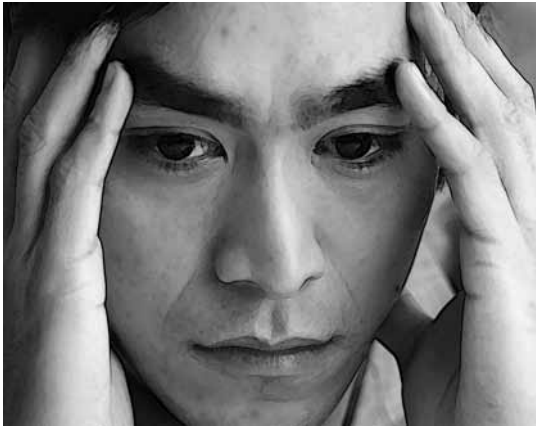


ROGER SONNENBERG

An Intentional Ministry—Family Ministry



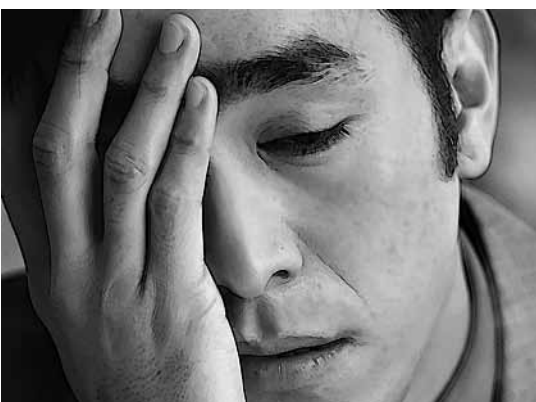
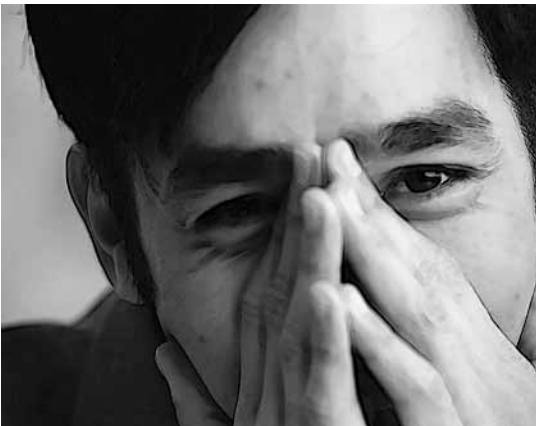
“SO WHAT?” MARTIN LUTHER asked the same question in “What does this mean?” It is the question which is asked by many people sitting in the pew Sunday after Sunday, “So what does this mean for me?” An exit poll of people who have left the church showed that many feel that the church is irrelevant.

Sheila is a single mom raising two children on her own and wonders if the pastor has any clue of the struggles she’s having with her oldest daughter.

Larry was abused as a child. In his thirty years of being in the church, he has never heard a word about abuse. For him, this translates into the church not caring.

Paul and Ruth have been unhappily married for twelve years. Their health providers care deeply, primarily for financial reasons, to be sure, but nevertheless they care about their physical well-being, encouraging them to have annual checkups, eat right, and exercise. But their spiritual caregivers—the church and its leaders—don’t seem to care about the spiritual well-being of their marriage other than periodically offering exhortations about the sin of divorce. They wonder, “Why does the church wait for some crisis to occur before it speaks about marriage? Where is the care that might prevent separation or divorce?”

Yes, the church is good at answering life’s ultimate question, “What happens to me when I die?” but doesn’t seem to care enough to address important questions about day-to-day



ROGER SONNENBERG IS THE PASTOR OF OUR SAVIOR LUTHERAN CHURCH, ARCADIA, CA.; ADJUNCT PROFESSOR, LUTHERAN INSTITUTE ON AGING AND FAMILY, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, NEBRASKA; 1ST VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE PACIFIC SOUTHWEST DISTRICT, THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD; AUTHOR; PSYCHOTHERAPIST. SONNENR@AOL.COM

living. Doesn't God say that He has come to give life "more abundant" (John. 10:10)? Isn't God's resurrection present tense; "I am the resurrection and the life . . ." (John 10:25)?

Intentional Family Ministry is a congregation's response to the "So what?" or the "What does this mean?" question being asked by many. Intentional Family Ministry can provide wisdom through a single-parent support group for the Sheilas of a congregation. Through an Intentional Family Ministry, the Pauls and Ruths have the opportunity to sit with other couples and learn of ways to improve their marriage in an enrichment Bible study.

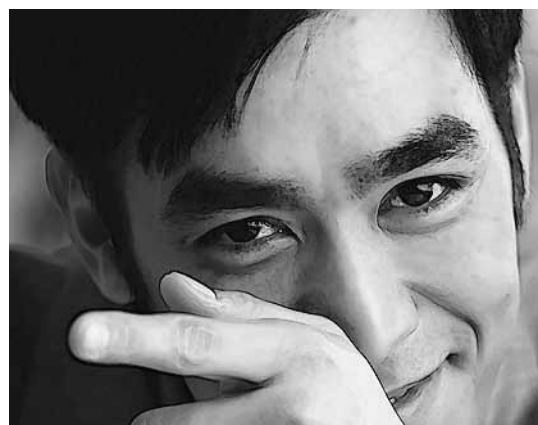
Intentional Family Ministry Builds Relationships

NARCISSISM, according to studies, has increased 700 percent over the last twenty years. "Entitlement" is the present day mantra. Twenty years ago "community" was most important for the average twenty-five-year-old. Today, it is "individualism." And yet, what is the Christian church about? It's not about individualism; it's about relationships. In the early church, "They had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). They joined together in support of one another. Their vertical relationship with God through Jesus Christ brought them into healthy relationships with one another. Romans 1 tells about what happens when there is a skewed relationship with God.

Steve is an executive for a large firm in California. He is also a trained lay deacon in the Southwest Pacific District. When he attended the Continuing Education Seminar for lay leaders of the District last year, participants were invited to engage in a relationship building exercise where participants were asked to think back when they were 12 years of age and draw a quick floor plan of the home they lived in. They then were asked to sketch a few pieces of furniture. Then they were told to recall what was outside the house such as a playhouse, large trees, or a swimming pool. After noting these things, they were asked to imagine

walking into each room of the house and remember some of the smells. After giving them a few seconds, they were then told to draw stick figures of the people and pets that lived in the house at that particular time. Finally, they were asked to draw a cross over the one person, place, or thing where they experienced "grace." They could define "grace" however they wished.

The exercise was so helpful for Steve that while leading an important meeting for his company, he decided to begin with this relationship-building exercise. A young woman on the staff found the task difficult, but upon completing it, she came to him with



tears in her eyes and said, “I’m 33 years old and this is the first time in my life I shared the pain of what happened to me in my home . . . it’s the first time anyone asked . . . and the first time someone seemed to care . . .” It was painful but so therapeutic. According to Steve as well as others who worked with her, the woman literally became a different person in her dealings with the people around her. The exercise had opened up a secret closet, a closet that had been locked for years. This simple exercise gave her permission in a safe environment to open the door and to be set free from years of captivity. As she shared her story, important people in her life—the people she had worked with for years—revealed how much they cared. This new relationship “empowered” her, changed her.

This is only one of many stories heard over the years from those who were blessed through someone who cared enough to care! It began by someone intentionally asking a question and then allowing the process of good communication to do the rest. Such is the essence of Intentional Family Ministry . . . caring enough to care . . . to ask the right questions and to listen. It is intentional in that it is planned and orchestrated, giving people the opportunity to safely share more than surface-stuff, inner-stuff. It is about the telling of stories that build relationships.

One of the things people who lead family ministry programs and facilitate support groups hear time and time again is: “We thought we were the only ones with this problem,” or “We had no idea that other married couples struggled over the same thing in their marriages.” Intentional Family Ministry helps people see their commonality. It helps them connect. It helps them to see that they are not alone.

Intentional Family Ministry is needed more than ever because we live in a world where much communication takes place via technology. Studies indicate that the average person, twenty-five years and younger, spends seven hours and thirty-four minutes each day using technology. This does not include time

spent texting, which, according to the same studies, may be well over an hour and thirty-nine minutes per day. (The average teenage girl sends over 3,952 texts every month.) Though technology connects people, in reality many of these connections lack face-to-face contact and a deep level of interaction.

Intentional Family Ministry Answers Questions People are Asking

IT IS OFTEN SAID, “The church answers questions people aren’t asking.” Certainly, questions which Saint Paul asked are questions worth asking, such as: “What’s the problem? I know what I’m supposed to be doing, but I do the very opposite . . . wretched man that I am, who is going to rescue me?” (Romans 7:15, 24) However, sometimes this question is lost by other more pressing issues in a person’s life. It’s hard to care about spiritual matters when your fourteen-year-old daughter just informs you that she’s pregnant or your husband announces he wants a divorce. A teenager who is worried about being pregnant isn’t listening to the pastor who’s talking about heaven. She wants to know if the pastor cares about her dilemma, and, if he does, will he still want her around the church!

Special family ministry offerings, such as support groups for single parents or the divorced, will signal to everyone in the congregation and the community that the church and its leadership understand real life and genuinely care what is happening in the lives of people. By offering these special transitional support groups or other family ministry programs, the church is saying we care and understand. So does Jesus!

Intentional Family Ministry Offers Wisdom

MANY PEOPLE HAVE KNOWLEDGE. The world gives knowledge. Some people have wisdom. God gives wisdom. It was the one thing Solomon sought. Intentional Family Ministry offers wisdom because it offers God’s Word. Churches don’t need to

compete with the local mental health agency which offers parenting courses. Churches offer parenting programs with a different perspective. God's Word offers wisdom. It translates the knowledge, the standards of good parenting suggestions. "It attaches tendons and muscles . . . it puts spirit into the deadness and barrenness" (Ezekiel 37:6). In Ezekiel, we read that He doesn't just dress people up to look good like figures for a wax museum; He puts real life into them. He does it through His "Means of Grace." His very Word "Is spirit and life" (John 6:63).

A woman came to me who was fighting cancer. She asked if she could start a cancer support group. She went on to say that though she was leading one for the local hospital, she had been told that she could not bring religion into it! "I want to talk about Jesus," she said. It became one of the more successful support groups in our church, attracting many people from outside the church. More women wanted to talk about Jesus in their struggle with cancer.

A couple announced that they were going to get married because they love one another. When I asked, "What do you mean that you love her?" he gave the world's answer, "Because I feel so good when I'm around her." I also asked, "What happens when the feeling goes away? Are you still in love then?" The wisdom that God gives related to love is seen throughout the Scripture (e.g., 1 Corinthians 13:4-8). However, the Bible does more than describe love. The Spirit of God Himself uses the words to empower the reader, the listener, the recipient of these words. Through the words, He pours His love into us so that we might love one another in the same way. The very Spirit of God enters us through the Word and makes it possible for us to love with grace and mercy, just as He loves us.

Intentional Family Ministry is Gospel-Driven

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD correctly teaches that it is the Gospel that changes people's lives, not the Law. The Law

teaches us how to live and how not to live. Though it shows us our foibles, our mistakes, our sin, it does not change us! Only the Gospel changes a person. Balswick in his book, *The Family: A Christian Perspective*, reminds us that though commitment (covenant) is one of the elements of God's relationship with us and our relationship with one another, commitment is never possible without "grace." Why? Because of sin! Perfection is found in none other than Jesus Christ.

Much of the world's teaching is law-oriented. For example, most parenting books tell parents what to do and not do. Even many so-called religious books are moralistic, meaning that they give rules and authoritative directions. Though such instructions may be needed and helpful, ultimately, without knowing "grace . . . mercy . . . forgiveness," such teaching can lead to frustration and despair. Even the best parent can scold one's self for not meeting the standards. The Gospel offers "grace," undeserved mercy, forgiveness, love for not meeting those standards. Healthy family ministry is a "Gospel-filled" ministry which frees people to move forward, knowing that despite mistakes, there is forgiveness, there are second chances and new opportunities to improve and become more "Christ-like." Families that are "Gospel-focused" are families that provide "safe places" for their members.

Some have said, "All that the church needs to do is to provide Word and Sacraments." Though the Word and Sacraments are the "Means of Grace," Intentional, Gospel-focused Family Ministry helps to connect the grace of God and the lives of family members. A Gospel focus in Intentional Family Ministry empowers individuals and families for their living and dying. (When you know how to die, you also learn how to live.) Intentional Family Ministry helps to translate the "Means of Grace." This ministry offers a "safe place" to ask questions and to care for one another. It provides opportunities to answer the question, "What does this mean?"