

We're More Than Friends, We're Family

The Importance of Building Caring Relationships in the Congregation

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From my own experience and the many years of trial and error in planning effective programs for faith formation, I have discovered care and nurture is the essential first step in our ministries. Caring begins with hospitality and opening our doors to all ages by connecting through conversation. The value of an honest, caring conversation cannot be underestimated. Often times we can attend church week after week and sit in the same place, surrounded by the same people, and still not know very much about the person sitting next to us.

How can we build and support others beyond our own walls if we do not take the time to nurture and care for one another? Opportunities for getting to know one another should be a priority. Caring conversations are followed by caring actions.

Recently I met with church leaders representing Latino congregations. Our goal was to design a plan for equipping leaders in the congregation with tools to encourage and support faith formation. As we were talking, the topic of family came up as defining where to start. It was mentioned that an emphasis on faith in the home would be a good place to begin. A conversation many of us have heard time and time again in the context of church about careful use of words and using the word family followed. Our understanding of family in English is Mom, Dad, and the children under one roof. Extended family is also included in this description. Often times when we talk about family ministry in the congregation, we need to be clear that it is more than immediate family. We use words like household to better describe who family is, but our desire in the setting of the church is to envision all ages under our roof as family.

In today's world the family living in each household has a different look. Defining family as simply, "Mom, Dad, and the kids" is less and less the norm. It's like we're walking on eggshells when it comes to defining family in the context of the congregation. We provide resources and materials to encourage all different ages to grow in their faith and we seek to connect generations under the umbrella of cross-generational ministry. We often include family ministry in the title for leaders in the congregation. We struggle to help people understand that when we say family, it includes everyone and all ages.

In Spanish, the word familia, meaning family, encompasses much more than the immediate family. Using the word familia means all ages, includes the extended family, and beyond. As our group continued processing the importance of words when naming programs in the church, the word familia was one that clearly is understood in the Spanish-speaking congregation as those under this roof and is a given when describing brothers and sisters in Christ. I like using the word familia especially in the context of the church. The more we care for one another, the closer we grow to becoming familia under one roof. Familia can face the world together. Familia can go in to the world together because they have a place to return to where caring happens. Allowing time for caring conversations turns relationships in to caring ones.

Family originally comes from the Latin word familia. As I searched online for definitions of family, I found one of the meanings relevant, from my perspective, to how we do ministry in the congregation: *One of the primary functions of the family is to produce and reproduce persons, biologically and/or socially. This can occur through the sharing of material substances (such as food); the giving and receiving of care and nurture.*

I'd like to change the definition to redefining family in the context of the church as: *One of the primary functions of the church family is to produce and reproduce persons, spiritually. This can occur through the sharing of conversation, scripture, and prayer (also food); the giving and receiving of care and nurture to one another results in caring relationships so that we may serve our neighbors.*

What would it look like if we envisioned our primary function in the faith community to produce and reproduce spiritually? Sounds like making disciples to me. This could surely occur through the sharing of food, conversation, and prayer. The end result would be the giving and receiving of care and nurture. What better way to build caring relationships?

Something to consider: Until we take the time to initiate conversations with one another and begin to care for the “familia” we have in our own congregations, the likelihood of us serving others beyond our walls is less.

Suggested Steps to Grow Caring Relationships in the Congregation

- 1. Provide opportunities for conversation to happen.** Assuming that people will talk with one another does not guarantee growing relationships. Guided questions about our lives help us get to know one another more deeply. And when push comes to shove in our lives, unless someone really knows us, we cannot expect them to be there when we need them. Many actions are misunderstood for lack of knowing a person.
- 2. Be intentional.** We can plan and implement program after program. People come and people go. But until we become more intentional about growing our families through providing first steps beginning with getting to know one another, the end result cannot be building caring relationships. Intentional means we do it on purpose and deliberately. We can't just ask nicely, do it once, and expect results. It is in the hands of the leaders to be intentional and provide a setting where caring conversations can take place. The eldest do not know the youngest in many settings because of lack of opportunity. If need be, provide child care for the very youngest so that parents and siblings can participate.
- 3. Initiate conversations in small group settings.** The likelihood of all ages and all personalities feeling comfortable and wanting to talk happens in small group settings, not large ones. Most likely there are existing small groups already meeting in your setting. What happens when they meet? Does every small group that meets begin with building caring relationships as a priority? Each time the small group meets there should be an opportunity for all to speak.
- 4. Start simple.** If there are existing groups, ask each group to take some time before they begin to talk with one another about something that happened in their lives in the past week.

Rarely do people think to do this. It is not wasted time. It is important time. If you are establishing new small groups, begin with coffee and dessert and meet in a home or comfortable setting. Make the priority getting to know one another and then support when and where this group would like to meet next. Help them grow relationships. Bible study may sound difficult to some but coffee and conversation is simple and a beginning.

5. **Identify facilitators.** When forming small groups or even in existing ones, it is important to identify someone who can keep the conversation flowing and facilitate the conversations. Gathering facilitators and helping them understand the importance of each person having a voice is very helpful. Also knowing the goal for those asked to be facilitators is to create a caring environment can help them be at ease. You are not asking them to teach or know any specific material. Simply ask them to be there and be present. It is a good idea to decide how to address needs or concerns that may surface in a group. And also know that there is a time and a place for the very lowest of lows in one's life. Make sure you have a plan for those who may have special needs.
6. **Role model for facilitators.** When beginning to form groups, it is important to role model a simple setting and help facilitators understand their role is to listen and encourage everyone to talk. A simple structure is best. Move from caring conversations about their week to prayer concerns and a closing prayer. Sometimes we get so caught up in wanting to disperse information that we lose sight of our goal to create a caring relationship. The best way to get facilitators on board is to role model.
7. **Identify relevant topics related to Scripture.** A first step after initial conversation is to choose a Scripture verse. Perhaps one that was recently read during worship. Take simple steps to ask what word jumps out at them and then reflect on this word. Help the small group to understand this process is something we call application. In other words, it relates to our lives. Often times, we do not take the time to take simpler steps in approaching Scripture. Helping people take small steps to see the relevance in their own lives deepens relationships too.
8. **Serve food and beverages.** I always point back to the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Chart to remind us that in our role as leaders, we cannot expect that people are fed and come ready to listen and participate. The Chart indicates that one of our most basic needs is food and water. Providing this basic need in today's busy world when one carves out time to join us after work/school or in between family obligations with school and sports can be much appreciated and adds to the way we build caring relationships.
9. **Turn phones on silence.** Name this time as something special. Both children and adults will thirst to return to a place where someone listens and someone cares. In today's world with social media and communications happening online, face to face talk is rare. The goal for your time together is to "be" together.
10. **Follow up.** If you begin the process of consciously viewing caring relationships as your goal in existing small groups or begin new small groups, it is important to be accountable. Checking in with facilitators is important and providing a guideline for how many times

groups will meet and some type of evaluation of what has been working or not working can be the defining point in the success of each group. Adjust accordingly. Without follow up, the tracking of growing, caring relationships can be difficult and assumptions that all is well and working may not be accurate.

As faith communities, we all struggle to provide cross-generational opportunities as an integral part of our faith formation programs. Recently, I have encountered numerous conversations about connecting all ages in the setting of our faith communities on websites, in emails, and on Facebook pages. It is a hot topic. Immediate and extended families need support, nurture, and care. There is a true need for empty nesters, singles, and seniors to come together as part of the family to serve as mentors and build relationships. Together we can help support all the generations meeting under one roof.

The reality: The congregation/faith community is the last place we have today where we actually have all the ages coming together as a family under one roof.

In one phone conversation I had with a Director of Family Faith Formation, I heard her passion for creating opportunities for all ages to meet together in a cross-generational setting. I also heard disappointment when she began to describe her desire for a better understanding of family in the context of the church. She said, "***At church we should be more than friends, we should be family.***" She expressed the need for the older generations to be faith mentors for parents and children. When we are talking family, we cannot dismiss the fact that it includes all ages.

I began to think about what was said and realized the difference between family and friends is that friends are most likely to be same ages and have common interests. It's good to have friends who are like-minded and with whom we can share activities. There is a time and a place for friends to meet. But where in society do we provide places for families to meet?

Families have a variety of shapes and looks. Ages vary and even though interests are not the same, they continue to live together and love one another through thick and thin. How does one use the word family as an open invitation for all ages? It is indeed a challenge.

I like the idea of having a place to go to be with family, especially in today's transient world. Let's begin to take steps to build caring relationships where we meet and invite one another to ***be*** family. After all, we should be more than friends. We ***are*** family!