



Healthy Church Solutions

MAKING SUNDAY SCHOOL FAMILY FRIENDLY

How can my church become more family friendly?

Someone once said, “The temperature of our churches is set by the thermostats of our homes.” Yet few churches have a strategy for strengthening families. Surprisingly, many churches do not even think through how existing programs might hurt families instead of help them. One of the most common activities, Sunday Schoolⁱ, usually separates families. Visit almost any church and ask a leader which way people go for Sunday School and the adults, children, students, and preschoolers we all go in different directions. Churches using home groups or other offsite groups are often in a worse situation. Parents go to their small group on one night while students go to theirs on another. The result is that families are separated for a long time on twice as many occasions. Yet, with a few simple changes Sunday School and small groups can become an asset to healthy families and therefore, to healthy churches.

The Problem

Student ministry is only about sixty years old, yet over the years, churches have helped create a culture in which parents have abdicated the role of spiritual development of their kids to the church. Richard Ross, the founder of the True Love Waits movement, says that if one asks the typical Christian parent if they teach their student algebra, they will respond, “No, I pay taxes and with those taxes the government builds schools and hires professionals to do that job better than I could.” In a similar fashion, if asked if they teach their student *faith*, they will respond, “No, I pay tithes and with those tithes the church builds super-cool youth rooms and hires professionals to do that better than I could.” George Barna puts it this way: “Unfortunately, no matter how hard a church tries, it is incapable of bringing a child to complete spiritual maturity: that is the job of the family.”ⁱⁱ He also says, “Teenagers rarely embrace Christianity if their family has treated faith as a Sunday morning experience ... the family ... must have worship

experiences, pray together about significant personal needs, study the meaning of Scriptures together, and serve others.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A recent comprehensive study by the University of North Carolina also confirms that “teenagers seldom vary very far from the religious beliefs of their parents. Only 11% say their religious beliefs are very different from their father’s and only 6% say their beliefs are very different from their mother’s.”^{iv} Multiple studies have reached the conclusion that parents are at least twice as effective in leading students to faith in Christ as even the church is.

So, how can a church turn something as large as Sunday School into a family friendly environment?

Age Grade Sunday School According to Kids’ Ages

Parents naturally tend to gather with people who have children the same age as theirs rather than with people their own age. Since many churches don’t really enforce age graded classes anyway (how many 40s classes are full of 50+ aged people?), age grading by kid’s ages is much more organic. By stating that a class is organized in this way, the leaders have the freedom to make applications to the lesson that help parents communicate faith to their kids. Leaders can also adjust schedules of fellowships, outreach events, or ministry projects to fit the unique schedules of families with children or teens. This also solves the tension of fellowships that are either “with or without kids.” This arrangement also allows for greater peer accountability for parents to be their kid’s primary discipler.

Consider Multi-generational Classes

Some churches have even offered an option for multi-generational classes. Some have run the full spectrum from preschoolers through senior adults.

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At this time there is not a major publisher that offers curriculum for this arrangement, so churches must create their own curriculum, which often creates other problems, so use this suggestion with care. However, with the right leader, this does have the potential to be a meaningful experience for many families.

Provide Intergenerational Experiences

If the suggestion above is too radical, consider simply providing intergenerational experiences. These could include fellowships, short-term classes, service projects, even mission trips. Students usually take mission trips with the “youth group.” This is reinforced by the myriad youth mission trip providers like *World Changers*, *World Changers International*, *M-fuge*, and *PowerPlant*.^v Most of the work students do could easily be done by adults (with a little prodding). Local ministry projects are even more easily done with intergenerational groups.

For churches that provide separate worship services for students, this is even a more pressing issue. Without these kinds of experiences, students never get to share the Christian life with their parents at church. Students need to see their parents worshipping. They need to be able to express their devotion with their parents. Because students usually don't interact with adults, other than youth group leaders who are often in their early twenties, they don't learn how to be adults in the church. This could be a contributing factor to the high church drop-out rate after high school graduation.

Use Coordinated Bible Study Materials

Even when the adults are separated from their kids, the church can help parents initiate spiritual dialogue at home by simply using coordinated Bible study materials. This way, parents can do more than simply ask, “How was Bible study today?” To which the usual reply is, “Fine.” For this approach to work, parents must be encouraged and expected to initiate the dialogue.

Provide Parents with Follow-Up Materials

Whether or not a church uses coordinated materials, it can still encourage parents to talk with their kids about spiritual things by providing follow-up materials. Current LifeWay Christian Resources materials do provide a weekly family devotional in the member book of the *Life Truths (for Parents)* series. Since many adults do not use “quarterlies,” a church would do well to emphasize these materials and even write additional materials for family discussions, family devotions, or simple “table talk” at dinner.

Churches could provide occasional training sessions for parents to help them improve their spiritual communication with their children. A simple commentary on a Bible passage can help a parent seem like a spiritual giant during family devotions. These training sessions will also help keep up the expectation that parents are the primary spiritual educators. Remember, the church is fighting a culture of “professional spiritual education” that the church helped create in the first place.

Encourage Home Devotions

Sadly, most families, even ministers' families, seldom have family devotions. First, most families don't even realize it is a job of the parent. Second, many parents don't have personal devotions, so the thought of family devotions doesn't even occur to them. Third, few parents have any idea how to lead a family devotion. Churches must counter this by raising the expectation of family devotions, training parents to lead them, and holding families accountable. Expectations need to be raised among the students and children as well as the parents. A great resource for family devotions with teens is available at <http://www.lifeway.com/heartconnex>. Heartconnex provides one-page family devotions twice a week, delivered directly to a parent's email inbox.

Whatever track a church decides to take, the key, as mentioned before, is to raise the expectation that parents will be the primary spiritual educator,



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provide parents with tools to educate, and find ways for current church programs, like Sunday School or small groups, to facilitate family spiritual communication.

For more help, contact Daryl Watts, the CSBC family specialist, at 559.256.0861 or dwatts@csbc.com, or see the resources below.

Resources

Hemphill, Ken and Richard Ross. *Parenting with Kingdom Purpose*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman. 2005.

Devries, Mark. *Family Based Youth Ministry*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 1994.

Erwin, Pamela. *The Family Powered Church*. Loveland, CO: Group Books. 2000

Freudenburg, Ben. *The Family Friendly Church*. Loveland, CO: Group Books. 1998

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ⁱ Sunday School, in this article, applies to all small group Bible studies whether at the church facility or in homes, age graded or geographic.

ⁱⁱ Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child's Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=138>. accessed on May 9, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ George Barna, *Real Teens*, Revell Books, 2001, p. 149

^{iv} Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 35

^v These are the major youth group mission trips provided by the national agencies for Southern Baptists. For information on *M-fuge* (LifeWay), visit www.fuge.com, for information on *World Changers* and *PowerPlant* (NAMB), visit www.studentz.com, and for information on *World Changers International* (IMB), visit www.thetask.org.