

# THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO FAMILY MINISTRY



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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 578 8

First published 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by TJ International.

**THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE  
TO FAMILY  
MINISTRY**

**GAIL ADCOCK**



To Matt, Luke and James.

I love and admire you all beyond measure.

Being family with you is a pure joy!

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# 3

# FAMILY MINISTRY TODAY

## Introduction

Defining what family ministry is today is not without its challenges. No single succinct definition exists that effectively describes how this work takes place across churches and communities. Due to its multidimensional nature, it is difficult to capture the essence of ministry with families in a way that conveys its purpose and intention. As one interviewee told the *We Are Family* research project:

There are hundreds of definitions out there. People call it different things and mean different things by it. They call it all-age ministry, intergenerational ministry, family ministry, household ministry, households of faith.<sup>52</sup>

Pinning family ministry down to a soundbite that is widely accepted is probably beyond our reach. Diana Garland describes the term ‘family ministry’ as a ‘catch-all category of programs designed to support persons in their daily activities and relationships’,<sup>53</sup> which perhaps is only a partial picture and suggests a ‘doing to’ model of ministry, where families are merely recipients rather than participants. There are often congregational and spiritual elements to ministry, those aspects which nurture faith formation, as captured in this definition:

The process of intentionally and persistently realigning a congregation’s proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained and held accountable as the persons primarily responsible for the discipleship of their children.<sup>54</sup>

The emphasis here is on families developing in faith together in the context of their participation in a church community. This moves us towards a definition of ministry that combines both of these ideas: an approach seeking to support families in their daily lives and relationships as well as nurturing their spiritual development, enabling them to grow in faith together. Approaches to family ministry have recently become much more holistic, striving to integrate a range of support for families' physical and spiritual needs.

For many churches, embracing a broader definition of family ministry isn't straightforward, given how much the context of work with parents and children has changed, which in turn has impacted how they offer practical support to families and encourage them to grow in faith. For example, even just a few years ago the term 'faith at home' would have been alien to many, but now it's a topic of frequent discussion with many church-based workers exploring innovative new ways to aid families in their discipleship.

Historically, family ministry was easier to define, as much of the provision churches made for families was narrowly prescribed, linked to Sunday school and children's religious education, enabling children and young people to spend time with their peers, learn about the Bible and the Christian faith, and get sound moral foundations. More recently churches have widened their programmes, so that the whole family can be involved. At the same time, giving financial or other practical support to families in need has long been a mandate of the church.

There's a growing recognition that working with children or young people in isolation isn't necessarily the best approach. It can be more beneficial to bring different ages and generations together, exploring new ways to engage with each other in church worship and community. It's exciting to see how those in lay ministry are discovering new routes to offer care for the whole family within broader multigenerational settings.

Ultimately, a church can choose to form its own definition of family ministry based on its location, community and context. It's a worthwhile exercise for any church that wants to missionally reach and support families to spend time reflecting on the goals of their own distinct ministry, tailoring a definition that authentically represents the nature of work they're striving to do.

Exploring and finding a definition for family ministry is essential, as it equips us to wrestle with the big questions of what it is and how we understand it. Reflecting on how we do ministry is vital – it forces us to ask ‘why’. Why do we do what we do? Why do we work with these families and not others? Why do we pour our resources, time and energy into these activities and not those? These are the questions that bring us face-to-face with the intentions of our work, things we may not often think about. It is easy to jump in and embark on a host of family ministry activities without giving much thought to the shape of it, what the ultimate aims are or what we hope it might achieve. That approach is fraught with danger, as it can lead to nothing we do being joined up or related to other areas of work. For our ministry to be sustainable and to make an impact, we need to carefully reflect on these questions and be better informed about what’s happening locally. Churches are then in a stronger position to be strategic – to plan and implement ministry that is going to make a difference to the lives of the families in their congregations and beyond.

Despite the challenges of keeping pace with how family ministry has been evolving, recently there has been some valuable thinking and research done, which has been hugely helpful in growing our understanding of how ministry to and with families is being approached. Let’s look at some of these now.

## Approaches to family ministry

In their chapter in *A Theology for Family Ministries*, Timothy Paul Jones and Randy Stinson present three contemporary models that capture recent developments in family ministry. As they point out, these ‘represent a break from the segmented-programmatic approaches that dominated twentieth-century churches’,<sup>55</sup> that is, when church life was frequently characterised by the separation of generations and age groups and ministry was targeted to particular interests or styles of worship and participation. Instead, the contemporary models place Christian formation at the centre of ministry activity, with the goal of equipping parents to actively create environments where the whole family’s faith flourishes.

- *The family-based model* takes an intergenerational approach, while keeping peer-group activities occurring alongside those designed for the whole congregation to participate in. There’s an intentionality to gather



everyone and prioritise the role of the family as faith is being formed. It's an approach pioneered by Mark DeVries in the context of youth work, who states, 'We try to point as much of our programming as possible in the direction of giving kids and adults excuses to interact together.'<sup>56</sup>

- *The family-integrated model* moves ministry away from a silo model to one of full family integration across church life. Here, all age-specific programmes are removed, enabling everyone to actively grow in faith and understanding together. In this radical model, the home is the hub of ministry activity, providing mutual support and reaching out missionally to other parents and children. It's an approach built on the idea of being a community that exists as a 'family of families'.
- *The family-equipping model* has parents in the ministry spotlight, providing a programme of activity that seeks to train and involve them as the primary disciple-makers of their children. It's an approach that sees the church and home working in partnership to nurture the faith of children and young people. Church life is oriented around this priority so that, although separate age-specific programmes continue, they are restructured to ensure priority is given to equipping parents in this responsibility.

Jones and Stinson are writing from an American perspective, so the lens through which they observe and respond to work with families is different from the UK. Yet much of what they offer for consideration is constructive and beneficial here. For Jones and Stinson, recognising the imperfections of these models is important; no single approach will accomplish all our goals or provide straightforward solutions to the challenges of working with families. Yet all three display principles that underpin ministry with them. They describe these as 'perennial truths':

- 1 God has called parents to take personal responsibility for the Christian formation of their children;
- 2 the generations need one another;
- 3 family ministry models must be missional.

These characteristics can be a valuable starting point for conversations around the nature of our ministry to families. We can ask ourselves where they sit in our priorities and how we might therefore embed them into the structures of church life. The models suggested here recognise the

importance of adopting an approach to ministry as opposed to simply implementing a programme. There's an essential distinction to be made between the two, as it can often be the case that giving time and space to considering the principles that underpin ministry is overlooked in our haste to establish a project or embark on the practical work of ministry. We'll return to this later in the book.

It would be fascinating to rate our family ministry (say, giving it a score out of ten) based on those three truths offered above. Is our work with families supportive of parents as they seek to create Christian households? Where are the connecting points for different generations? Is there enough emphasis on shaping a missional ministry? Would our scores be high or low? Sometimes it can be good to ask the tough questions, and if we don't have an answer we could do some further thinking, inviting others to join us as we do so.

## The Family Ministry Research Project

The influential Family Ministry Research Project captured much of these recent developments in its report *We Are Family*. Following a broad study and investigation across Britain, the project presented a comprehensive picture of all that is taking place in churches. Based on data gathered from church-based workers from a range of denominations, along with telephone interviews, surveys and a review of job descriptions, the research project compiled rich information of how families are engaged in church life and receive support through a host of different groups and channels.

The study indicated that family ministry occurs in many contexts and places with a wide variety of families. Participation varies depending on the nature of the activity, but over time, the report showed, many churches built strong relationships with parents, children, young people and grandparents through the services provided. For instance, if a family takes part in a church toddler group, there is a stronger likelihood they will be willing and keen to join in other church activities.

One of the significant drivers for churches wanting to embark on work with families is the rising age of congregations. There is often a hope that family work will attract a younger demographic, bringing a new lease of life into the church. Family workers employed in these circumstances shared some

of the challenges this brought, particularly in terms of evaluating their work if Sunday morning services didn't see an increase in family engagement. Finding ways to measure the effectiveness of ministry was one of the challenges they faced. There could be a host of wonderful support and provision available that families valued, but this was rarely considered by their churches to be a measure of success. It continues to be a point of frustration for many family workers employed by churches that better systems are not in place to gauge the value of their ministry, reflecting the dynamic nature of all they do.

Asserting a presence in the local community was another driver identified by the research project. Family workers who took part in the day-long consultation events shared many examples of ways in which they had a presence beyond church buildings into their local neighbourhood, often working with schools, nurseries and children's centres. Family workers are often well known in their local vicinity, recognised by parents and children who had come into contact with them via church-based activities. This raises the profile of church groups and services, giving a sense of connection to the wider community and building the church's reputation as people and places providing care and a welcome. Effective church-based family work places a high value on becoming embedded into community life and embracing the principle of being 'in the world'. Many family-work practitioners invest heavily in growing these local relationships, which frequently bear fruit when establishing new projects or programmes. Being rooted in the neighbourhood was a value many workers shared.

In terms of the breadth of work taking place, the study captured the extensive sweep of family ministry being delivered in cities, towns and villages across the UK. These were focused into two strands: *ministry*, the activities that contain a spiritual or faith-based element, and *support*, activities that seek to provide pastoral care or practical help.

*Ministry* centres on those activities with a missional edge, that explore ways to grow faith and discipleship, that find routes into being more intergenerational and that emphasise equipping households to be places of faith nurture and growth. So when we're talking 'ministry' as family-work practitioners, this concerns the way in which families develop spiritually in prayer, in worship and in their knowledge and understanding of scripture and Christian life. It can also mean how they're engaged in evangelistic activity, becoming confident transmitters of the gospel in the places they

move and work and learn. Part of a practitioner's role can be to draw attention to the spiritual encounters in everyday life, bringing those faith thoughts from the fringe to centre stage. As mentioned by one interviewee about some of the families they encountered, 'Faith is a blip in the horizon of their lives, which doesn't mean that there isn't any spirituality in their lives, there may be, but those families are not necessarily part of the faith community.'<sup>57</sup>

A theme of the practitioner discussions was that people want to talk about 'big questions' around life and spirituality, but they no longer turn to the church for answers. So in some settings creating authentic new forums in which to host faith conversations is vital if families are to engage meaningfully with the Christian faith. As one family worker stated:

The numbers of families who are interested is definitely growing. But... bringing them further into the church and bringing them further to the core of what we're about... seems to be the big sticking point at the moment.<sup>58</sup>

Exploring faith, and fostering it so that it develops further and incorporates families into church life, appears to be a key aspect of ministry for many workers. Practitioners are committed to the lifelong work of nurturing disciples and know it to be the systematic, day-in-day-out of relational involvement that can be life-changing for many parents and children.

*Support* activities are primarily community-focused. They provide opportunities to build relationships with people, have a strong thread of social action running through them and involve working with local partners. Provision can be in a variety of forms but often has at its core a desire to enhance families' general well-being, whether on a practical basis or improving emotional and mental health.

Much of what takes place under the umbrella of family support has high regard for hospitality and welcome: endeavouring for activities and groups to be places where families can participate authentically, receiving a genuine invite in without pressure to conform or subscribe to a particular set of beliefs at the outset. This is an important value for family workers, and many testified to the difference it had made for many they met who had previously felt on the fringe, excluded or beyond the apparent perimeter of church life and involvement.

Meeting local need through social action enterprise was very evident in the kind of support churches engaged in. Faith in action is what people were alluding to when talking about food banks, providing furniture or clothing for families in need, churches being embedded in local networks alongside children's centres and other secular partners in the community, and providing a safety net for the poor, vulnerable and elderly from all communities in the neighbourhood of the church. Investing in this work is seen as a key expression of faith, part of what Jesus called his followers to actively pursue in terms of loving our neighbours. Following a raft of funding cuts in the wake of austerity, the church has become in some places the 'last man standing' as families are adversely affected by the scaling down and closing of local authority services. Plugging this gap has been an observed trend by many practitioners in cities, towns and villages across the UK. As one worker stated, the church has an important role here in the current context:

There's a lot of families out there that we know about that have real problems... the social workers and the people out there, there's not many at the moment and children's centres are being cut. There's a place there that maybe the church could step in, because it's a worrying time at the minute.<sup>59</sup>

Providing practical support and signposting to other local services, agencies and charities featured among the activities churches invested in to meet need in their local contexts.

While the two strands, ministry and support, are helpful in defining the work taking place, they represent a false division, as all that's been described can be argued to be ministry. If we take a holistic view of what it means to minister to families, then everything a church provides, from a listening ear and drop-in advice sessions to social events and services which nurture faith, is in some shape and form ministry.

In many settings toddler groups are a good example of how churches seek to bring elements of their ministry and support together in one expression. Such groups have often been at the heart of provision to parents and young children, and in many instances family ministry has grown out of these groups, which have been the backbone of community activity. It's believed that around 55% of churches in England run toddler groups, and many have a close connection to the hosting congregation. Since the turn of the

century, there's been a move away from calling these 'mother and toddler' groups, in recognition of the shifting nature of family life. Many groups welcome a wider variety of caring adults, including grandparents, nannies, childminders and foster carers. For all these people, as well as mums and dads, the group can be a place of indispensable support and contact with others. The Toddler Project reflected this, as it heard of the importance of making adults and children feel welcomed, comfortable and able to fully integrate into group activities. It highlighted five areas that are primarily seen as missional opportunities for groups:

- Love and serve young families
- Be distinctively Christian
- Nurture faith journeys
- Build the church community
- Support toddler group leaders<sup>60</sup>

As groups become more diverse, there's a need to consider what appropriate types of care and support may be valuable. Grandparents will have different needs to childminders. Ensuring that toddler groups remain settings accessible to all may have its challenges in the future. As increasing numbers of parents are in employment, there's an inevitable impact on how toddler groups operate. Group leaders may be elderly and finding volunteers to join teams is difficult, so new approaches to running them need to be explored.

Within this mix of new expressions of care, faith and support, it's impossible to ignore the significant impact of Messy Church ([messychurch.org.uk](http://messychurch.org.uk)), a way of being church that seeks to gather families and people of all ages to create communities of faith outside of Sunday services. These worship spaces offer opportunities to encounter God in refreshing, new and dynamic ways, through creative activities, storytelling and a mealtime that gathers everyone around the table. Messy Church has offered a warm welcome for many who previously considered themselves not to be the sort of people who go to church or who never imagined it had anything to offer them. It has ushered in a new era for church life that actively seeks to engage authentically with people where they are and provide space to ask questions and nurture friendships. Children's, youth and family ministries have all been impacted to some degree by how Messy Church has flourished, raising questions about deeper faith development and discipleship and how best to include young people.

Across these different expressions of family ministry, it's practitioners who lead the way in shaping provision and meeting the needs of families in congregations and local communities. Their roles are rarely identical and contain a range of what might be seen as competing responsibilities and tasks. For some the 'family worker' role has been a natural extension of children's and youth ministry, recognising that these groups don't exist in isolation. For others it's been a bolt-on to an existing specialism. This blurring of roles has been seen in some respects as a worrying trend, with the potential for specific skills and knowledge to become lost in the broader field of ministry with families.

The range of work being done by family workers who participated in the *We Are Family* survey illustrates the competing/complementary strands of family work. From hands-on activities with a specific age group, such as leading Sunday school, to mixed-aged provision, such as Messy Church, to admin tasks and practical duties, practitioners' jobs are vast. Preparations for imminent events or sessions and finding ways to involve volunteers in teamwork were often high on their to-do lists. Managing their broad workload was challenging for many who felt on occasion that supervision was lacking. Putting processes in place that support family workers to be effective in their planning and delivery is vital in order for them to flourish in ministry. Yet there's little evidence currently that those in lay ministry have access to healthy, accountable oversight that values their personal well-being and development alongside the drive to bring greater numbers of families into the life of the church.

When it comes to training, the *We Are Family* research project indicates that practitioners were usually sent on short workshops or one-day conferences that emphasised practical skills rather than theological understanding and strategic thinking about ministry. As such, while the training workers undertook was usually effective and valuable, and offered much-needed networking opportunities, it didn't provide a context for deeper professional development. As family ministry continues to unfold and become more established, it is vital to ensure that practitioners are effectively prepared and equipped for the work they do. Enabling family workers to be strategic thinkers and willing to share experience and knowledge within communities of practice will contribute hugely to ongoing innovation in this field.

Embedding family ministry within the wider mission and work of the church is also key, as in some settings it has become the sole responsibility

of a paid worker. That work with families is no longer an enterprise for the whole church to contribute to and join in, being instead tasked to a professional, has been seen as a relinquishing of the church's primary community-building role. The impact of this is seen in a host of ways, not least in the fact that family workers feel isolated and unsupported, but also in that clear routes for families to become woven into the wider life of the church simply don't exist. Rediscovering a corporate sense of missional life and faith shared by everyone is a key aim for those in family ministry and leadership roles.

## Conclusion

From this whistle-stop tour of the current landscape of family work in Britain, there are trends worth highlighting. These are helpfully summarised by the *We Are Family* research project in their findings as follows:

- *Understanding family ministry* – Recognising that family has changed significantly influences the way we work with them. The nuclear family no longer represents the ideal or lived experience for many households across the UK, and giving careful thought to how we therefore approach offering support is vital if ministry is to be relevant. There needs to be greater attention paid to the types of families found in a church's neighbourhood, their lifestyles and their livelihoods, so that ministry is better tailored to their needs.
- *The spectrum of family ministry* – This requires us to develop new understanding that work with families takes many varied forms. Some of it is very practical in nature, providing relational support and enabling families to thrive, particularly during significant life-stage transitions (e.g. adjusting to the arrival of a newborn baby, blending two families to become a new one, nurturing teenage independence or caring for elderly relatives) as well as when encountering troublesome life events or issues. Other aspects of the work contain a spiritual dimension, having a distinct missional edge, seeking to provide opportunities to explore questions of faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus.
- *Issues in family ministry and support* – There is a range of related questions identified by the research. It reflects that young families, often participating in Messy Church and toddler groups, are part of what's been



termed the ‘missing generation’ (those who have had no or little contact with church). They bring a range of differing ideas and understandings about the Christian faith, so it can’t be assumed they will relate to the rituals and language used in church life. There’s a need to consider where the routes into working intergenerationally are and how different age groups are brought together in worship and grow to be community with one another. Another issue identified was the value of exploring routes into partnerships with other agencies and charities working locally and how these could be mutually beneficial for both churches and the families they know and work with.

- *Equipping for family ministry* – From the breadth of work taking place in churches across the UK, it’s clear that there is often a lack of strategic planning for ministry activity. Finding ways to combat this scattergun approach is essential to make best use of resources, as is undertaking education and training of those in lay ministry. Many church-based workers had received minimal training, and they expressed a strong desire to be better equipped for their work and ministry.

These four findings provide a frank and defined essential starting point for further reflection on how we can intentionally shape family ministry in the 21st century. Addressing these areas will enable our work to flourish and to be authentic, relevant and life-enhancing for the families we work with. *We Are Family* pinpointed some significant developments in family ministry, but it also raised questions about how our work could be more effective. If family ministry is going to become embedded across the life of the church as a source of community for families, we need to get serious in our strategy and thinking. It’s no longer acceptable to assume that any work is better than no work; we need to be intentional in the way we approach and sustain ministry. Shaping activities so that they fit the lives and kinds of contemporary family that exist today is key, yet the church hasn’t recognised the change that’s been taking place over recent decades. Is our work rooted in the current societal context? There needs to be a shift of focus from family structure to family function, which invests in relationships, creating an environment in which each family can flourish. Do we take a holistic approach, combining the two strands of ministry and support, or do we see practical support as being at odds with nurturing faith? What if families encountered caring support in the church that valued their whole being, seeking to entwine gospel love with meeting their physical need? This is a transformational picture of ministry

that could impact families of all kinds and have a lasting influence on their interactions with each other, those they live alongside and the God who created them.

## Questions for reflection

The *We Are Family* report posed 15 key questions for leaders and those working with families based on the four major findings.<sup>61</sup> These remain vital questions for reflection when setting out on any kind of family ministry. Choose a set of questions or an area for you to consider further.

### Understanding family ministry

- What are the various types of family found in your local context or community?
- How could family work and ministry in your context become more inclusive of different kinds of family?
- How does your context impact on your priorities for family work? What is the profile of the local population?

### The spectrum of family ministry

- Which elements of family work are a priority in your church?
- What are the drivers behind the work being done with families? What do you hope to achieve?
- How do churches achieve a balance between responding to need and missional activity?
- What opportunities exist in the church and local context for family workers to engage in wider, more strategic discussions about ministry?

### Issues in family ministry and support

- How are leaders in the church being trained and equipped to support ministry for all generations?

- How does the whole church community come together for shared worship and conversation? What would need to change to make this happen?
- What impact have funding cuts on local services had in your area?
- How well connected are workers and volunteers with local agencies that support families?
- Who are the key local partners in family ministry and support?

### **Equipping for family ministry**

- What structures does the church have to enable it to manage, support and train volunteers?
- What training can be offered to more fully equip those working with families, including study to develop theological approaches to family work?
- What does effective supervision look like that provides both accountability and support for family workers?

Never before has the church invested so much in caring, supporting and sharing faith with those living on their doorstep. Families are being welcomed in churches to an exciting array of groups, activities and worship services, giving impetus to church leaders to be better equipped and informed for ministry that successfully meets the needs of people of all ages and stages in life.

This book provides a comprehensive foundation for those working in the increasingly complex and diverse area of ministry with families. It presents an overview of contemporary family life, sets out the principles that underpin this work and offers strategic and practical approaches to working with families, making it the essential guide for all who are involved in this field and passionate about seeing God's kingdom come in families, churches and communities.

*Whether your church is just starting this journey or has been on it for some time, there is plenty here to refresh your vision, understanding, strategy and practice.*

Mary Hawes, National Children and Youth Adviser, Church of England



**Gail Adcock** is Family Ministries Development Officer with the Methodist Church.



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