

# **Ministering to Nontraditional Family Units: Discerning who is not served and how to reach out to them**

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Ministering to nontraditional family units is a mainline issue for all churches due to the ever evolving nature of the modern family form. Today two parent family households are on the decline while divorce, remarriage and cohabitation are on the rise. Along with changes to family form there are changes to gender role assignments. One in four women now work outside the home. With the legalization of same sex marriage you will also see 2 dad and 2 mom homes. It has always been the responsibility of the preceding generation to pass on the Good News to the next generation. In fact, Psalm 145:4 states, "One generation shall laud Your works to another and shall declare Your mighty acts." It is therefore very important that the church discern who is not served and how to reach out to them in an effective manner. Opportunities for connection, learning, and service must be conveyed in language that is irrespective of familial status, and avoids isolating people. Everyone wants and needs to be in community so churches should regularly survey church attendance to identify groups not being served well.

Applying a few strategies to address the issue can have a wide impact. First, churches should evaluate the language used in marketing material. The language used can often cause an unintentional effect of creating exclusivity. The language should convey that you see/know them, want to disciple them, and can use their gifts, without imposing a deficit mindset toward their nontraditional family unit. To "know" your people, church attendance should be evaluated to identify childless singles, childless couples, divorcees, blended families, single parents, widows and orphans, and other groups often alienated by disagreements within the church. Inclusive language for these groups can be achieved by making at least 50% of the learning opportunities offered by the church unrelated to the life cycle stage or the life circumstance of

the congregants. The “ageout” dilemma is also avoided by selecting class names unrelated to the age of participants. For groups, already named based on life stage, ask if the group is willing to broaden the definition. For example, a couples’ class for 20s and 30s can become an adult class for 20s and 30s. Changing the marketing descriptors also helps the college age students that do not want lumped in with the high school students. An additional benefit of not marketing classes based on life circumstance is people then evaluate for themselves whether or not they like a group and can benefit from it. People like options, and the approach also removes the burden of being designated for the “misfit class,” or the individuals deciding that there are not class options available in the church that fit their demographic, and going somewhere else.

There are multiple ways to provide learning and connectional opportunities that are irrespective to familial status. Curriculum options can be balanced with options that address common familial needs regardless of family form and general topics. Ministry teams can offer learning and social activities into the work of their specific ministry. For example, the worship team can host recruitment/training seminars. Affinity or interest groups can also be planned, like Bible journaling classes. Providing more intergenerational opportunities can connect single and childless couples with widows and orphans. An example of an intergenerational ministry is Pray4Me. The program utilizes a prayer guide and matches youth with prayer champions from each of the three adult age bands. Mentorships can also be made available. Special events for people based on life stages can still be offered because people in each life stage do share common experiences such as grief, loneliness, and parenting challenges. Those shared needs should not be ignored but whole programs do not need built around them.

When considering programs designed to market specifically to divorcees, single parents, and blended families use inclusive language. Titles like ‘Singles’ Ministry’ can cause unintended pain to those in these groups as to their marital status and isolate them further. It also helps to be aware of those who might struggle with the holidays. For example, making an

announcement that as group we will not meet on Valentine's Day "so that you can be with your sweetie," can be painful to those who are single. Also, it is often, but not always, the single parent mom that brings their kids to church. Try, then, to use gender neutral language by choosing phrasing like "humankind" instead of "mankind," which emphasizes one sex over the other. Scheduling also brings about challenges for children whose parents are divorced and share custody. If a child is missing every other Sunday because they are with the other parent it can be difficult to keep them engaged, and involved with series-based kids' programming. One-off lessons that don't build on previous weeks can help with the feelings of isolation these kids' face. Also, schedule with foresight by keeping an eye on the whole church calendar to avoid pulling parents/families into scheduling conflicts.

For the church at large, rather than pouring time and resources into one off ideas, plan ministry series that play out church wide from the sermons, to Sunday school, to life groups, to scheduled events. Programming that can be leaned into and that everyone can relate to at some point in their life should be leaned into, and used for focused ministry outlets. One example is programming around the grief stages. Grief can result from a number of factors including but not limited to a death, divorce, or other losses. When going through grief of all sorts of people need love, acceptance, forgiveness, and hope, as well as a secure environment to process the events playing out in their lives, a place to receive encouragement and direction. To assist people in the healing processes, the church can take on a mind-set of "Healing and Restoration" within the church body. Volunteers to work alongside staff toward a churchwide goal of healing and restoration first need to be identified, trained, equipped, and organized. A ministry series that could be engineered around this theme could play out church wide in sermons, Sunday school classes, life groups and scheduled events relevant to the topic of healing and restoration in marriage/relationships, finances, body, mind, and spirit with the emphasis being unity, staying and growing together as a church body.

Widows and orphans are often lonely and overlooked. There are specific connectional ministry opportunities designed to reach out to them. Members can join a birthday club to sponsor an orphan or widow. Members can also adopt a foster family for pizza night or movie night. Young adults or childless couples can take on mentorships as a Big Brother/Big Sister. They could also adopt a grandma or grandpa. If time is an issue, members could volunteer financial sponsorships for orphans and foster kids by paying for registrations/memberships, uniforms, retreats and field trips.

All ministry flows from and through the values of Godly Christian relationships: this should be stressed and taught so that there would be a number of people sensing the call to ministry. Marginal groups should be approached with love, acceptance, and forgiveness. They are typically identified by others involved in various relationships with them, and by connectional church efforts designed to aid and assist them. It is good to have ministry servants that spearhead meetings with individuals the church has identified as not currently being served well so that family or individual can share the needs they are experiencing, and connections for ministry then made for them.

It is paramount at this time to understand as we minister to the LGBTQI community that the vote at the GC2019 does not say that the UMC looks down on or hates LGBTQI individuals. On the contrary, it attests, all are part of God's family and are in constant need of His grace and mercy. The question then is HOW do we minister to this group of people. We invite them to our churches and associated gatherings. We treat them just like we treat any other person walking into our church, and then we wait on the Holy Spirit to guide all parties as to what the next steps are. Love, acceptance, and forgiveness are the words that we need to once again become familiar with and put into our vocabulary when it comes to these issues, I believe these words are the key to ministering effectively to all people.

In summary, we must find common ground with any individual that we are attempting to minister to. We must love all people no matter where they are in their faith walk. We must

accept people as they are and encourage them to actively work towards sanctification, the process of being made holy, and arriving at perfection in Christ. We must forgive people even when they do not line up with our personal beliefs. We must have Spiritual Partners who help us to understand that we are all broken but have been redeemed by Christ and that with time and effort through our spiritual disciplines we will all be perfected in Christ.

As leaders, ask within your church, who is not plugged in outside of worship? Is it because we are presenting programs in a way that excludes them? Are we honoring individuals with the language we use in our marketing and ministries? Are we seeking the Holy Spirit out in our relationships so that we can see the needs of those within our reach?

## **Sources**

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