

**A Proposal to Consider  
Family Based Ministry at New Life Church**

**A Philosophy of Family Ministries Paper  
Presented to Curtis Congo, EdD  
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## **A Proposal to Consider Family Based Ministry at New Life Church**

### INTRODUCTION

“I really hate that after we graduate we have to leave youth ministry”. It is a comment that was shared by a graduating student in June 2008 at a youth ministry event. What the student meant was that she loved youth ministry and was sad that she would have to find other potentially less exciting ways to grow in her faith in the next stage of her life. This quote caused me to examine the way we disciple children and youth in our ministries. In reflecting I wondered what we have lost in moving from integrated church ministry fifty years ago to the age segregated ministry models we work with today. In the last two years I have become convinced that the segregation of our youth and Children into separate ministries is not helping connect the younger generations with the generations that have worked out their faith with fear and trembling. If the primary mission at New Life is to “touch lives with the transforming love of Jesus” and help people live transformed lives I am not convinced our current age segregated ministry approach will achieve that goal as we move into the future. I am convinced by my own faith journey and my research into Family Based Ministry (FBM) that connection with older generations is vital in transferring faith from childhood to adulthood.

Those of us that work in children and youth ministry are seeing that our ministries need to work harder at building generational interdependency at New Life as a key way of encouraging children and youth to carry their faith beyond graduation. For too long we have assumed that when children and youth hold true to their faith as adults that our age segregated ministries have

somehow played an important role in that process. The reality seems to be that the church is not as influential in the process of passing on ones faith as it sometimes assumes it is.

My aim within this paper is to highlight a need for a new ministry paradigm at New Life Church

by focusing on following:

A BIBLICAL MANDATE

Old Testament Insight

New Testament Insight

Christ like Community

ALLOWING INFLUENCERS TO LEAD

Recognizing Primary Influencers

ACTION STEPS FOR NEW LIFE

Equipping and Empowering Influencers

Celebrating Rites of Passage

Intergenerational Ministry

Strengthening Marriages

The intent is for the New Life staff and board to consider embracing a new ministry paradigm.

Embracing this FBM paradigm/philosophy/perspective does not mean throwing out the baby

with the bathwater. Though there are frustrations with age segregated ministry those same

ministries can be tweaked without adding major programs or stretching workloads. What is

required is a willingness to tweak the ministry priorities from one of nurturing the faith of our

members ourselves to empowering those who have greater influence than the church to do the

task of nurturing faith.

## A BIBLICAL MANDATE

The following will highlight the Biblical mandate for embracing a FBM philosophy for New Life Church.

### *Old Testament Insight*

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 reveals a foundation from which to understand God's intention for the effective discipleship of children of all ages and the faith communities in which those children are raised. The opening of these verses is called the shema which in Hebrew means to hear.<sup>1</sup> This message that God's people were to hear is ostensibly the endgame of discipleship for the people of Israel and therefore also for us. In verse 7 we see God's directive to impress on their children the need to love their one true God with their whole being. What immediately follows is a list of examples of when it would be appropriate to talk about the commandments in the shema. The Shema was to be talked about at every opportunity during the daily routine both inside and outside the home. It is often in these verses that supporters of FBM extrapolate the justification for too narrow a view of family ministry. What would have been understood by the first hearers is that these Jewish children belonged to the larger Israelite community not necessarily to the idea of the North American nuclear family we are familiar with.<sup>2</sup> Though it was certainly the responsibility of the parents to ensure the Shema was taught to their children, the community was integral in reaffirming the teachings of parents and modeling obedience to

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<sup>1</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 424. 168

<sup>2</sup> "Family Ministry," 09/05/2007 [cited 2009]. Available from <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/2007/09/family-ministry/print/>. 4

God in the various stages of life those community members were in.<sup>3</sup> The result of not attending to this need to impress the greatest commandment on the next generation is seen in Judges 2:10-11: “after that generation... another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served Baal’s.” I believe the above examples highlight the importance of intentionally impressing our faith on the next generation.

### *New Testament Insight*

In various places throughout the New Testament we see a value being placed on intergenerational collaboration in the development of faith. In Matthew 18: 5-6 Jesus affirms the need for adults to receive children in his name and goes on to warn that leading children astray welcomes severe punishment. In Mark 10: 13-14 Jesus admonishes his own disciples for hindering children from being in his presence.<sup>4</sup> John 6: 9 Shows Jesus involving a boy with five loaves of bread and two fish in a miracle that taught his own disciples to have faith. These are examples of Jesus recognizing the role that the generations have in strengthening each other’s faith.

In the New Testament we also see Jesus affirming a broader understanding of family. In Mark 3:31-35 Jesus himself “places a high priority on the extended family of brothers and sisters in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Though Jesus does not reject his flesh and blood relatives (nuclear family) he does extend the term family to a broader audience, that being those who “do God’s will”. We find a

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Holmen, *Faith at Home NOVA Conference (Break Out Session)*, Kelowna, British Columbia ed., 2007)

<sup>4</sup> "Theological Principles Behind Intergenerational Youth Ministry," 03/11/2009 [cited 2009]. Available from <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/2008/11/theological-principles-behind-intergenerational-youth-ministry/print>.

<sup>5</sup> Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 255. 105

similar invitation to consider ourselves as part of God's extended house hold in Ephesians 2: 19. Here Paul calls us to no longer consider ourselves foreigners but rather members of God's own household. I believe scripture provides the impetus for us to embrace a ministry perspective that brings the generations together with more intentionality, greater frequency and with the goal of passing on the faith from one generation to the next.

### *Christ like Community*

If we are to move towards a FBM paradigm it is important that we remember that scripture does not limit the scope of FBM in our New Life context for two reasons. First in our community the nuclear family has not been exempt from the tragedy of loss and brokenness. Divorced, blended, childless, adopted and single parent families are an equally valued part of our membership. Secondly a large portion of our demographic such as singles, empty nesters, retirees and widow(er)s might not feel the nuclear family fits their profile. I feel that New Life has the ability to be an intergenerational extended family that better supports all the generations represented in it. It has been said that New Life has a certain "Je ne sais quoi" about it. That feeling has been expressed by others as the feeling of being home. As I move forward with the vision for FBM any references to faith and family should be understood in the context of strengthening what Mark Holmen calls "faith at home" as opposed to faith in the nuclear family.<sup>6</sup> This incorporates an understanding of the home that is New Life Church as well as the homes in which our children lie down and get up.

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<sup>6</sup> Holmen, *Faith at Home (Break Out Session)*

## ALLOWING INFLUENCERS TO LEAD

Though our perspective of family needs to remain broad we must understand on a church wide basis that there are those who are better able to impress the importance of faith on our children on a daily basis.

*“American culture does not support the notion of parenting being a full time job. In fact many in our society look down upon those individuals, most often women, who devote the largest share of their “business hours” energy to being stay at home parents”* George Barna<sup>7</sup>

This quote might at first seem to be a trite societal generalization. However I think it expresses some truth about our cultures perspective on parenting. Among researchers there is a very real concern that the task of parenting and faith nurturing has been outsourced in an effort to free parents to work outside the home. Though economics often dictate the need for parents to work outside the home there remains a mantle of responsibility for nurturing the faith of a child that can't be simply passed on to an organization. I believe that the economic demand on families coupled with the churches offer of segregated programming has created an environment where there is no clear understanding as to who is responsible for this faith nurture. The purpose of this section will be to highlight the importance of primary influencers such as parents and other significant adult influencers in the lives of children and youth. Having understood the importance of these key influencers I will offer a glimpse at strategies that New Life can use to begin to empower those influencers to pass on their faith.

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<sup>7</sup> George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting: Want to Raise a Spiritual Champion?* (Carol Stream, Illinois: BarnaBooks, 2007), 165. 27

### Recognizing Primary Influencers

In his book *Faith Begins at Home* Mark Holmen references a Significant Religious Influences Survey that reveals that the first five religious influencers in a Child's life are immediate and extended family. They are Mother, Father, Grandparent, Relatives and Siblings.<sup>8</sup>

Though this research is faith based, secular studies also confirm that parents are still heavy influencers when it comes to their children making values based decisions.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond recognizing parents as influencers it should be noted that with the exception of siblings four of the top five influencers are adult figures. Both Chap Clark and Mark DeVries in their research underscore a need for caring adults with no hidden agenda to be involved in the lives of children.<sup>10 11</sup> Upon reflection the argument should not be whether New Life is capable of taking on the task of being the primary faith influencers for children and youth in ministry. The question is should we be doing this? Wherever primary influencers are present the role of the church should be to provide support for those adults it recognizes as better positioned to nurture faith. When primary influencers are missing, emotionally distant or not capable of nurturing faith the church as an extended family is able to take up a surrogate primary influencing role. Finally casting a vision for this kind of paradigm means two things: 1. clearly communicating that New Life values partnership with parents over being an outsource ministry. 2. New Life must be willing to equip and empower primary influencers to complete the task of nurture.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Holmen, *Faith Begins at Home* 43

<sup>9</sup> Charlie Gillis, "Generation Tame," *Maclean's*, 13/04/2009 2009, 13. 36

<sup>10</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt : Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 236. 176

<sup>11</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 255. 89

## ACTION STEPS FOR NEW LIFE

Though FBM largely requires a paradigm shift and a rearranging of priorities there are action steps that should be considered if the church is going to put its money where its mouth is. The action steps most effect the ministries that have the potential of greater face to face contact with primary influencers in the church community. Some of the suggested action items are already being considered or are even being implemented currently.

### *Equipping and Empowering Influencers*

In his book *Soul Searching* Christian Smith reveals that teens desire greater intimacy with their parents but have no understanding for how to make that happen.<sup>12</sup> I believe that New Life from a FBM perspective must look at how it can equip and empower parents and other intergenerational influencers to build that intimacy with children at all ages. This is where it is still important for the church to have on staff qualified persons that know the trends and nuances of child and adolescent development. These staff members are able to study demographic trends and offer support and training opportunities for the influencers in a Childs life. The following are a sampling of empowering initiatives that New Life needs to look at considering in moving towards a FBM paradigm.

### ***Children's Ministry:***

- Take It Home Events. Parents learn faith skills that can be repeated in the home<sup>13</sup>
- Internet Safety Training. Developing family media standards
- Transitioning Workshops. Helping children transition into and out of children's ministry
- Rites of Passage Workshops. Learning how to celebrate childhood milestones

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, Christian: Denton, Melinda L, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

<sup>13</sup> Holmen, *Faith at Home (Break Out Session)*

### ***Youth Ministry:***

- Annual Parent Information Meetings. Learning how to make the most of a teens time at youth
- Teens and Technology Workshops. Understanding and setting boundaries around technology
- Transitioning Workshops. Helping teens transition into and out of youth ministry
- Rites of Passage Workshops. Learning how to celebrate a teens milestones

### ***Young Adults Ministry:***

- Mentoring Workshops. Helping connect young adults to older adults within the church body
- Understanding Millennials Workshop. Helping parents understand this generations priorities
- Transitioning Workshops. Helping young adults transition into adulthood

Though some might not consider these suggestions to be particularly startling they are concepts that have not been examined with much intentionality prior to 2007. It was then that staff in children and youth ministry began to recognize a need to move away from the “drop off”<sup>14</sup> mentality towards empowering parents in the faith nurture process. At around the same I began to notice that as a culture we have lost the importance of celebrating rituals and rites of passage in helping our children move their faith forward.

### ***Celebrating Rites of Passage***

Though the church does a good job of celebrating the sacraments of baptism and profession of faith it does a poor job of capitalizing on other rites of passage that are equally important in the spiritual lives of children and youth. Brad Griffen a researcher for the Fuller Youth Institute suggests the church is “uniquely positioned to celebrate life cycle events”.<sup>15</sup> In many cultures there are life cycle rituals that are celebrated during adolescence that help usher youth to a next stage of life or season of expectation. Jewish culture has its bar and bat mitzvah’s Mexicans

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<sup>14</sup> Jeramy: Clark Clark Jerusha, *After You Drop them Off: A Parent's Guide to Student Ministry* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: WaterBrook Press, 2005), 219.

<sup>15</sup> "Through the Zone," [cited 2009]. Available from <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/2006/06/through-the-zone/print/>. 6

celebrate quinceañera a coming of age feast for young girls turning 15. Though we do a good job of celebrating some of our children's spiritual milestones we rarely use those moments as opportunities to help connect their faith with their move forward into "emerging adulthood".<sup>16</sup>

The following are some examples of life cycle events where New Life can offer support to families wanting to help move faith forward as their children pass through various life stages.

***Children's Ministry:***

- Celebrating birth (Infant Baptism): Prayer in child's room
- Marking the passage into toddlerhood: Blessing toddlers feet and shoes
- 10-12: Transitioning to early adolescence: Leaving childhood, Embracing Change (Puberty)

***Youth Ministry:***

- 13-14 Mid-Adolescence: "A boy becoming a man" or "Girl becoming a woman" ceremonies
- 16 Driving: Independence and Re-Confirmation of Trust Ceremony
- Profession of Faith: Making Their Faith Their Own
- 17-18 Graduation: Leaving Home "Confirmation of being Christ's Ambassador"

***Young Adults Ministry:***

- Post Secondary Education: An opportunity to confirm gifting and calling
- Career: A releasing into a mission field
- Dating: Re-confirming Biblical Dating, Trust

Though it might be tempting to think that these types of celebrations should be the responsibility of parents (to which I agree) we must keep in mind that currently there is no cultural understanding of the importance of such rituals. This is why I believe that a move towards FBM will give New Life the ability to build an atmosphere where these celebrations are seen as being important in helping family's disciple their children as they pass through various life stages.

***Intergenerational Ministry***

It is here that we begin to see the importance of involving the generations in the process of discipling our children and youth. This is where the current model of age segregated ministry

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 4

falls short. Whether the segregation of our children and youth is embraced by them or not its effects are now being noticed. Both Chap Clark and Mark DeVries suggest that the “systemic abandonment or segregation” of youth and children has helped drive the young into their own subcultures. Within those subcultures it is no longer the wisdom of the elders that prevails but the opinions of peers and trends within pop culture that matter.<sup>17</sup>

The only way this can be reversed is if as a Church we recognize the importance of once more doing ministry intergenerationally. Though New Life is already worshipping intergenerationally on Sunday’s more should be done to intentionally intersect the generations outside of Sunday worship. Below is a list of opportunities that New Life can capitalize on to bring the generations together:

***Church Wide:***

- Game Nights: There must be two generations represented at each game table.
- Youth sit with families on Sunday: No more “youth section” Sit with family or a friend’s family

***Children’s and Youth Ministry:***

- Ask an older couple to volunteer as child/youth group “Grandparents”
- Have seniors share their testimonies
- Vision cast and invite different generations to be represented in leadership teams
- Church Body Scavenger Hunt<sup>18</sup>
- Combine child/youth and senior events

***Young Adult Ministries:***

- Mentorship (Pair older college and university alumni with new college and university students)
- Celebrate homecoming meals at the home of parents of each Graduating year
- Make note of homecoming at specific church services (reading break, holidays, and summer)

Though the mixing of generations invariably happens at some level within churches there is evidence that suggests that without an intentional effort the organic approach is not working.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Hurt : Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, 236. , DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 255.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 95

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 91

FBM recognizes the importance of connecting the generations and intentionally makes it a priority in the church.

### *Strengthening Marriages*

Finally if New Life Church is going to embrace FBM it must look at how it will strengthen marriages as the bedrock of family. Though New Life seems to do well at providing reactionary care for those in struggling marriages more can be done proactively to strengthen them. In a culture that places very little value on marital commitment there is equally little value given to the idea of strengthening ones marriage. This seems to contribute to the churches frustration and unwillingness to provide proactive opportunities to strengthen marriages. The impetus for engaging marriages proactively should come from an understanding that families are only as healthy as the marriages that form them. For New Life to embrace a FBM paradigm means it needs to look at how it will take steps to strengthen the formative relationships of families.

## CONCLUSION

It was made very clear at the two conferences that I attended this fall that there is an exodus of young people from the North American Church.<sup>20</sup> The western church must take the right approach in addressing it if it will survive. Though New Life may not feel this exodus currently the danger that it will be felt is very real. Now is not a time for adding more programs and making broad sweeping changes. It is simply time to examine a new ministry paradigm, a new perspective on making disciples. We must look at what God is doing already in touching the New Life congregation and transforming them into lifelong believers. In the last few years I

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<sup>20</sup> Holmen, *Faith at Home (Break Out Session)*

have noticed that the young people who have made lifelong commitments to follow Christ have had one of two things in common. Either they had connections to a strong interdependent family of faith or they had an extended non biological family of faith that grafted that person into a similar interdependent community.

We serve a God who does not change. He is the same yesterday today and tomorrow and his bride should not be nervous to embrace a philosophy of ministry that God designed to usher faith from one generation to the next. If New Life will emphasize collaboration between ministries, generations and families and focus on empowering primary influencers to pass on the faith to its children there should indeed be a vibrant community of faith at 35270 Delair Road for generations to come.

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