, smirk at sin, and center her passions on pleasures that will slip away. This is war because the same serpentine dragon in that celestial conflict that John glimpsed on Patmos who longed to consume the fruit of Mary's womb also wants to devour my children (Rev. 12:1–9). His weapons in this conflict are neither the priests of Molech nor the soldiers of Herod (Jer. 32:35–36; Matt. 2:16). The Enemy's weapons in my child's life are slickly promoted celebrities and commercials that subtly but surely corrode her soul. What we wrestle against in this battle is not "flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this dark world, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

I am able to remove some of these influences from Hannah's life for now, but I cannot and should not shield her from them forever. What I can do is guide her to love what is good, beautiful, and true. I can train her in the fear and reverence of God. I can constantly call her attention to the gospel. And that's precisely what I work to do

—not only week-by-week in the café on Dutchman's Lane, but also moment-by-moment in conversations about everything from the latest superhero film to the implications of Daniel's prophecies.

These may look like meetings for hazelnut coffee and whole-grain bagels, but what happens here is nothing less than the preparation and execution of a cosmic battle plan. Every week, every day, this is war.

SKETCH THE SITUATION

What intentional practices of family devotions or discipleship have happened in your home in the past week? List each one.

Sunday:
Monday:
Tuesday:
Wednesday:
Thursday:
Friday:
Saturday:

What on your list reflects God's good work in your family?

What's missing?

A FRAMEWORK FOR EQUIPPING FAMILIES

Over the past few years, I have spent thousands of hours carefully researching how Christian parents are shaping their children's souls. Throughout this process, I've repeatedly bumped up against a painful but unavoidable truth: The overwhelming majority of Christian parents are not actively engaged in any sort of battle for their children's souls. When it comes to the process of discipling their progeny, most Christian parents—especially fathers—have abandoned the field.

"Parents don't realize the necessity and urgency of discipling their children."

—Patricia Jones

If you as a parent are personally engaged in a process to transform the contours of your child's soul, you are a minority.

However, I envision a time when Christian parents consistently engage in planned discipleship processes with their children. I eagerly anticipate an era when children regularly experience family worship times and spontaneous spiritual conversations. These practices are not consistently happening in Christian households right now—I know that. But I believe that they can happen, and I firmly hope that they will.

That's why I've written this book. It is for present and future pastors, youth ministers, and children's ministers who are interested in shifting their ministries to equip families. It's also for parents and church volunteers who want to understand how to develop better partnerships between churches and homes. As you read this book, my first hope is that *you* will join me in the process of parental discipleship. No, I'm not expecting you to show up at the café while I disciple Hannah. I want you to carve out your own times and places to shape the souls of the children God places in your life. Once you and your family have caught this vision, I long for that same vision to spread to parents in your church and in other churches throughout the world.

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL NOT PROVIDE

"When I think of parents disciplining their children, I can't help but think of my parents and how, as young Christians, they began home Bible reading. No one had given them any materials, they had not grown up in Christian homes, yet somehow they knew this was important. Why is this escaping Christian parents today? But my parents were probably the exception then, too. I don't know of any of my friends whose parents had devotions, even though my friends came from Christian homes."

—Shyre McCune

At the same time, there are clear patterns that these partnerships have tended to follow as they have developed in different churches. The particular process I am proposing arises from a careful study of several ministries that have effectively called parents to engage actively in their children's spiritual development. It's my prayer that this framework will help you lead the parents in your church from abdication to active engagement in cosmic combat for their children's souls.

I want to be up-front, though, and also let you know what I won't try to give you in this book. I have no plans to provide a quick fix that a youth or children's ministry can finish in a few weeks. What's more, I will not ask you to append one more program to a ministry calendar that's probably too packed already. (In fact, what I'm proposing could require you to cut a few programs!) What I will share in this book is not a plan for adding more programs but a process for reorienting the ministries that you're already doing.

A few years ago, I coined the phrase "family-equipping ministry model" to describe the framework for this process of reorienting existing ministries to partner with parents. Since that time, family-equipping has emerged as a distinct and identifiable approach to family ministry in many churches. This process can't fit in a box on the shelf of your local Christian bookstore because it isn't about a curriculum or event. It's about a lasting partnership between your ministry and the parents of the children and youth in your ministry. You can't purchase partnerships of this sort, and you can't cultivate them in precise time periods that a church calendar dictates. These partnerships require commitments to a long-term process, and they are likely to look different in every ministry context. They will require you to seek prayerfully how to live out God's calling in your particular ministry.

THE CURRENT STATE OF CHRISTIAN FAMILIES

At this point, you may be wondering, "How do you know that parents have really abdicated their role in the Christian formation of their children? Who knows? Maybe most Christian parents really are actively disciplining their children, and you just don't know it!"

If that question has crossed your mind—and I hope it has!—you've raised a valid point. There are good reasons to be skeptical about claims like these. Far too many Christian organizations have tossed out far too many panicky alarms that have been based on sloppy statistical research.

That is not the case, however, when it comes to this research into parental disengagement from their children's spiritual lives. These observations are rooted in multiple research studies that reach far beyond my personal experiences. In 2007, the seminary where I coordinate family ministry programs partnered with an organization known as FamilyLife to develop better approaches to family ministry. One of the projects pursued by FamilyLife has been the Family Needs Survey.¹ This survey took a careful look at the needs and habits of church families. The round of study that ended in 2008 included data from nearly forty thousand parents. This data has provided a statistically reliable snapshot of what is

and what is not happening in Christian homes throughout North America. When it came to parental involvement in the discipleship of children, the results of the FamilyLife study were far from encouraging. According to the Family Needs Survey:

- More than half of parents said that their families never or rarely engaged in any sort of family devotional time. Of the minority that did practice some sort of family devotions, one-fourth admitted that these devotional times were sporadic.
- Approximately forty percent of parents never, rarely, or only occasionally discussed spiritual matters with their children.
- Nearly one-fourth of parents never or rarely prayed with their children; another one-fourth only prayed with their children occasionally.

Family Life Family Needs Survey

	Never or rarely	Occasionally	Several times a month	Several times a week	Almost daily
Pray with children (excluding mealtimes)	24 percent	25 percent	15 percent	13 percent	22 percent

times at any time in the past couple of months. For an additional three out of ten parents, such practices occurred once a month or less.

- Among two-thirds of fathers and mothers, biblical discussions or readings with their children happened less than once each week.
- One in five parents never read, studied, or discussed God's Word with their children.

Remember: The parents surveyed in these studies were church attendees. Virtually all of them professed to be Christians, and they were involved in small group Bible studies. These numbers represent the rhythms of life in many core families in real-life congregations—parents who faithfully attend every week and serve in the church's ministries, teenagers who rarely miss their small group Bible studies, and children who are consistently present in

Pray with spouse (excluding mealtimes)	52 percent	24 percent	9 percent	6 percent	10 percent
Talk about spiritual values with children	8 percent	30 percent	29 percent	22 percent	12 percent
Have family devotional time	56 percent	23 percent	8 percent	6 percent	7 percent

A few months ago, the Gheens Center for Christian Family Ministry at the seminary where I serve sponsored a more in-depth study with a smaller sampling of participants. The primary purpose of this study was to determine the precise dynamics of parents' disengagement from children's spiritual development. I oversaw this round of research—research that reinforced many of the findings from Family Life.

On the positive side, both studies suggested that around twenty percent of parents were praying, reading Scripture, and engaging in family devotions with their children at least once each week. Around one-fourth had read or discussed the Bible with their children seven or more times in the past couple of months.

The rest of the news was not so good, however. Our Family Discipleship Perceptions and Practices Survey revealed that:

- More than one-third of parents with school-aged children had never engaged in any form of family devotional or worship

Sunday school. Yet, in most of their homes, prayer with one another is infrequent at best. Times of family devotion and Bible study range from rare to nonexistent. From the perspective of one out of every five parents, church activities seemed to have been the family's sole intentional experiences of Christian formation.

Please don't mistake my point here. I am not suggesting that family devotions, Scripture studies, or spiritual discussions can somehow guarantee godly households. And yet, in the absence of such practices, it is difficult to see how parents can possibly be training their children to treasure God's Word or follow Jesus Christ with passion and joy. Cosmic combat for the souls of the rising generation swirls unseen around us even in our calmest moments. But with few exceptions, the parents in our churches have disengaged from the battle.

Family Discipleship Perceptions and Practices Survey

Discipleship Practices in Churched Households

	Never	Once	A couple of times	Three or four times	Five or six times	Seven or more times
Other than mealtimes, how many times in the past week have I prayed aloud with any of my children?	21 percent	11 percent	14 percent	13 percent	20 percent	21 percent
How many times in the past month have I read or discussed the Bible with any of my children?	20 percent	10 percent	25 percent	10 percent	9 percent	26 percent
How many times in the past month have I discussed any biblical or spiritual matters with any of my children while engaging in day-to-day activities?	7 percent	2 percent	21 percent	19 percent	20 percent	31 percent
How many times in the past two months has my	35 percent	10 percent	21 percent	6 percent	5 percent	22 percent

<i>family engaged in any family devotional or worship time in our home?</i>						



WHAT FAMILY MINISTRY IS AND WHY IT'S WORTH IT

The animated feature *The Incredibles* is a favorite movie in our household—and one of my favorite scenes is the family meal early in the film.

Dinner at the Parr household has deteriorated into sheer pandemonium. The infant squeals in delight at the chaos as his two siblings engage in superpowered combat with each other. A frazzled mom stretches and strains unsuccessfully to restore order.

And what about Bob Parr, father and former Mr. Incredible? He stands to the side, physically present, relationally absent, and utterly uncertain as to what to do. His sole advice thus far has been, “Kids, listen to your mother.”

Finally, his wife flings a frantic plea in his direction: “Bob! It’s time to engage! Don’t just stand there. Do something!” And, to his credit, Bob Parr *does* try. The problem is, Mr. Incredible has no clue how to engage the situation wisely, and his engagement results in greater chaos.

Then, the doorbell rings.

Suddenly, everyone scrambles for a seat at the table and, by the time the door opens, what the visitor sees is a perfectly placid all-American family.

Many parents in your congregation have been walking in Mr. Incredible’s shoes for a long time.

They have observed their children’s spiritual development from a disengaged distance. They have watched youth and children’s ministers stretch and strain to promote growth. And though we as youth ministers and children’s directors have tried to hide it from them, most of these parents have noticed that we *don’t* have it all together. Still, they’re watching, wondering if they should play a larger part in the discipleship of their families.

“After decades on the back burner of congregational life, family ministry has suddenly become a hot topic. Type ‘family ministry’ into a search engine, and your computer is likely to crank out more than twenty-five million results in fewer than ten seconds.”

—Bryan Nelson

Now, in a growing movement in churches throughout the world, ministers are suddenly turning to these parents and shouting, “It’s time to engage!” The problem is that many of them don’t know how or why, and part of the reason is because we as church leaders aren’t quite certain either.

WHAT IS FAMILY MINISTRY, ANYWAY?

In many churches, this call for parents to engage has taken the title of “family ministry.” However, this is not the only meaning that’s been ascribed to the family ministry—and that’s part of the problem when it comes to engaging with parents. Church leaders

aren’t certain what they mean when they say “family ministry.”

“As we examined our church context, here’s what we concluded: In our wellintentioned efforts to reach students for Jesus Christ, we had developed ministry models that failed to call parents to embrace their role as the primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives. The church had tacitly encouraged this parental abdication by relentlessly promoting benefits and life-changes that would accompany increased participation in ministry activities. As a result, the church and families were being split spiritually along too many key fault lines.”

—Jay Strother

“Unlike other areas of ministry focus,” Chap Clark has observed, “family ministry has emerged without any sort of across-the-board consensus of just what it is. ... Because of this lack of a common perception of family ministry, people responsible for family ministry in churches are often confused and frustrated.”¹ And no wonder! As many as four distinct meanings for “family ministry” can be found among contemporary churches: (1) In some churches,

family ministry implies FamilyLife Education— a program for counseling troubled families or teaching intact families how to communicate more effectively; (2) some churches set the nuclear family at the center and focus all their efforts on developing healthy Christian households; (3) other congregations take family ministry to mean a program for developing family-like relationships in the church; and (4) still other congregations see family ministry as a catchall title to describe the separate programs that they offer for each member of the family. A few churches have no idea what they mean by family ministry— but the church down the street had a family ministry and it sounded like something that might attract more people, so these churches launched one too. Now, they’re wondering what to do with it.

Family Ministry: The process of intentionally and persistently coordinating a ministry’s proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives.

plea a few years ago for a practical definition of family ministry: “If someone knows a simple definition of family-based youth ministry, please send it right away. I’ve read (and enjoyed) most of the books written on the subject. In fact, I can still remember reading ... *Family-Based Youth Ministry* the very week it was published. ... However, I’m still looking for that simple definition and practical handle.”²

So was I for several years.

In the end, I developed my own definition of family ministry based on ministry experience, research, and discussions with churches all over the world. My definition is less about a particular program and more about how we can redeploy the programs that we already have. Here’s what I mean by family ministry: The process of intentionally and persistently coordinating a ministry’s proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives.

I don’t pretend that this definition somehow represents the final word on family ministry, but this understanding has been field-tested and refined by years of ministry and research with a wide variety of churches. This form of family ministry is not about any

No wonder, then, that a prominent youth leader sent out this

particular program or curriculum. It's about a process of equipping parents to engage actively in the discipleship of their children.

WHY NOT LEAVE THINGS THE WAY THEY ARE?

Here's one significant struggle you will face, though, if your ministry begins to prioritize parent-equipping: Many parents have no clue how to engage in their children's Christian formation. After all, in many churches, age-organized programs have claimed that task for a couple of generations. As a result, when you call parents to engage in their children's lives, things are likely to turn a little messy and confusing.

"Jesus once said to his disciples, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Matt. 22:21 ESV). What was Caesar's was indicated by means of an image of Caesar stamped on the coin; the image of God is stamped on our children. As the shepherd of my family, I must constantly render my children to God. Anything less turns family ministry into one more

borrowed strategy or program and will yield only short-term interest in the church—or no gain at all. If no attempt is made to partner with parents and to equip them to disciple their children, the very ministry structures that appear successful outwardly will sabotage authentic effectiveness."

—David Prince

After decades of disengagement, many parents simply don't know what it means to function as primary faith trainers in their children's lives. Some parents may give up on discipling their children after their first family devotional ends in the emergency room because two children fought over who would read the Scripture and then chose to reenact David and Goliath in the living room, complete with a dishtowel slingshot and five smooth decorative stones. A few parents may confuse discipleship with hovering over everything that their child does. Other parents may ask, "If parents begin discipling their children, what are the children's and youth ministers supposed to do? Isn't that what we hired them for?"

In a recent study, it was discovered that Christian parents do not look primarily to God's Word for guidance in parenting. They primarily depend on how their own parents parented, and secondly on advice from friends. God's Word came in third place.³

The process of transitioning to family ministry will be difficult, perhaps even painful at times. At some point, you will ask yourself, "Is it worth it? Does our ministry really need to shift? Why not just keep doing programs and activities like we've done them for decades?"

Your staff or volunteers may even challenge you with questions like, "Why are we doing this? What is the motive for these changes? And is that motive sufficient to make it worth the cost?" In those moments, you might find yourself wondering whether the motives that brought you to this place are sufficient to sustain such radical changes in your ministry model. I am convinced that the changes are worth the cost—but only if the church is making these changes with the right motives.

THE MATTER OF MOTIVES

In any ministry that seeks the glory of God more than the success of the organization, the motives for change are every bit important as the change itself. If right changes are made with the wrong motives, those changes typically don't turn out to be nearly as right as they seemed like they would. "All the ways of a man are [pure] in his own sight," Solomon once observed, "but the LORD weighs the motives" (NASB)—that is to say, God looks not only at outward actions but also at inward motives (Prov. 16:2). God sees our hearts, and his Word cuts through our hidden motives (Heb. 4:12–16). He calls us to pursue purposes that bring glory to his Son, and he pledges to disclose the motives of our hearts when Jesus returns (1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Thess. 2:4). That's why, before I present a process for transforming the patterns in your ministry, I want to take a careful look at why the church's ministries should change.

"Even active students receive only forty hours or so of biblical instruction each year from their churches. Parents, on the other hand, have more than three thousand hours a year in which they're constantly

'teaching' their children in some way! Our church recognized that—if we wanted to see an emerging generation that loves God with everything in them—we would have to redirect our ministry's time and energies toward equipping parents to impress truth in their children's lives day-by-day."

—Jay Strother

Put another way, as you read the next section of this book, I want you to ask yourself, "What is the right motive for pursuing family ministry in my church? What is the problem with prevailing practices? Why not simply leave things the way they are?"

In the process, you may find that the problem that you thought was the problem isn't really the problem at all.



WE'RE SUPPOSED TO DO THAT AT HOME?

"You mean, we're supposed to do that at home?" she asked, staring wide-eyed at the video screen.

"No one ever told me how to do anything like that before." Would it be possible for a parent in your ministry to make a similar statement? If so, what does this suggest about your congregation's commitment to equipping parents to disciple their children?

At the time, I took these words as nothing more than a passing question from a curious church member. In retrospect, her words

represented far more than an inquiry about the contents of the video. What I was hearing was a crucial hint that should have opened my eyes to why Christian parents have disengaged from their children's spiritual development.

Several months earlier, I had preached through Paul's letter to Ephesians. In the process of working through the sixth chapter of Ephesians, I introduced a practice that seemed quite simple and straightforward to me: At the end of every sermon, the last slide provided a short outline for parents to follow when leading their families in a devotional time each week. Week after week, I encouraged every family to designate one evening for a family devotional—nothing complicated, just a prayer, an activity, a biblical text, and a few discussion questions that related to Sunday's sermon. Most weeks, parents also received a printed handout with an expanded outline to follow at home.

Five months later, a church member waited at the back of the worship center while I spoke with some visitors after the morning message. She and her husband had been faithful members and servants in the church for several years. Their oldest child had recently professed faith in Jesus Christ. I assumed that she wanted to touch base with me regarding her child or perhaps about an event that her committee was planning. As the last visitors left

the worship center, she approached me, gesturing toward the devotional guide on the screen.

Among the first followers of Jesus, believing households were contexts for the teaching of believers and for the evangelism of unbelievers (Acts 2:46–47; 5:42). Are the homes of believers in your congregation contexts for evangelism? Encourage faithful families in your church to commit themselves to inviting an unbeliever or an unbelieving family to their home for dinner at least once per month, with the goal both of building an authentic relationship and of gaining an opportunity to share the gospel.

And that’s when she asked: “You mean, we’re supposed to do that at home?”

I nodded, “That’s why it’s up there every week.”

“Wow,” she stared at the screen for several seconds. “No one ever told me how to do anything like that before.”

Her tone wasn’t unpleasant or even unwilling. Yet it was clear that a family devotional time was utterly alien to her thinking. I

external practices for a week or two, but such responses will never lead to lasting transformation. What parents need is neither guilt nor gimmickry but a deeper rootedness in the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, merely getting families to engage in devotions or discipleship practices isn’t even the right goal in the first place. The goal of family ministry is for parents to see themselves and their families in light of the gospel. Certain habits and practices will inevitably result from such a vision. But defining family ministry in terms of these external practices will never develop well-disciplined families. A focus on outward habits leads instead to well-heeled Pharisees who either flaunt their own counterfeit righteousness (Matt. 23:27–28; Luke 18:10–12) or who feel trapped by the recognition that they can never quite measure up to God’s righteousness (Rom. 7:18–24).

“It took my husband and me too long to realize that we were depending on the church and Sunday school to teach our kids. When I tell other people about our family devotions, I am asked all kinds of questions about how we do ours and advice on how they can get started. I am

might as well have asked her to ride a unicorn to the moon. It had taken five months of outlines for her even to recognize that I seriously thought families might do this. She had been a church member since childhood, in three different churches at different stages of her life. And yet, confronted with the idea of faith training at home, her response was, “No one ever told me how to do anything like that before.”

WHAT I MISSED ABOUT FAMILY MINISTRY

At the time, I assumed her perceptions were the exception. To be sure, not all the parents in our church were actually doing what they ought to be doing, but surely, they at least knew what was supposed to be done. As far as I could tell, the problem was that parents had decided that professional ministers ought to be the primary faith trainers in their children’s lives. With this assumption in mind, what I offered parents were many appeals but few clear instructions, a multitude of assumptions but no comprehensive plan.

I was wrong.

I was wrong about the solution to the dilemma. Emotional appeals from the pulpit may drive parents to engage in a few

amazed at the number of families that don’t read the Bible together or even have a simple bedtime prayer with their child—all because we let a busy life get in the way. How will our children ever know unless they see us do it and unless we are there to do it with them?”

—Angie Berry

By God’s grace, these truths became clear to me through the Scriptures while I was still serving as a pastor. But it was more than merely the solution that I had misconstrued.

I also missed the mark when it came to the question of why parents weren’t engaging spiritually with their children—this, even after glimpsing the centrality of the gospel in parenting. I thought that, if parents weren’t at least trying to engage spiritually with their children, it was primarily because they were in denial about their role. It was parents who had wrongly identified the discipleship of children and youth as the rightful domain of professional ministers—at least, that’s what I assumed.

And that’s where I was wrong once again.

WHAT PARENTS KNOW ABOUT THEIR ROLE

This assumption was still firmly imprinted in my mind when I partnered with a cluster of churches to discover the precise dynamics of parents' desertion of discipleship processes in their households. In this carefully designed study sponsored by the Gheens Center for Christian Family Ministry, congregations were selected to present a clear and accurate snapshot of parents in evangelical churches. And, on several key points, the results differed radically from what I had expected.

Here's what most surprised me: Parents did not view professional ministers at church as the people primarily responsible to grow their children's souls. In a radical reversal of my earlier assumptions, the overwhelming majority of parents identified themselves as the persons primarily responsible for the spiritual development and discipleship of their children. Parents knew that they were responsible for their children's spiritual growth.

Well over 90 percent of parents rejected the notion that professional ministers were the people primarily responsible for their children's spiritual development. When asked whether parents ought to engage personally in a discipleship process with their children, not one parent disagreed, and most parents strongly

agreed. Fewer than 14 percent of parents expressed even the slightest agreement with the suggestion that church ministries are where children ought to receive the bulk of their biblical teaching. More than 90 percent of parents wanted to answer their children's biblical and theological questions. Only 1 percent of parents strongly identified church leaders as the persons who ought to develop their children's souls.

"For my family, it has been several generations since the men had an active, vibrant relationship with Jesus. My dad was content just to get me to church a couple times a week. His dad did the same thing— with an iron fist. Fathers [in my family] have taken their children to church, and they have been somewhat religious, but they haven't engaged personally in their children's spiritual development. I hope to break that cycle. I want to be involved in my son's growth as a Christian."

—Aaron Stevens

Despite my early prejudices in the opposite direction, the data compelled me to admit that most parents in evangelical

congregations recognize their disciple-making role in their children's lives. They are fully aware that the spiritual development of their children is not a task that should be subcontracted to age-focused ministers.¹

It's at this point that a paradox emerges, though. Even as parents admit their responsibility to function as primary faith trainers in their children's lives, most are doing little, if anything, to fulfill this role. For most parents, intentional processes of spiritual formation with their children range from sporadic to nonexistent. One out of every five parents admits to never engaging in practices of prayer, Bible reading, or worship in their households.

Family Discipleship Perceptions and Practices Survey Parental Perceptions of Spiritual Responsibility

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
The church is where children ought to receive most of their Bible teaching	26 percent	45 percent	17 percent	10 percent	2 percent	1 percent
When my child spontaneously asks a biblical or theological question, I really wish that my child would have asked a minister or other church leader instead of me.	61 percent	31 percent	3 percent	2 percent	2 percent	2 percent

Parents, and particularly fathers, have a responsibility to engage personally in a discipleship process with each of their children.	0 percent	0 percent	0 percent	4 percent	34 percent	62 percent
Ministers or other church leaders are the people primarily responsible for discipling my children and teaching them to share the gospel with others.	37 percent	44 percent	11 percent	6 percent	0 percent	1 percent

Do you see the dilemma that emerges from this data? If more than 90 percent of parents see themselves as personally responsible for their children's Christian formation, why are so few of them doing anything consistent to disciple their offspring?

Of course, far more is involved in the answers to these questions than a few personal or organizational issues. What we are talking about here is cosmic combat. "Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" are warring against parents' efforts to bring up their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4 ESV; see also v. 12). The sole sufficient response to such conflict is to clothe ourselves in the strength of God himself (Eph. 6:13–20).

At the same time, it is wise to recognize that the Enemy uses terrestrial trends and tools in this spiritual battle. Based on the

research that was undertaken for this book, two specific factors seem to be blocking the pathway that leads toward consistent practices of discipleship in Christian households.

LACK OF TRAINING, SHORTAGE OF TIME

Now, I don't expect you to be a statistical specialist to understand this research—but I do want you to understand the significance of these two factors that I am about to present to you. The correlation between these factors and parents who had disengaged spiritually from their children was strong and highly

significant. In this particular study, what this meant in practical terms was that one or both of these factors directly correlated with parental disengagement more than 90 percent of the time, and there was less than a 5 percent chance that this inference is incorrect.

So what are these two top factors in parents' failure to disciple their children? The primary point of resistance was that churches weren't training the parents. The secondary reason was that parents weren't making the time.

It was a matter of training and a matter of time.



A MATTER OF TRAINING AND A MATTER OF TIME

PARENTS AREN'T MAKING THE TIME

Parents in your ministry don't have time to disciple their children—or, at least, that's the way many of them feel when they look at their weekly to-do lists. Nearly half of the parents in the survey had resigned themselves to the notion that, to some degree, their families were simply too busy to engage in practices of family discipleship.

Two-thirds of parents admitted that family devotions or worship times were not a priority in their schedules. And what were the factors that prevented these parents from having the time for

intentional spiritual formation in their households?

For a significant minority of parents, it was children's sports and school activities that trumped family time when it came to scheduling priorities. Nearly one-third of parents agreed that they were willing, at some level, "to do whatever it takes" for their children to succeed in certain sports or school activities.

And what if the resulting schedule was so hectic that it prevented the family from eating any meals together during the week? As long as the payoff at the end included academic or athletic successes for their child, these parents were willing to pay the price.

MORE THAN A GIFT FOR THIS LIFE

This pattern suggests that a significant number of parents in our ministries have allowed their priorities to be shaped by the dominant culture—a culture wherein the primary goal of parenting is to produce children who become happy, well-paid adults.¹ Parents perceive accomplishments in sports and schooling as their children's pathway to present popularity and future financial success. As a result, athletics and academics define these parents' designs for their children's lives.

These fathers and mothers see their children as gifts to be treasured—and this is good. In God's creation design, children *are* a

blessing and reward (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 127:3–5). And yet, seen in light of the whole story of God, children are far more than a gift for this life.

“Instead of asking parents to give their children a fancy education in secular literature ... Paul asks the Ephesian laypersons, many of whom ... were engaged in the ordinary occupations of this life, that they should educate their children in every doctrine and counsel of the Lord. Overseers and pastors ought to take note of this.”
—St. Jerome

If children were nothing more than a gift for this life, a single-minded focus on children's happiness and success might make sense. As long as the family's frantic schedule secures a spot for the child in a top-tier university, forfeiting intentional spiritual formation for the sake of competitive sports leagues and advanced placement classes would be understandable— if children were a gift for this life only. Perhaps working around the clock would be plausible provided that your children's friends are visibly impressed

“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” Jesus asked his first followers (Mark 8:36 ESV).

When it comes to our children, we might ask a similar question: What does it profit our child to gain a baseball scholarship and yet never experience consistent prayer and devotional times with us, the parents? What will it profit our child to succeed as a ballet dancer and yet never know the rhythms of a home where we are willing to release any dream at any moment if we become too busy to disciple one another? What will it profit the children all around us in our churches to be accepted into the finest colleges and yet never leverage their lives for the sake of proclaiming the gospel to the nations? What will it profit pastors to lead the largest churches with the greatest discipleship programs if they don't disciple their own households?

“For what end do you send your children to school? ‘Why, that they may be fit to live in the world.’ In which world do you mean—this or the next? Perhaps you thought of this world only and had forgot that there is a world to come; yea, and one that will last forever! Pray take this into your

with the house you can barely afford. If children were a gift for this life only, maybe it would make sense to raise them with calendars that are full but souls that are empty, captives of the deadly delusion that their value depends on what they accomplish here and now.

But children are far more than a gift for this life. They are bearers of the gospel to generations yet unborn. In God's good design, your children and mine will raise children who will in turn beget more children. How we mold our children's souls while they reside in our households will shape the lives of children who have yet to draw their first gasp of air (Ps. 78:6–7).

Your children and mine are also eternal beings whose days will long outlast the rise and fall of all the kingdoms of the earth. They and their children and their children's children will flit ever so briefly across the face of this earth before being swept away into eternity (James 4:14). If our children become our brothers and sisters in Christ, their days upon this earth are preparatory for glory that will never end (Dan. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:17–5:4; 2 Pet. 1:10–11). That's why our primary purpose for these children must not be anything as small and miserable as success. Our purpose should be to leverage our children's lives to advance God's kingdom so that every tribe, every nation, and every people group gains the opportunity to respond in faith to the rightful King of kings.²

account, and send them to such masters as will keep it always before their eyes.... Surely, if you love or fear God yourself, this will be your first consideration: ‘In what business will your son be most likely to love and serve God? In what employment will he have the greatest advantage for laying up treasure in heaven?’ I have been shocked above measure in observing how little this is attended to, even by pious parents! Even these consider only how he may get most money; not how he may get most holiness! ... Upon this motive they fix him in a business which will necessarily expose him to such temptations as will leave him not a probability, if a possibility, of serving God. O savage parents! Unnatural, diabolical cruelty—if you believe there is another world.”
—John Wesley

There is no profit in such endeavors—no real or lasting profit, anyway— but the costs are painful, infinite, and eternal.

HOW SUCCESS BECOMES AN IDOL

In the beginning, God infused humanity with a yearning for eternity (Eccl. 3:11). If the scope of our vision for our lives or for the lives of our children shrinks any smaller than eternity, our thirst for eternity will drive us to attempt to fill the emptiness with a multitude of lesser goals and lower gods—including the fleeting happiness and success of our children. When the happiness and success of children becomes the controlling framework for life, parents expect their children to have, do, and be more than anyone else, and they are willing to sacrifice family relationships and discipleship to achieve this objective. The result is a culture of childhood royalty that treats children like princes and princesses instead of potential or actual brothers and sisters in Christ.³

I am not suggesting that successes in academics, athletics, or vocation somehow stand outside God's good plan. Learning and play are joys that God himself wove into the very fabric of creation. Although cursed in the fall, work was also part of God's good design before the fall (Gen. 2:15; 3:17–23).

And yet, whenever any activity, however good it may be, becomes amplified to the point that no time remains for family members to disciple one another, a divinely designed joy has been distorted into a hell-spawned idol. God calls us, just as he called our father Abraham, to be willing to release every longing for our child's

pleasure and success for the sake of obedience to God's Word (Gen. 22:2–18). In this, what God asks of us is no less than what he himself has already done in Jesus Christ: "He ... did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32).

DOING LESS SO THAT PARENTS CAN DO MORE

Most parents in churches typically do believe, at least on the surface, that their children's existence will persist past this life. The problem is that this tenet of faith doesn't always make its way into their daily practices of prioritizing household commitments. Parents mentally accept the fact that their children will exist forever, but they do not live in light of this truth. When this truth works its way into daily life, parents begin to weigh their family's priorities and schedules in light of the gospel. Until the gospel drives even our scheduling priorities, families will continue to default to the values of the culture around them, and parents will remain too busy to engage in intentional discipleship with their children.

So how can your ministry help parents rethink their family's priorities in light of the gospel?

A critical look at your own ministry calendar is probably the best place to start.

The cluttered family calendars that hang from refrigerator doors in members' homes mimic patterns that are modeled each week in the church bulletin. Both tend to be excessively busy—and sometimes because of a similar fixation on visible success. Parents seek success for their children in the form of higher SAT scores or athletic victories; church leaders add more activities to make members happier and to improve the numbers on their annual church profiles.⁴ The idolatry is the same; only the paperwork is different.

Look at your church calendar for the past month. Consider carefully whether church activities may cause families in your congregation to be too busy. Then examine the schedule for your particular area of ministry. What activities could be merged with other activities, perhaps in partnership with another ministry in the church? How might some activities and events look different if you reshaped each one not only to engage a particular age-group but also to develop intergenerational relationships and equip children or youth to engage with their parents? If Christian parents in your congregation functioned as

primary disciple-makers in their children's lives and in the lives of children whose parents aren't believers, which activities might become unnecessary? How might you redevelop existing activities to equip parents for this role?

When ministry calendars become too crowded, weekly Bible studies, committee meetings, and youth groups compete with seasonal activities and monthly events. Eventually, families become so busy doing church that no time remains for them to be the church in their homes and communities. If your church is planning for parents to disciple children, your ministry may need to do less so that parents have time to do more. After all, if active church members invest half their evenings each week (or more), enabling their church's fixation on programs, where will they find the time to form the spiritual lives of their children? And when will they mentor children whose parents aren't yet believers?

Not only parents but also church ministries must be challenged to reevaluate every time commitment in light of God's plan for the homes of his people. Over time, family ministry may require you to streamline, combine, and even cut back activities so that

families become free to join God’s mission in their households and communities.

This matter of time is highly significant, but scheduling priorities are not the sole roadblock in parents’ practices of discipleship. Around half of the parents in the survey identified themselves as too busy to engage in practices of family discipleship—a significant proportion, to be sure, but not enough to explain the full number of parents who have disengaged from their children’s spiritual formation. The second and far more significant problem has to do with the expectations and equipping that parents receive through their churches.

Family Discipleship Perceptions and Practices Survey Parental Scheduling Priorities

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I want to do whatever it takes for my child to succeed in certain sports or school activities—even if that means my family is too busy some weeks to eat any meals together.	16 percent	27 percent	26 percent	21 percent	10 percent	1 percent
I would like to do regular family devotions or Bible	8 percent	27 percent	17 percent	32 percent	12 percent	5 percent

I wish I could write this off as an exceptional pattern that was limited to my own experience, but I can’t. When the survey data from parents and churches came back, it became quite clear that my experiences were far from unique. As a whole, churches are not consistently encouraging or equipping parents to engage intentionally in their children’s spiritual growth.

Family Discipleship Perceptions and Practices Survey Parental Perceptions of Equipping for Family Discipleship

*For the purposes of this survey, “church leader” included pastors, elders, ministers, deacons, teachers, or small group leaders.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
My church has helped me to develop a clear plan for my child’s spiritual growth.	18 percent	41 percent	17 percent	18 percent	6 percent	1 percent
How often in the past year has any church leader* made any contact with me to help me to engage actively in any of my children’s spiritual development?	68 percent	12 percent	14 percent	5 percent	0 percent	2 percent

WHAT PARENTS AREN’T GETTING AT CHURCH

When asked whether their churches had helped them to develop

reading in our home, but my family is just too busy for that right now. It will probably be that way for quite a while.						
I prioritize consistent family devotional or worship times in my family’s schedule.	5 percent	33 percent	17 percent	23 percent	18 percent	5 percent

CHURCHES AREN’T TRAINING PARENTS

“No one ever told me how to do anything like that before,” she said as she pointed at the video screen. As I think back, I see that she was right. As her pastor, I had urged parental involvement in children’s spiritual development. I had lamented and even lambasted the lack of commitment to family discipleship. Yet I had never clearly shown parents how to engage personally in discipling their children—or even precisely what I expected them to do. And, as I thought about it, no church or ministry leader had ever equipped me to engage spiritually with my child either. What I was doing at that time to disciple my daughters, I did because I vaguely recalled bedtime prayers with my mother that continued into my teenage years, as well as daily Bible readings at the breakfast table when I was a child.

any plans for their children’s spiritual growth, nearly 60 percent of churched parents disagreed or strongly disagreed, while an additional 17 percent somewhat disagreed. Only 7 percent could state without any reservation that their churches had helped them to plan for spiritual growth in their children’s lives. When asked if any church leader had ever contacted them to help them to engage actively in their children’s spiritual development, more than two-thirds of parents could not recall a single instance in the past twelve months.

Other recent studies have replicated these patterns: In a survey of churched parents with children under the age of thirteen, 81 percent said that no church leader had ever spoken to them about how parents could be involved in their children’s spiritual development. A study of student ministry values and practices revealed that, when youth ministers’ efforts and expenditures were analyzed, almost nothing was being done to equip parents to engage spiritually with their teenagers. Despite placing family ministry fourth on their lists of ministry priorities, youth ministers spent only 3 percent of their time and less than 3 percent of their budgets in any ministry that related to parents and families.⁵

All of this, despite clear evidence that most parents in churches want to be equipped to guide their children’s spiritual development.

When asked about their family's most pressing needs, more than three-fourths (77 percent) of church-involved moms and dads specifically mentioned their desire to know how better to help their children to grow spiritually. The same percentage of parents also wanted to be better equipped to teach Christian values in their

homes.⁶ And so, the issue seems to be not so much that parents have resigned their role as primary disciple-makers. It isn't even that parents don't desire to disciple their children. In most cases, the problem is that churches are neither expecting nor equipping parents to disciple their children.

9

PROVIDING WHAT PARENTS REALLY NEED

Sometimes, the truth hurts worse than you thought it would.

Hannah was in first grade when she asked the inevitable question: "Daddy, is Santa Claus real?"

I should have anticipated my daughter's question. As Christmas approached, her classmates chattered constantly about Santa Claus—but our family never mentioned the red-suited saint. I would like to claim that I had some profound theological rationale for my silence. Mostly, it was because, if I'm going to spend that much on Christmas gifts, I want my child to know that *I* wrote the check, not Mr. Claus. All of which probably explains why my child was a bit skeptical when her friends claimed a chubby old man would take a

tumble down our chimney on Christmas Eve.

"Is Santa Claus real?" I mused. "Well, sort of. A long time ago, Nicholas of Myra was a pastor in a place that's now known as Turkey." And so, I told Hannah the true story of the benevolent bishop known as St. Nicholas who provided dowries for poverty-stricken girls. When I finished the tale, Hannah's eyes were a bit glazed, but she seemed to have gotten the point.

"So where's St. Nicholas now?" she asked.

"Well, he's in heaven now, I suppose. He died in the fourth century. A few years before he died, a Roman emperor locked him in a dungeon. Nicholas probably would've died for his faith in Jesus, but the emperor died first."

Hannah skipped into the next room, and I must admit that I felt pretty proud of myself. Not only had I answered Hannah's question, but I had also provided a lesson in history and generosity. What amazing wisdom God had provided to my daughter through me!

Or so I thought until the next afternoon.

In case you didn't know already, first-graders can really be blabbermouths sometimes. Once they learn something new, they feel the need to tell everyone, even if not everyone really needs to know.

Which explains why, on the next day, several of Hannah's classmates ran crying to their teachers because Hannah's daddy—who knew everything about these sorts of things, according to Hannah—had informed Hannah that Santa Claus had been dead for a long time.

Not only that, but an evil king had tortured him in a dungeon.

Let me tell you, there are certain children in this world who get way too worked up when it comes to the death of Santa Claus. And when children get worked up, parents and teachers get worked up too. Somehow I had lived several years under the peaceful delusion that once you graduate from high school, you can't get in trouble at school anymore. I was wrong about that.

Hannah had told the truth, but the truth hurt worse than she ever imagined it would.

It was somewhat that way when the results of my research into family discipleship came back. For so long, I had seen parents as the problem. I thought most parents were simply denying their responsibility for their children's spiritual development, but I had located the problem in the wrong place. The greater problem was the church's failure to acknowledge or equip parents as primary disciple-makers in their children's lives.

This truth hurt worse than I thought it would, because it forced

me to take a painful look at my own history as a youth minister and to consider how little I had done to equip parents. Parents in my congregation probably sensed their responsibility as clearly as those in my research sample. They too were under-equipped and overly busy but I never tried to equip them. And I compounded their busyness by adding more activities for their children. Simply put, my programs and methods had been part of the problem. On top of this, especially in my early years as a youth minister, I gave parents the impression that I didn't need their input. My volunteers and I had everything under control—or so I wanted parents to think.

When all the data was brought together, lack of time, lack of training, or both factors together accounted for 90 percent of the parents who had disengaged from their children's spiritual development. (For the purposes of this statistic, I defined disengaged as a failure to engage consistently in any form of prayer or Bible study with children.) Ten percent of these disengaged parents admitted that their churches had equipped them to disciple their children but that their families weren't making the time. Almost three out of ten suggested that they had the time to engage spiritually with their children but that their church had provided no guidance. A little more than half stated that both factors were

descriptive of their families: They were too busy *and* their church had provided no consistent equipping or encouragement.

As far as I can tell, that's the truth about where we are. It may hurt a bit but, like the death of St. Nicholas, the truth is no less true simply because it makes us wince.

Family Survey
Factors in Parental Disengagement
from Family Discipleship

	Percentage of Parents
Lack of training only	28 percent
Lack of time only	10 percent
Both lack of training and lack of time	52 percent
Neither lack of training nor lack of time	10 percent

WHAT PARENTS REALLY NEED: TELLING,

TRAINING, AND TIME

Let's pull together in a few paragraphs what we've learned thus far in this book about families in our churches: Most parents are not consistently engaged in any intentional processes of discipleship with their children. Parents typically value their children as gifts from God and seek to change their children's less desirable behaviors but they are making few intentional investments in their children's lives in light of redemption and eternity.

This lack of engagement is not, however, because parents are somehow unaware of their divinely designated responsibility. In fact, parents in churches overwhelmingly affirm that they are the people primarily responsible for their children's spiritual growth.

Why, then, are most of these same parents failing to engage in any intentional and consistent spiritual training in their households? A significant minority of moms and dads have traded spiritual growth for a schedule that's focused on success in sports and schooling. These parents need to experience gospel-centered transformation in their priorities. In many churches, this transformation is unlikely to happen in parents' lives until the calendars of ministry leaders are uncluttered to show them a better way.

The majority of parents have abdicated their role for a far different reason: In the words of the church member who waited for me after the worship service, “No one ever told me how.” When it comes to planning for spiritual growth in their children’s lives, parents have received little or no guidance from their churches. Most have never even been asked how their churches might help them to disciple their children. Parents in this category need to be acknowledged and equipped to guide their children’s spiritual growth.

In the simplest possible terms, parents must be told, trained, and make the time.

But how can the church help? How can church leaders acknowledge and equip parents to pursue their God-ordained role?

What needs to happen so that, instead of usurping a role that God has placed at the feet of parents, church ministries guide parents to engage consistently and intentionally in the growth of their children’s souls?

How can ministries clear their calendars to create the time that parents need to disciple their children?

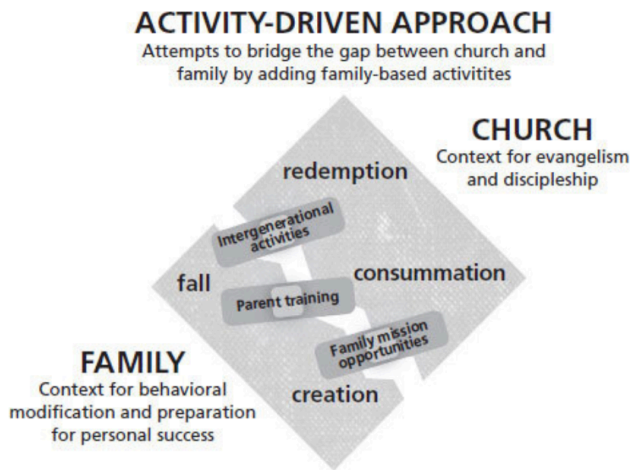
That’s what the last bit of this book is all about.

“Is anybody out there actually doing what we’ve described?”

That’s the question that I found myself asking when I first developed the concepts that have now coalesced in this book. My colleague Randy Stinson and I had envisioned a distinct approach to family ministry—one that was theologically grounded and yet practical; something that provided churches with a clear vision for equipping parents without becoming simply another program.

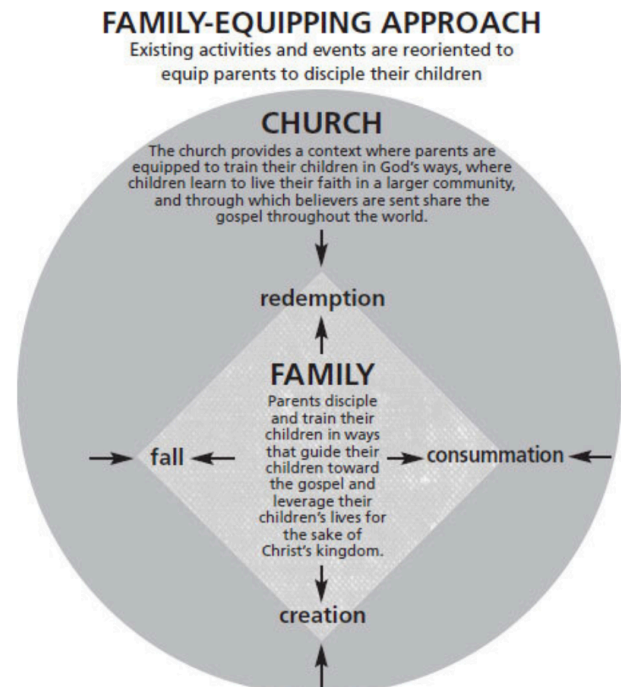
Although we agreed that age-organized programs have often cut off parents from their disciple-making role in their children’s lives, we still saw some value in focused ministries for children, youth, singles, senior adults, and other age-groupings. At the same time, we knew that it is not enough simply to add a few family friendly activities to what churches are already doing. Activity-driven approaches, while perhaps a positive first step for many churches, will never be sufficient to equip parents to disciple their children. Parents need training, to make the time, and to be told that God has called them to play a crucial role in their children’s spiritual development. This will require churches to rethink and rework their age-organized ministries in radical ways.

FAMILY MINISTRY FOR THE LONG-TERM



And so, Randy and I developed the theological foundations for the approach that I eventually dubbed the “family-equipping ministry model.” Early in the process, I wondered at least a few times whether anyone would be willing to do what we had envisioned. I had been engaged in some of these practices during the last few years that I had served as a pastor, but I felt fairly certain that I was alone in what I was doing.

I soon discovered that I had not been alone after all.



Randy began to visit churches throughout the United States and soon gathered an informal coalition of ministry leaders who were already doing in practice precisely what we had sketched out in

theory. Many of these leaders had never even met, yet they were pursuing models of ministry that were similar in significant ways. Steve Wright in North Carolina called it “co-championing church and home.” Jay Strother in Tennessee and Brian Haynes in Texas were referring to parents as “primary faith trainers.” Brian had also implemented a process for a lifelong partnership between church and home that he called “legacy milestones,” and so on. As the number of participants in the discussion increased, we sharpened, corrected, and learned from one another.

CORE VALUES OF A FAMILY-EQUIPPING MINISTRY

Coordination around a Strategic Question

The precise wording may differ, but most family-equipping ministries make plans with a very specific strategic question in mind. This question functions as a filter to reshape or eliminate activities that might work against equipping parents to disciple their children. For example, the ministry team might ask, “How will this event equip parents to view themselves as the primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives?” or “How will we train, involve, or equip parents through this activity?” If the projected

activity does not clearly call parents to engage in their children’s spiritual development, the activity is shelved or reworked.

Parenting with an Eternal Goal

As part of equipping parents, a strong emphasis is placed on rethinking the purpose of parenthood. The purpose of parenting is not to raise happy and successful adults but to lovingly leverage children’s lives to advance God’s kingdom so that every tribe, nation, and people-group gains the opportunity to respond in faith to the rightful King of kings. Parents receive encouragement to rethink their priorities and family schedules with this purpose in mind.

Parenting with a Lifelong Plan

Family-equipping ministries develop milestones or rites of passage in the lives of children and youth. Each milestone is preceded by a period of intentional parental instruction. Parents and ministries then partner together to prepare students for these milestones and celebrate them with the entire community of faith. For students whose parents will not participate, the church provides families in faith for the purpose of including these students.

Appreciation for the Generations

While recognizing the value of some age-organized learning experiences, family-equipping ministries emphasize opportunities for intergenerational integration and appreciation, with a particular emphasis on helping younger people to learn from older believers.

Faith Training in the Home

Family-equipping ministries consistently and intentionally equip parents to engage in faith training in their households.

High Expectations for Christian Husbands and Fathers

Recognizing the responsibility of Christian husbands and fathers to set the spiritual direction in their households, family-equipping ministries provide resources and training for husbands and fathers to guide their families.

Active Compassion for Spiritual Orphans

Recognizing that Christian parents are not present in every household, family-equipping ministries develop comprehensive plans for mentoring and discipling students whose fathers or mothers are not believers, while

simultaneously seeking the salvation and spiritual growth of those parents.

Perhaps most significantly, our coalition explored how ministries managed the transition to family-equipping effectively. What emerged from these dialogues was a coherent, field-tested ministry model with clear core values that could be transferred to almost any context. Soon, we found a multitude of ministers who wanted to do family ministry but also needed guidance to metamorphose their ministries. That led to consultations that have spanned the globe and to churches around the world that have taken steps toward family-equipping ministry.

FOUR TRANSITIONS TO MOVE YOUR MINISTRY TOWARD FAMILY-EQUIPPING

1. From doing to being: Family-equipping ministry is not a program or a curriculum that a church does; it is an expression of our identity in Jesus Christ which calls Christian parents to raise children not only as their

children but also as potential or actual brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

2. From expecting to equipping: Instead of expecting that parents already know how to disciple their children, family-equipping ministries reshape existing activities to equip parents with the skills they need to become primary disciple-makers in their children's lives.

3. From assuming to acknowledging: Instead of assuming that parents already know what to do to become primary disciple-makers in their children's lives, family-equipping ministries intentionally overcommunicate, taking every opportunity to acknowledge parents' divinely designated role.

4. From segmentation to synchronization: Recognizing that parents are the persons that God has positioned as primary disciple-makers in their children's lives, family-equipping ministries reshape activities for children and youth until every activity trains, involves, or equips families to practice at home what is learned in the larger community of faith. The church, instead of replacing what happens at home, supplements and

reinforces the faith training that occurs in Christian households.

I must warn you, though: This transition is not quick or easy; it can be messy and will take time. If you plan to guide a ministry in the direction of family-equipping, don't think in terms of weeks or months; think years. Think about gradually changing the culture of a ministry so that parental discipleship of children becomes the norm instead of the exception. Parents need telling; parents need training; and parents must make the time—but none of these needs can be fulfilled instantly.

The foundations that I have presented thus far in this book will take months, at the very least, to put into play. The four transitions on the previous page could take years. Do what you do “with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). Seek transformation not through power plays or personality campaigns but through the systematic teaching of God's Word. Your goal is not to muster followers for your program but to equip servant-leaders who will in turn equip others to see every child as a potential or actual brother or sister in Christ.

“Re-culturing” of this sort requires deliberate and incremental course corrections that unfold over months and years. Moving too rapidly without first developing vital foundations and relationships can quickly kill the very changes that most need to be made. When it comes to re-culturing a ministry, the early bird may get the worm, but it's often the second mouse that gets the cheese. Don't look for the quickest route; look for the pathway that will lead to lasting change.