

# CHRISTIAN FAMILIES SERVING TOGETHER: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This summary of a series of research projects begins with the finding that engagement in community service is a strongly felt need of Christian families and is central to family faith. The findings suggest guidelines for ministry leadership that effectively activate and support family service. The author concludes with a discussion of the distinction between the social scientific study of voluntarism and Christian service.

For more than thirty years, congregations have attempted to strengthen families through what has been come to be called “family ministry,” with various ideas about what “family ministry” is.<sup>2</sup> For purposes of this article, I will use a definition of family ministry that has been developed over these decades, which is that “family ministry” is any activity that directly or indirectly (1) forms families in the congregational community; (2) increases the Christ-likeness of the family relationships of Christians; and/or (3) equips and supports families for the work to which they are called (Garland, 1996, 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2012). This article reviews the research literature that supports congregational leadership focused on that third prong of the definition, family engagement in service together.

In a qualitative research project, the researcher asked families to describe their shared faith. Many family members began by telling about going to church together or saying prayers over dinner together, but then went on to describe caring for others beyond their own group boundaries, together. Families talked about visiting patients or extended family in a nursing home, about serving food in a free lunch program for homeless people, and about taking care of an elderly neighbor’s yard. The list of ways families live their faith was as diverse as the families themselves, sharing only the common theme of service beyond the family. Sometimes their service takes place through the programs and activities of their congregation, but many also have found ways to serve together as families on their own. A family’s shared beliefs and values are given expression in their shared activity. Christian faith is about *doing*; “Faith, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17, NAS).

### **A Story of Family Service<sup>3</sup>**

A case study illustrates how families become engaged in service together (for full case study, see Garland, 2010). Heather and Jim Hall have been married 20 years and belong to a nondenominational church of more than 3000 members. Jim is a chemical engineer, head of a large division of a petroleum company. Heather is a physical therapist in a Catholic hospital. Their three children, Marianne (15),

Jonas (11), and Sarah (8), all attend a private Christian school. Heather teaches Sunday School and Jim serves as an elder. Both of them have taken off from work to lead in the congregation's summer Vacation Bible School.

Heather had been restless, though, worried that they were not doing enough to nurture faith in their children. She told the researcher that a brief prayer at the supper table was really the only evidence, other than going together to church activities, identifying their family life as "Christian." One Sunday, the theme of the sermon was that serving is required of *every* Christian. Heather prayed for God to use her gifts, and as she did, she was struck that the most important gift in her life was her family. How might God want her to use her gift—her family—in service?

After the service, the church offered a lunch and encouraged people to visit the "missions fair." While the children wolfed down lunch and she munched on a sandwich, Heather wandered among the twenty-some tables around the church fellowship hall, each with posters and brochures of various service opportunities in the community. Heather walked by all the tables and found herself stopping at one with a sign that said "Calvary Methodist Church Children's Recreation Program." Around the sign were pictures of children playing basketball, sliding down a waterslide, and playing Chutes and Ladders at a picnic table. Calvary Methodist was a small African American congregation in the poorest area of the city. The little church had ambitiously turned its corner parking lot into a safe place for the community's children to play. They had put up a fence to keep drug dealers out and bouncing balls in. They purchased play equipment and picnic tables. Now they were seeking volunteers who would help supervise and play with the children of their neighborhood. Reflecting on that Sunday afternoon, Heather said, "I was convicted, and I just said, 'We're doing this. This is something we can do together as a family.'"

The volunteer coordinator was a little perplexed; they were seeking adult volunteers, but Heather asked to include her whole family. Heather also held her ground with the family; they were going to try this. Her husband Jim told the researcher that Heather often pushes him into doing things he would not do on his own. He certainly would not have chosen to spend an evening a week playing basketball and kick ball on a black asphalt inner city parking lot in the heat of the summer.

Jim and Heather both had second thoughts and misgivings in the weeks prior to the program's beginning. They had never ventured into that part of town and although they had friends who had served the year before, none of them had taken their children.

When they arrived at Calvary the first evening, a young man wearing a bright blue t-shirt greeted them. “He gave all of us t-shirts, even us kids, that said *Recreation Leader* on the back and Calvary Methodist Church on the front,” Jim remembered, and Marianne (age 15) added, “Like we needed identification—we were the only White kids there.” Heather shared her own memory from that first evening: “I had thought we were doing this great thing for these poor kids, to give them a safe place to play. And then I realized, ‘My kids need this. They need to have friends like this, who aren’t all White and middle class and just like them.’”

All summer Jim and Heather and their three children spent Tuesday evenings on Calvary’s corner playground. Then they expanded their involvement to Saturdays, riding with the children in the church bus to the zoo or the swimming pool on Saturday morning. The children loved it. They weren’t “helping” – they were playing with new friends. As they drove to and from Calvary each week, they talked about the friends they were making, how their lives were alike and different, and what they were learning.

During the following winter, Marianne reflected on her family’s summer service. “It opened my eyes,” she said. “It made me thankful for everything I have, because, you know, I live in a safe community, and it was cool to give them a safe community where they could come and play, too.” She admitted that sometimes she did not really want to go because it was summer, and there were other things that she wanted to do. “But then I would think, ‘It’s only two hours on Tuesday evening and a Saturday morning, and I can give that to hang out with these kids.’ So I think I learned not to be so selfish.” She has grown up in a family that has always been involved in church. “I have always known about Jesus and we always pray and stuff, and so that’s not new to me. But going to Calvary, I met kids from the neighborhood who had not participated in church life. I hope by the way I acted they could feel God’s love.”

Heather told me that her perspective has really changed on her church. “Before, I just thought about, ‘Do my kids have a good Sunday school teacher?’ Now, I’m thinking, ‘It’s okay that the programs for our kids are crowded, and that we’re sometimes inconvenienced because there is a worship service in Spanish at the same time as ‘ours,’ and they’re using a bunch of rooms and some of the space. Before, I would have looked at some of those activities and said, ‘We can’t even take care of our own, so why are we reaching out?’ Now I know that’s exactly what we should be doing. It’s not ‘our’ church. It’s their church too!”

Jim remembered the knot in the pit of his stomach the first time they walked inside Calvary’s playground fence, his family of five White people in the midst of a hundred African American children and adults. As the weeks went by, he reported that his wariness turned into a deep sense of satisfaction; this was the right place for them. There are other activities they could have engaged in as a

middle class White family that would have been satisfying and yet felt “safer” because those activities would have kept the outside world at arm's length. Jim commented that they could have sponsored a child in Central America for \$2.00 a day, receiving pictures and letters to put on the refrigerator. “But,” he said, “the active participation can be a real catalyst; I'm not sure for what, but I know in the future, we'll look at opportunities to serve very differently.” Jim and Heather are already planning to continue serving during the coming summer, maybe even two nights each week.

Jim has been surprised to realize that his values and priorities have changed. “If you had said to me two years ago that the church wanted to carve off \$100,000 for English as a Second Language programming because we have some community folks that can use our facilities and people in our church who can be instructors, I would have doubted that was something we really need to get involved in. Now I would say, ‘Yes! That's a great way for us to be a better steward with what we've been given and engage in our surrounding community.’ Everybody doesn't look like us and talk like us.”

The Hall family still belongs to their suburban congregation, but they also feel they belong to Calvary and to the children and families of the Calvary community. The Hall family had just spent two hours on a weeknight and Saturday mornings playing with kids over a three month period, less time than they usually spend watching their children play in the local soccer league, but more time than they spend in their own congregation. It changed their understanding of their church, their community, their family, and even their faith.

### **Service as Families' Felt Need**

No one framed for Heather that family service was an answer to her questions about how to make faith real and central in their life together; she came to it through what she believed to be an answer to her prayer. Research indicates that she is not alone. A project using the Church Census surveyed attenders in 50 congregations across a diversity of denominations. The survey includes a 52-item checklist that respondents use to indicate family life issues they would like their congregation to address, such as communication skills, romance and sexuality, roles of men and women, managing time, managing money, family worship, coping with crises, and parenting children. Respondents chose “help our family serve beyond ourselves” more than any other item (Garland & Edmonds, 2007).

Of course, those were not the only concerns expressed by respondents. Teenagers asked for help with dating and romance issues, communication skills, and with handling conflict and anger. Twenty-something adults asked for help managing money. Thirty- and forty-something adults asked for help parenting children and teenagers. Those in their 50s asked for guidance and help in caring for aging family members. But more often than all these other concerns was the surprising

request for help in serving together from respondents from every type of family represented. Never-married adult families named it more often than items like dating, preparing for marriage, and romance and sexuality in single life. Widowed families listed it more often than they did help with grief and coping with crises. Families living with major stress – financial, health, relational – still want guidance in serving others.

It appears that even, and perhaps especially, when families are struggling they need to know their lives together count for something beyond their own happiness. Not just in spite of, but especially when life is hard, when the health of a loved one is fragile or career dreams are shattered or a teenager goes off the rails, families need to know that their lives matter on a scale bigger than their home's floor plan. Having a purpose beyond themselves does not resolve the family crises, but it puts family problems in perspective.

The surveys also found that congregational families are already engaged in service together. The survey includes a section entitled "how we live our faith together." The project found that families were already more likely to be engaged in the world around them as expressions of their faith than to be engaged in studying the Bible together. The faith practices they reported that their families engaged in most often – besides going to worship services together – are "serving others in need," "caring for the created world," "offering hospitality," and "seeking more justice in the world."<sup>4</sup> They are asking their congregations to guide them in that service.

We are a society known for volunteering; opportunities are everywhere. Families can go to any number of social service agencies and find ample opportunities to serve their communities. What these families said to us in the survey is that they want somehow to ground what they are doing in their life of faith.

These research findings with the Church Census led to the next project, the Service and Faith Study, which involved surveying an additional 35 congregations in four regions of the county. Researchers asked all attenders in each congregation during a given week to complete surveys, resulting in 7,403 completed surveys; 946 of those respondents reported that they were currently involved in unpaid community service (Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2009; Garland, Wolfer, & Myers, 2008). Those so involved reported that they prayed, came to worship services, studied their Bibles, and gave significantly more financial support than those not involved in service. Active engagement in service to others had a more profound connection with the faith of these ordinary Christians than any other faith activity, including attending congregational worship.

This finding was true not only for adults, but also for a group of 631 teenagers who participated in the survey (see also Dollahite & Marks, 2009). In fact, service was the most significant and powerful contributor to a maturing faith, as measured by the study's scales, for teenagers as well as for adults. Service was more powerful than Sunday school, Bible study, or participation in worship for the faith development of teenagers. Teens who are involved in service that is connected to their faith are much more likely to be firmly bonded to their churches and are much less likely to drop out of school (Roehlkepartain, 1990; Roehlkepartain, Naftali, & Musegades, 2000; Roehlkepartain & Williams, 1990). Moreover, teenagers *want* to serve. In a survey of Catholic youth, 63 percent reported that opportunities for service attracted them to participate in their parish's youth program (Roehlkepartain et al., 2000, p. 21).

If service is so important to Christian faith, it is remarkable that it is not as central to the lives of congregations as worship and Bible study. Based on data from the 2002-03 National Study of Youth and Religion, Smith and Denton noted that only 30 percent of adolescents have ever been involved by their congregation in a mission or service project. That is compared to 50 percent who have been to a youth retreat or conference (C. Smith & Denton, 2005). Another study found that more congregations involve young people in recreational activities than they do in Bible study, service, or missions (Snell, Smith, Tavares, & Christoffersen, 2009). Reggie Joiner has observed that we are foolish to believe our children will do ministry when they grow up and leave us if we just talk to them about the importance of service but never actually engage them in ministry. "If what they have heard doesn't move from their heads to their hands, it will probably never make it to their hearts" (2010, p. 139).

A study of Protestant congregations found that involvement in family service projects during childhood and adolescence has a powerful impact on young people's growth in faith and that about one-third of Protestant youth are actually involved in service with their families (Roehlkepartain et al., 2000, p. 149). It seems that families are more likely to involve their young people in service than their congregations, and that is encouraging, because parents are the single most important influence on the spiritual lives of adolescents (DeVries, 2004; C. Smith & Denton, 2005).

This connection between service and faith takes on added meaning because of the kind of world we live in, a world that is very focused on work. As Americans, we tell our teenagers they are loved, but they may not feel particularly needed in a society that has emphasized children's dependence on adults for care and support. The U.S. tax code says it clearly—they are "dependents." The standard question we ask children when attempting to form a relationship with them is what they want to be when they grow up, implying that they have to grow up to be somebody, to have an identity. We define people by the jobs they have—or will

have someday. Only two generations ago, children had a vital role to play in family life—working on the farm alongside adults, caring for younger siblings, and contributing to the overall life of the family. In today’s world, most of the “real” work takes place away from home. If teenagers have part-time jobs, it is most likely to make their own spending money or perhaps to help with school expenses, but not to contribute to the overall well-being of the family or community. When there are few such opportunities, service gives meaning to life right now.

Rick Warren has astutely observed that a congregation’s strength is not its seating capacity, but its sending capacity – the deployment of members into ministry (Warren, 1995). Unfortunately, it appears that we are more focused on Christians sitting in the church than Christians sent into the world. Even the catalytic sermon and mission fair that was Heather’s path into involving her family did not provide any attention to *family* service; that was Heather’s own doing. Nevertheless, this family found a way into a service that has become a defining feature of their life together. Families like Heather’s encourage others to live their faith together through service, just as those who served at Calvary in summers past pointed the way for the Halls.

Being restless and wanting faith to be active is the beginning. Then comes finding a place to start. Heather had been casting about, looking for a foothold in making faith more central in her family’s life, for months, maybe years. Then came the Sunday when the scripture passage and the sermon grabbed her attention, and the opportunity that fit her family’s gifts was right there on a folding table in the fellowship hall.

### **Engaging Families in Ministry**

The research team in the Service and Faith Project also interviewed 29 congregational leaders, 25 actively engaged congregational members, and an additional 16 families engaged together in service. The coding and analysis of these interviews led the research team to define the basic steps for congregations to get involved, stay involved, and nurture a culture of service. Inside-out congregations engage families in ministry by: (1) developing families’ taste for ministry; (2) seeking service opportunities that are relational; (3) asking families to serve; (4) preparing them for serving; (5) supporting them as they serve; (6) reflecting on the relationship of service and faith; (7) encouraging them to rest and celebrate; and (8) naturalizing or ending time-limited projects (Garland, 2010; Garland et al., 2008).

#### ***1. Develop families’ taste for family ministry.***

It is the role of church leaders to teach and preach about the centrality of service for our faith as Christians and for our lives as families. Knowing service is

essential to faith does not necessarily translate into action, however, unless there are opportunities to find places to engage, such as the Missions Fair in Heather's congregation. Like wine-and-cheese tasting parties that give guests the opportunity to try out different flavors, congregations can have service tasting days: families mow lawns and plant flowers for elderly neighbors, visit congregation members confined in nursing homes or hospitals with a gift from the congregation, serve the congregation's neighbors in a neighborhood cookout for Sunday lunch, or wash cars for free.

It is better for a family to start with a small beginning that they can build on rather than to promise more than they can really do and then end up feeling that they have let others down or failed. For a family to spend a couple of hours on a Saturday morning raking leaves and mowing grass for an elderly neighbor can be a very meaningful service activity. Visiting a shut-in senior adult with a plate of fruit or homemade cookies for thirty minutes once a week can be a significant experience for both the senior and the visitors. Such limited commitments may then lead to greater involvement.

Two hours a week for a few summer months seemed manageable to Heather and her family. Their commitment had a beginning and ending built in; it was not unending, although they could choose to continue as they did. Hybels points out that spiritual gifts are less something to be figured out ahead of time and more what God reveals to us as we serve (2004). Callings and gifts develop over time. Sometimes the calling to serve takes the lead and gifts are discovered in the process of serving. Other times, the gifts take the lead and pull the family into a particular service arena. In either case, the focus does not begin with congregational leaders identifying all the needs of the community and then trying to figure out how to address them. The goal is to provide channels for families to live their faith together.

Congregations often have members who are professionals in the community – teachers, police officers, or social workers. Congregational members also serve on community boards or volunteer in other ways. The congregations we studied saw these members who are already active in the community as ready-made linkages to service opportunities for others in the congregation. These community professionals and leaders serve as ministry “catalysts.” A catalyst is an agent that precipitates a reaction between two other agents that otherwise do not interact with one another. The catalyst for congregation involvement is someone who has one foot in the congregation and the other ankle deep in the needs of the neighborhood. None of the congregations we studied had become involved because someone from the *outside* asked them to do so. Government officials and social service agencies may approach congregation as resources for community service, but there has to be a link with someone inside the congregation already connected and willing to act.

**2. *Seek opportunities that build relationships.***

The most engaging ministry opportunities for congregations are those that allow families to serve together, from the youngest to the oldest. Some individuals may be alone, either because they live alone or their families do not participate in the life of the congregation. The service project then becomes a wonderful opportunity for leaders to link them with others in the congregation. Serving together adds both companionship and accountability. Instead of deacons splitting up to visit the homebound, two deacons can take with them two of the children or teenagers from the congregation. The children are full-fledged, participating members of the congregation who have an important role to play in its ministry. They have opportunity to form friendships both with the deacons and those they visit. They learn from one another. Deacons learn something about the young people in the midst of their congregation, and children learn about the ministry of visiting and the meaning of such ministry for the life of faith.

Such a service provides a far more meaningful experience for both those serving and the recipients than participating in the children's or youth choir singing in nursing home hallways to anonymous persons in wheel chairs. One lively woman in her 80s lives in a retirement community and volunteers at Meals on Wheels and as an elementary school tutor. She told me that she and her neighbors in the retirement community dutifully go to hear the church groups of young people who come to sing for community residents. The residents want to be good hosts to the well-meaning church folks. But almost every group sings "I'll Fly Away," implying that the older adults who live there are simply waiting to die and "fly away." The volunteers mean well, she said, but their attempts to serve are unintentionally ageist; they stereotype residents by their age as "near death" rather than as persons living interesting lives, themselves serving others. In a personal visit to specific older adults, both the visitors and the visited may be delighted to meet and form relationships with one another, relationships that may become mutual opportunities for service to one another and beyond.

When there was not initially the opportunity for cross-generational involvement, the congregations we studied often figured out a way to change the ministry itself. For example, a Presbyterian congregation had created cross-generational activities to accompany the building of affordable housing in their community. Because of safety concerns, children were not allowed at the home building sites while construction was taking place. But after the building project work was completed, children and adults together made doorstops, planters, and bird houses to give as gifts to the new home owners. Service that connects the family with those being served in a mutual relationship is ideal.

Finally, the research found that a growing faith is particularly associated with involvement in service with persons who are different—who come from different

cultures and life experiences. We are stretched to new understandings of ourselves and of God when we have to work at understanding someone whose life experiences are different from our own, as the Hall family found on that asphalt-covered inner city playground.

**3. *Invite families to serve.***

The most common catalyst for a family to become involved in service for the first time is “someone asked us,” and that someone is often a church leader, whether a lay leader or a staff leader. The personal touch is critical in moving from passive acknowledgement that “We really should get involved,” to active engagement. A research study of adolescents involved in community service found that 93 percent of young people who were invited to serve did. In contrast, only 24 percent of those who were involved in service were not personally asked (Roehlkepartain et al., 2000). Putting opportunities in a church newsletter may attract a few, but the work of church leaders is making personalized linkages with service opportunities.

**4. *Prepare them to serve.***

Training may be nothing more than orienting a family to what will be expected of them; the Hall family’s preparation took place at the missions fair that day, where they learned that what was most important was the expectation to “show up” and play with children. Given their lack of experience in relationships with persons in a neighborhood that seemed so different from their own, however, it might have helped them to explore what their involvement would mean for them and for the children and adults they would come to know. Resources such as Corbett and Fikkert’s *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . And Yourself* (2009) can be a resource for leaders to explore with families preparing for new service opportunities. The more families are prepared for the experience, the more likely they are to follow through and have a positive experience that will encourage them to continue to find ways to be engaged. Those serving need to understand the culture, resources, and needs of the neighbors they will serve, lest they do more harm than good.

Perhaps the most important goal of the relationship between the “server” and the “recipient” is that their relationship becomes mutual—both are serving, both are receiving. Preparing, then, involves coaching families to open themselves to new relationships and to receive as well as to give.

Preparing involves matching the service context with the family’s gifts. Some families enjoy the challenge of building relationships with other families and the community guests in a soup kitchen, finding it deeply satisfying to feed those who otherwise would go hungry. Others may feel frustrated by the experience, realizing that in four hours the people they are serving will be hungry again, and then there may not be a free meal. Instead, these families would be better

challenged by working to develop a community business, where the guests of the soup kitchen can be offered jobs and partial business ownership with incomes so they can purchase their own food (Hyland, 1997; Kinney & Carver, 2005; Raschick, 1997; Seipel; P. Smith & Thurman, 2007). The challenge to church leaders is to match the gifts and callings of congregants and their families with the opportunities for service.

***5. Recognize and support the service.***

Recognizing the work they are doing to represent the church can affirm and strengthen the engagement of congregants. Tangible support matters, like the blue t-shirts the Halls received. A church leader blesses what a congregant is doing in a personal interchange – a casual conversation, a handwritten note, or a phone call.

Stories about the ministry can be important for enlisting others, and at the same time, it affirms those already engaged. Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, an eighteenth century Hasidic rabbi, explained that the reason the Torah begins with stories and not laws is because stories have the power to awaken a person's heart (Sasso, 2005). Some congregations provided opportunity for families themselves to tell stories of their service, sharing what they are doing and what it means to them. Such presentations can be wonderful ways to motivate others to find their place to serve. Families can share their experiences through articles in the church newsletter or through a presentation during a congregational gathering. Pre-worship slide shows can include digital photos of those serving. Take care to avoid the faces of service recipients or get their permission to be photographed; photography of children requires parental permission.

Recognition can backfire and be considered offensive, however, and leaders need to know families well enough to know what kind of recognition will be encouraging and affirming for them. In addition to or instead of public recognition, support may come as a gift relevant to their service: a book, sponsorship to attend a workshop, purchase of camping equipment for mentors to use to take children on an outing, or articles clipped out of newspapers or journals that relate to what a family is doing.

***6. Reflecting on the relationship of service and faith.***

Families are often involved in ministry and service, but they may not have a way to process their experience. Most people act for reasons they are not entirely able to put into words, or perhaps their reasons are so complex and the meanings so deep that they defy description (Wuthnow, 1991, 1995). Leaders support congregants by encouraging them to reflect on the relationship of their service to their faith.

Ideally, the congregation provides time for reflection as a part of congregational life, wrapping family service with specific prayer for the work and for those

served, and with Bible study related to the work. People who are action-oriented and busy often will skip on to the next activity unless the time for reflection and conversation is structured into the experience. Church leaders can make the time and space and be available for this reflection. The interlocking combination of service, Bible study, reflection, and prayer represents Christian education at its best.

Families need to hear the theological foundations for faith that are expressed through service, and have the opportunity to talk about their experiences in light of their faith. Action and reflection form a cycle of learning (Garland, 2003; Sherwood, 2006). Families come to the service experience with their own values, beliefs, and skills based on their life experiences. But as they engage in service, particularly through developing relationships with persons in radically different life circumstances than their own, they experience some dissonance with their initial values and beliefs, and feel the need for new skills. The service experience challenges the servants' understandings of how the world works, and draws attention to the causes of social problems such as poverty, homelessness, illness, school failure or whatever the problems are with which service recipients are struggling. For example, the Halls reflected on the shift in their own attitudes about the allocation of their congregation's space and budgetary dollars.

The following four aspects of service experiences can provide a starting place for reflective conversation:

*Stories about what they are learning and about the people with whom they work.* Reflection begins with remembering and retelling the experience. As families talk back through what they experienced, they will see the experience afresh through the perspectives of others. What did each one do, how do they remember feeling, and how did their feelings change as they served? What did others do, and how did they seem to feel about it?

*How their service is having an impact on their relationship with God.* Reflecting on their own and others' possible experiences of God may open them to a deepened awareness of the divine presence in their service. Simply asking the question, "How have you felt God's presence?" may provide an opportunity for telling stories.

*The impact service is having on their families and congregation.* In addition to the direct results of serving together, indirect results of service such as the development of tolerance and compassion may have influence in their family and community relationships.

*The meaning of success.* Religious beliefs, values, and biblical texts can provide fodder for conversation about what success in service looks like

for people of faith. Some interesting themes include (1) servants' beliefs and Christian teachings about the responsibility of believers to be faithfully present and walk alongside others versus those serving being responsible for changing others; (2) whether or not God depends on us to create the kingdom of God on earth; and (3) how God responds to our failures and what that means for our response to one another.

***7. Encouraging them to rest and celebrate.***

Service is often rewarding in itself, but nevertheless celebration is a great way to frame the work together. When God finished creating the world, God declared a day of rest and paused to look over and celebrate all that had been created. Time to talk over the experience can be provided via an ice cream stop on the way home, a walk in the park, or savoring a favorite meal together. Sabbath "rest" includes both opportunity to refresh and renew as well as celebration.

Such celebration and remembering why we serve is especially important when the service is less than satisfying. Sometimes those served may not be as grateful for the family's work as we think they should be. Serving can be exhausting and frustrating. It can help to link families with others who are also trying to live out their own understanding of the gospel in visible commitments to service.

***8. Naturalizing or ending time-limited projects.***

If the work a family is doing is a time-limited project of the congregation, there comes a time to bring it to a close. The Halls served their commitment for a summer, and they will do so again. There are also times when what begins as a church-sponsored project "naturalizes." "Naturalizing" is the planting of bulbs or seeds that then spread and continue to grow year after year. For example, a structured time for families to visit "adopted grandparents" in a nursing home may, over time, lead to a deepening bond. A skillful leader encourages families to adapt the project to their own ways of doing things and the needs to which they are responding.

**Hospitality**

One of the ways service sometimes naturalizes is that those served become a part of the congregation. Congregations need to get ready to welcome the service recipients, and that may be harder than it appears at first blush. In our research, several who were engaged in service reported that they were dismayed when they tried to include service recipients in congregational activities and discovered that they were not welcomed. A tutor in a neighborhood elementary school was deeply angry and hurt when children from the school began participating in the congregation's activities and a couple of families left the congregation because they did not want their children to be in the same activity programs as children from "that" neighborhood. The Halls realized that their service at Calvary

changed their attitudes about race and ethnicity, about who they would welcome in their own congregation, and even about whose congregation it really was.

Hospitality is a calling for families as well as congregations; family hospitality and congregational hospitality can be mutually supportive. Christian hospitality is quite different from the connotation the term “hospitality” often carries in our culture. It is not synonymous with social occasions, with cooking fancy meals, or with using the good dishes in the dining room instead of eating in the kitchen. In fact, Christian hospitality is quite the opposite of our culture’s sense of hospitality, which is often synonymous with “entertaining.” Entertaining refers to a break in a family’s routine in order to take care of visitors in special ways, different from ordinary daily life. It often entails sprucing up the living quarters, changing to nicer clothing, serving fare that is fancier than the everyday, and using all the “special” accouterments the household can muster. We are right in doing these things as a way of honoring the presence of the guest. At the same time, “special care” inadvertently communicates “otherness” rather than “welcome.” True hospitality means not hiding who the family really is but, rather, opening the family’s boundaries to include the other. Hospitality offered by a family or a congregation involves inviting people into the heart of the family as valued representatives of Christ’s presence.

According to Robert Roberts (1993), hospitality bears three characteristics. First, the persons welcomed are not family. Hospitality is offered to “strangers” who are not connected to us. That lack of connection is especially apparent in the most vulnerable of strangers, those who are refugees or otherwise homeless and without “home” relationships to support them (Pohl, 1999). We can be generous to our family members but not hospitable, because we already share “home” with one another. Second, there must be sharing of home territory. When we offer hospitality, we welcome the other into a space that has meaning and value to us, whether it is our home or our church building. Third, the family must provide others with the benefits of being in home territory. Taking a gift to someone is generous, but to be hospitable, we must open our homes to the other; we must let them in, to become a part of us for a time. We offer respect and acceptance and friendship. Hospitality is less about the food or bed we offer and more about giving of ourselves in relationship to the other. Eating together is less about the physical nutrients provided and more about the acceptance and mutual regard offered. It is the difference between serving persons who are homeless a hot meal and inviting them to share table and conversation as part of the regular church supper (Pohl, 1999; R. Roberts, 1993).

Hospitality inevitably makes us vulnerable to the stranger. The opening of family boundaries brings the risk that the one invited in will disrupt and perhaps even harm the family in some way. The supper guest may stay too long, and keep us

from other activities. The guest might actually steal from us, or in other ways abuse the privilege of being folded into the family.

More commonly, though, hospitality involves laying our lives down in “little pieces, in small acts of sacrificial love and service; part of the mystery is that while hospitality is costly, it also nourishes and heals both giver and recipient” (Pohl, 1999, p. 34). Over and over the scriptures tell stories of the blessings from strangers to whom hospitality was extended: the widow who fed a stranger her last bit of bread, only to be blessed by an unfailing provisions and the restoration of life in her son (1 Kings 17:8-24); the prostitute Rahab who welcomed the spies into her house and gained protection for her whole family (Joshua 2:1-21); and the woman at the well who gave a strange rabbi a drink and received in return “living water” (John 4: 7-30).

The New Testament urges hospitality as one of the true marks of a Christian: “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (Romans 12:13). The author of Hebrews exalts hospitality as service that is well-pleasing to God: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2; see also 1 Peter 4:9). Leaders in the church are supposed to be “lovers of hospitality” (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:10; Titus 1:8).

Hospitality is a paradox; if successful, it becomes impossible, since adoption of the guest as a family member makes the outsider an insider. The goal of all Christian hospitality and service is to self-destruct into the perfect familial fellowship of the kingdom of God, where the distinction between insiders and outsiders, between those who serve and those who are served, is broken down. Hospitality and service thus point us to the New Testament ideal of adoption as God’s good news.

### **Service, not “Volunteering”**

The language of “volunteering” has often been used to describe Christian service. I have used it myself in past publications, albeit with an uneasy sense that this language from the literature of the social sciences and civic engagement does not fit the expression of faith through service. First, a volunteer is usually someone who is neither paid nor has professional expertise for the service. But Christian service may be either paid or professional or both. A professional chef may cook the church fellowship supper each week without pay or for pay; either way would be service. As a social work professor, I have watched generations of students choose social work as a profession for which they will be paid but which is much more than employment. Bob Roberts, a pastor who has engaged his congregation in community development both locally and in Asia, has stated that the calling of religious leaders is get the people sitting in our pews to use their vocations as their channels of ministry (B. Roberts, 2007).

Second, to be a volunteer means being free to give service – or not. Volunteer responsibilities are usually considered secondary to vocational choices and other personal responsibilities. More important, volunteering implies an optional role – something we can choose to do and, when we are tired of it, choose not to do. But service is not “optional” in the life of a Christian (Shelp & Sunderland, 2000). We are called to care for one another, not invited to volunteer if it is convenient for us.

And finally, to be a volunteer is something done in the margins of our lives, when, and if, we have time. “Voluntary” plants are those considered accidents; they come up from seed scattered accidentally or from roots growing beyond where the gardener planned. “Volunteer” tomato plants sometimes sprout in the petunias, growing from seed cast in the kitchen composting bin. Christian service is not voluntary, however; it is not an accident or beyond the boundaries. Instead, it is the heart of our lives together as families living our Christian faith.

### **Seamless Connections**

As the discussion of hospitality illustrated, home life and service are really all one piece for Christians. Care for one another prepares us for caring for those beyond our family circle. And caring for those beyond our family circle helps us to love those within more deeply. The ordinary is sacred, and the sacred is ordinary. Rubio calls this “the ethics of the ordinary life” (Rubio, 2010, p. 4).

Caring for our own sick family member is service to Christ just as much as caring for a sick neighbor. The “ordinary” decisions we make about our life together are the ground for our concern for God’s larger world. What do we pay the woman who stays with our children while we go to work – is it enough to live on or what we can get by with in the market? What decisions do we make about foods we purchase or grow and how our purchasing has an impact on God’s creation? These are the “little” ways of the Christian faith that profoundly shape our life together and ground our service in our life together. Community service as a family twice a week needs to be grounded in disciplining ourselves to live the Christian way with one another seven days a week. In turn, living faithfully with one another must carry us beyond ourselves, into the world where we are called to care.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article has been adapted from Garland (2010, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> For a review of the various ways family ministry has been defined, see Bickel (1998); Browning et al. (1997); Freudenberg & Lawrence (1998); Garland (1989, 1996, 20002); Hawkins (1969); Hebbard (1995); Held (1987); Joiner (2009); Kehrwald (1994); Lynch & Preister (1988); Lyon & Smith (1998); National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (1996); Patton & Childs (1998); Perkins (1999); Pinson (1978); Richardson (1996); Roehlkepartain (2002); Stedham (1989); Sweley (1986); Throop (1998); and Wasserman & Brugler (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Excerpted from *Inside Out Families* (Garland, 2010), with permission.

## Christian Families Serving Together: A Review of the Research

<sup>4</sup> This portion of the survey has become the Christian Faith Practices Scale and is available in Sherr, Stamey, and Garland (2009).

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## **CHRISTIAN LEADERS SUMMARY**

Diana R. Garland

Family ministry is any activity that directly or indirectly (1) forms families in the congregational community; (2) increases the Christ-likeness of the family relationships of Christians; and/or (3) equips and supports families for the work to which they are called (Garland, 1996, 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2012). This article reviews the research literature related to the third focus of that definition: family engagement in service together.

More than anything else, families in congregations are asking for help in finding ways to serve together. Even, and perhaps especially when families are struggling, they need to know their lives together count for something beyond their own happiness. Moreover, those involved in service to their communities report that they pray, attend worship services, and give of their financial resources significantly more than those not involved in service. Active engagement in service to others has a more profound positive impact upon the faith of teenagers and adults than any other faith activity, including attending congregational worship.

This article describes how leaders can engage with and support congregational families as they live into their calling to serve by: (1) developing families' taste for ministry; (2) seeking service opportunities that are relational; (3) inviting families to serve; (4) preparing them for serving; (5) recognizing and supporting them as they serve; (6) reflecting on the relationship between service and faith; (7) encouraging families to celebrate; and (8) naturalizing or ending time-limited projects.

The language of "volunteering" has often been used to describe Christian service. But this language from the literature of the social sciences and civic engagement does not fit the service that is an expression of Christian faith. First, a volunteer is usually someone who is neither paid nor has professional expertise for the service. In contrast, Christian service may be either paid or professional or both. Second, to be a volunteer means being free to give service – or not. Volunteer responsibilities are usually considered secondary to vocational choices and other personal responsibilities. More important, the language of "volunteering" implies an optional role – something we can choose to do and, when we are tired of it, choose not to do. Service is not "optional" in the life of a Christian. Finally, volunteering is something done in the margins of our lives, when and if we have time. "Voluntary" plants, for example, are those considered accidents; they come up from seed scattered accidentally or from roots growing beyond where the gardener planned. Christian service is not voluntary, however; it is not accidental or beyond the boundaries. Instead, it is the heart of living out our faith as Christian families.