

Equipping Parents to Be Spiritual Champions in Their Homes:

How Three Churches Are Helping Parents Become Spiritual Leaders

By Pat Springle

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Overview:

Article Summary

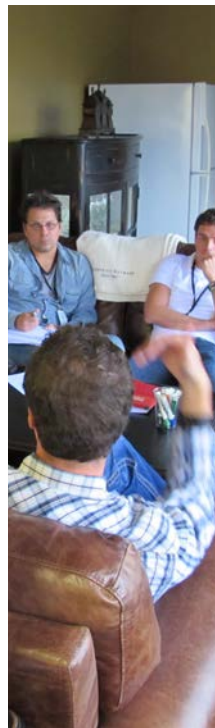
Leadership Network hosted an Innovation Lab for Family Ministries for visionary pastoral staff from around the United States. These leaders aren't content to let the surrounding culture dictate the roles of parents and church ministries. They have developed a clear strategy and effective practices to equip parents to fulfill their roles of spiritual leaders.

Further Reading

How Externally Focused Churches Minister to Children: The Power of Serving Kids in Your Community

by Krista Petty

Externally focused churches seek to be salt and light in their communities, showing the good news of Jesus Christ through good deeds and good will. Church leaders and volunteers serving children in their communities find it to be one of the most rewarding as well as challenging ways to extend God's grace beyond the walls of their church.



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Equipping Parents to Be Spiritual Champions in Their Homes

“Today’s parents have outsourced the spiritual development of their children,” laments Ryan Wolfe, family ministry pastor at **First Christian Church** in Canton, OH (www.firstchristian.info). He explains, “Many of them want to lead their children spiritually, but they don’t know how. So, they hand off that responsibility to children’s ministries and youth ministries at the church.”

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A survey of parents by The Barna Group confirms the observations of Ryan and other pastors. The study found that “close to nine out of ten parents of children under age 13



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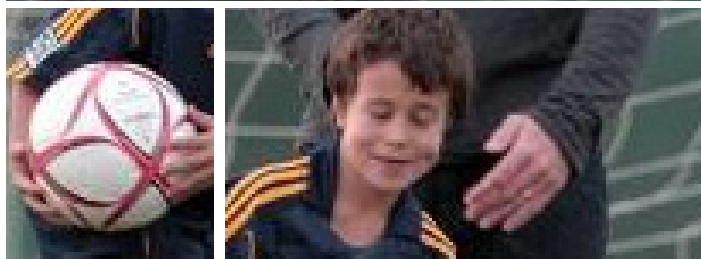


believe they have the primary responsibility for teaching their children about religious beliefs and spiritual matters.” However, “a majority of parents do not spend any time during a typical week discussing religious materials with their children.” Instead, they “generally rely on their church to do all of the religious training their children will receive.” The report concludes that

parents are *not unwilling* to provide spiritual leadership for their children, but they are *ill-equipped* to lead them in this way.¹

In the span of a generation, a confluence of several cultural factors has significantly eroded parents’ impact on their children: More marriages end in divorce, more families have both parents in the workplace, kids spend many hours distracted in video games and social networking, they experience fierce competition in academics and sports, and postmodern relativism assaults propositional truth so that young people have difficulty knowing right from wrong.

The situation, however, certainly isn’t hopeless. Parents genuinely want to have a powerful, positive influence on their children. Interviews with three pastors attending the Leadership Network event demonstrate effective ways to solve this growing problem.



Parents take initiative in areas where they feel emotionally invested and comfortable like athletics or academics.

Parent Connection

At Faith Promise Church in Knoxville, TN (www.faithpromise.org), Pastor of Family Ministries Chuck Carringer is dedicated to provide parents with a purpose and a plan. The objective of the church’s ministry is clearly stated: “Creating partnerships that equip families to lead the next generation in following Christ.” Chuck observes that

parents take initiative in areas where they feel emotionally invested and comfortable.

For some, it’s academics. They are intentional about their kids getting all the resources they need to excel in the classroom. For others, it’s sports. They drive their kids to innumerable practices and pay for additional coaching to help their children win. “But in the church,” Chuck notes, “only a small percentage of parents feel comfortable and proficient in leading their children spiritually. At our church, we’re committed to be an equipping ministry instead of a drop-off ministry.

Our goal is to help parents be as effective in spiritual leadership as they are in providing academic and athletic resources for their kids.”

For Chuck, the impact of parents is so strong—for good or ill—that the church can’t afford to neglect the priority of inspiring and equipping them.

Too often, Chuck observes, parents are disconnected from the spiritual input their kids receive at church. To remedy this problem, he and his team are committed to not have *any* event—Sunday morning for kids from birth through grade school, Wednesday junior high and high school youth groups, or camps—without a “Parent Connection.” Before every activity designed for children and youth, the family ministry team posts online an

overview of the content the kids will learn. It includes several conversation prompts for parents to use with their children when they get in the car or arrive at home.

For students, camp experiences are often transformative, but too often the only involvement for parents is paying the registration fee and picking up their kids when they get off the bus. The student pastors wanted to put parents in the middle of this powerful moment in the lives of their children. Before they leave for camp, they host a Parent Connection meeting for all parents and their kids. They explain what's going to happen during the week, ask them to pray, and invite parents to write a letter their kids can read during their camp experience. Together, church staff, parents, and their children ask God to do great things in the lives of these young people who are going away for the week. Each parent is given a prayer journal with an overview of each talk and activity that take place each day at camp. They can then pray specifically for God to use each element to change the lives of their kids. This Parent Connection meeting sets the stage for parents to be integrally involved before, during, and after camp.

The student ministry team also extends the camp experience to include a "welcome home" celebration and worship when the students come back. Camp doesn't end when the bus stops in the parking lot; it ends only after the students and their parents celebrate God's work in their lives. The Student Ministry hosts a nice dinner and shows a 20-minute video featuring every child who attends camp. Many kids trust Christ at camp, so they hold a baptism service at the celebration, and the student pastors invite parents to participate in baptizing their sons and daughters. "It is," Chuck says with profound understatement, "a very moving experience for everybody."

The impact of this strategy with student camps has been both immediate and incremental. Recently, after the night of celebration when the students came home, a number of parents stopped Chuck to tell him how much the night meant to them and their whole family. And long after the night of celebration was over, more parents have used the weekly online resources to stay connected to their children, have meaningful conversations about God, and lead them spiritually. Through Parent Connection, conversations are deeper and relationships are stronger in families throughout the church.

Tailored Curriculum

At First Christian Church, Ryan Wolfe has developed three targeted resources: fresh curriculum for children and youth ministries, corresponding online resources to help parents engage their kids with concepts they've learned, and a Quarterly Creative Series in which every age group at the church focuses on the same content.

Years ago, Ryan and his team realized that much of the curriculum they were using with children and students wasn't working very well, so they began

crafting their own. As they became adept at writing lessons, he realized that he could take it a step farther to provide daily devotionals, discussion questions, and prayers for parents that correspond with the passages of Scripture and principles they were learning. Ryan observes, "Too often, parents greet their kids after class with the not-so-profound question, 'Did you have fun today?' We wanted to help them do better than that in connecting with their kids about the lessons they were learning."

Ryan didn't make any assumptions about what parents could do with their kids. He writes prayers with a place for the name of the child to be inserted, and he crafts open, challenging questions for parents to stimulate dialogue. These questions are readily available to parents. In fact, they're posted online, in the church newsletter, and even on the screen at the end of each worship service. These simple but profound questions are essential tools in equipping parents to lead spiritually. Also, parents are informed about the monthly memory verse so they can take the lead in encouraging everyone in the family to memorize it. One verse a month may not seem like much, but Ryan wants parents and their kids to



First Christian Church hosted a series titled "Tastes Like Chicken: Eating Out with Jesus" that examined passages in the gospels when Jesus ate with people.

feel the joy of successfully internalizing God's word.

Each month, Ryan videos someone "speaking" the memory verse in sign language so that the verse is reinforced verbally and physically. Recently, the parents of a four year-old girl named Corrin filmed her signing the verse. She was so cute and compelling that Ryan used her clip of signing the verse instead of their regular person. The church loved it.

Ryan and his team write brief and pointed daily devotionals (five days a week) for parents to lead their children in a few minutes of Bible study and discussion. In addition, each month he gives parents suggestions for a challenging, inspiring activity they can do with their kids. Before their children attend a class or group, parents can go online to get these resources so they can be ready to engage in meaningful discussions as soon as they greet their child following the event.

For a month each quarter, Ryan crafts a Quarterly Creative Series, including church-wide content for parents

and every age group of children. He explains, "We want to teach the way Jesus taught, using modern day parables." They use stories from popular children's books, movies, and other ways to connect biblical principles with everyday experiences. Not long ago, their series titled "Tastes Like Chicken: Eating Out with Jesus" examined passages in the gospels when Jesus ate with people. Each week, they provided a mystery food for kids to taste and gave parents suggestions about meals they could prepare to reinforce the lessons each week. At the final session in the series, Chick-fil-A offered kids' meals for every child in the church, and Ryan worked with them to provide questions so parents could talk about that week's principles as they ate at the restaurant.

The metrics of success for Ryan's strategy are difficult to assess, but anecdotal reports from parents and their children indicate that those who are participating are seeing the kind of impact he dreamed he'd see: Parents feel inspired, they are developing new skills of spiritual leadership, and they are connecting with their children more

deeply than ever about the things that matter most.

Two Milestones

A few years ago at **Gateway Church** in Austin, TX (www.gatewaychurch.com), Next Generation Director Kenny Conley noticed that they were missing a golden opportunity at two important milestones in a family's life: child dedication and child baptism. Parents in their community traditionally have been deeply invested in the lives of their children in areas like academics, nutrition, the arts, and sports. These parents also wanted to nurture their children spiritually, but they didn't know how. Kenny and the church leaders saw that these two events could become important points to equip parents to take leadership of their children's spiritual development.

In most churches in the country, child dedication is simply a showcase of children dressed up in their nicest clothes being held by their parents as a pastor reads names. Sometimes their cute faces flash on the video



The church leaders at Gateway Church in Austin saw that child dedications and baptism could become two important points to equip parents to take leadership of their children's spiritual development.

screen. Instead, Kenny uses this event as an open door to impart biblical principles and a powerful vision for the parents' role. About a month before the event, the church hosts a 90-minute class, using Deuteronomy 6, to teach parents the foundational elements of parents becoming spiritual leaders in the home. It's not a lecture. After Kenny's introduction, three couples sit at a table with a lay leader or staff member, called a "prayer leader" in this context, to talk about God's purpose for parents, answer questions, and build a relationship that will last long after the dedication. Some of the questions the table leader asks parents include, "What might a rhythm of spiritual formation look like in your home?" "When you were a child, how did your parents help you grow spiritually?" "What aspects of your parents' modeling of spiritual life do you want to emulate, and what would you do differently?" and "If there is one thing you want to pass along to your child by the time he or she leaves home, what would it be?" Kenny reports that about 60% of parents are baffled by the last question and mumble something about hoping their child becomes a good person or lives a happy life. The question is the springboard to a rich discussion of God's purpose for parents and for their kids to know him, love him, and follow him with all their hearts.

The preparatory class is required for a child to be dedicated, but no one has ever complained about having to attend. In fact, Kenny reports that parents are eager to come and learn—many because they see it as an important step in the life of their child, but others because they would feel guilty (and catch grief from grandparents) if they didn't bring their child to be dedicated to the Lord.

Between the class and child dedication, the prayer leader stays in touch with

the parents to encourage them, answer questions, and continue prepare them to assume their role of spiritual leadership in the home. The prayer leader asks the Lord for a meaningful passage of Scripture to share with the parents about their role, and researches the meaning of the child's name to be shared at the dedication service.

The church doesn't have the ceremony on a Sunday morning—a time that is often rushed so that the church can move on to "more important things." Gateway has this event late on a Saturday morning so that the family—most often with aunts, uncles, proud grandparents, and other family members—can go out to lunch after it's over. In the service, they sing a couple of songs, and Kenny briefly shares the essence of Deuteronomy 6. The highlight of the ceremony comes next: The prayer leaders invite the couples, their children, and other family members to gather with them in clusters all around the room. For about 15 minutes, the prayer leader shares verses, explains the meaning of each child's name, and invites members of the family to speak words of blessing to the child. There are many tears and lots of laughs, and it's a very moving

experience for everyone involved. As they leave the room, a professional photographer takes pictures to memorialize the day, and Kenny gives each couple a copy of *Revolutionary Parenting* by George Barna. The preparatory class and the meaningful dedication ceremony are both based on the couple establishing a relationship





with the prayer leader who may remain a friend and encourager for years to come.

Baptism is the second milestone that can be used to equip parents. Gateway has four baptism services each year. About six weeks before each one, Kenny conducts a class for parents and kids to explain the meaning and process of baptism and answer questions. After about 30 minutes of explaining what it means to trust Christ and follow him, Kenny and his team leave the room to allow the parents to talk to their kids about the Lord. In each of these classes, from a quarter to half of the parents lead their children to Christ. The church has also seen parents come to faith during the class.

Parents are encouraged to participate in the baptism of their children. “You ought to see the expression on these parents’ faces as they baptize their kids,” Kenny relates. “It’s a beautiful and powerful moment in the spiritual life of the family.”

A New Filter

In his groundbreaking book, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide*, Reggie Joiner observes that,

“business as usual, isn’t working to make homes powerful centers of spiritual growth.”

He writes, “As long as churches do only what churches are doing, they will get only the results they are presently getting. And as long as families do only what families are doing, they will produce only the outcomes they are presently producing. To experience a different outcome, we have to embrace a different strategy.” Research and anecdotal evidence support the conclusion that parents are waiting for church leaders to give them resources and processes. Joiner concludes, “A

Family Ministry should develop the process that drives how both the church and the home combine their efforts to influence the next generation. If we really believe that nothing is more important than someone’s relationship with God, it makes sense to combine the influences of the home and church. . . . Family Ministry should not be another program you add to your list of programs. It should be the filter you use to create and evaluate what you do to influence children and teenagers.”²

Three pastors and their churches are changing the culture of their churches and the families that call these churches home. They are pouring resources into one of the most strategic relationships in the life of a family and a church. And they are having profound impacts—one they see today in stronger, more vibrant and connected families, and one they’re sure they’ll see later when these kids become adults and leaders in the church. These pastors have concluded that investment of time, energy and resources is well worth it.

About Leadership Network

Leadership Network welcomes your response. The primary writer is **Pat Springle**. Sherry Surratt, Director of Innovation Labs for Leadership Network and Warren Bird, Director of Research and Intellectual Capital Support for Leadership Network. Contact them via Julia.burk@leadnet.org

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* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.

Endnotes

1. "Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child's Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness," The Barna Group, May 6, 2003.
2. Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide*, (David C. Cook, Chicago, 2009), pp. 24, 83.



About the Author

Pat Springle is the president of Baxter Press in Friendswood, TX. He served on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ for 18 years, 11 as the Texas state director. He was Senior Vice President of Rapha for three years before starting his publishing business.

Suggested Reading:

Revolutionary Parenting: What the Research Shows Really Works by George Barna
Collaborate: Family + Church by Michael Chanley, Reggie Joiner, Fred Stoeker and Jim Wideman

Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide... by Reggie Joiner
Parenting Beyond Your Capacity: Connect Your Family to a Wider Community (The Orange Series) by Reggie Joiner and Carey Nieuwhof

Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers (Youth, Family, and Culture) by Chap Clark
Real World Parents: Christian Parenting for Families Living in the Real World by Mark Matlock

Real World Parents—“Conversation Starters” parents can use with their kids:
www.realworldparents.com/starters/

Additional Resources:

PAPERS

*How Externally Focused Churches Minister to Children:
The Power of Serving Kids in Your Community*
By Krista Petty

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