Transforming Our Narratives about Families
In the 21st Century

Theological Perspective
Challenges

• Negotiating a working relationship with a fast-paced, instant-gratification, media-driven society
• Finding enough time to get it all done
• Dealing with change
• Transitions through lifecycle stages

Good News!

“As Christian families, you not only belong to the Church, but your daily life is a true expression of the Church.”

“Become who you are!”
Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*

The family is the primary setting for socialization, since it is where we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one. The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home. In the family, we learn closeness, care and respect for others. . . . Every day the family has to come up with new ways of appreciating and acknowledging its members (276).

Families & Faith

- Primary Influence: Parents and the Family
- Secondary Influence: The Congregation and Significant Adults
Each Person Needs . . .

- **Gatekeeper of the Faith**
  - how much and what sorts of religious content to encounter

- **Interpreter of the Faith**
  - meaningful embodiment of the Christian faith

- **Sponsor of the Faith**
  - point of access between church & home

- **Parent / Key Adult**

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Pastoral Perspective
Doing Family

- Basic
- Fundamental
- Spiritual

Needs

Met
- Key people
- Developmental relationships

Network
- Beyond Family
- Relational Process

Who Matters?

- Blood Family
- Household Family
- Essential Relationships
Priority

- Essential
  - Children
  - Youth
  - Adults

Developmental Relationships

- Key people contribute to meeting our fundamental human needs
- Cannot *develop* without these relationships
- Key people contribute to our fundamental spiritual needs
- Cannot *develop faith* without these relationships
Developmental Relationships

Express care
- Faith
- Traction
- Care
- Challenge
growth
- Share
power
- Provide
support

Family

Nuclear Family
- Seedbed of Faith Formation
- Network of Developmental Relationships

Research Applies
- Biblical Nature
Social Perspective

Overview

A. Trends in Families and Society: How Do We Interpret & Respond?

B. Six Critical Shifts
   1. Toward strengths and resilience
   2. Toward relationships in families
   3. Toward “living into” faith
   4. Toward relationships with families
   5. Toward empowering families
   6. Toward community-center ministries
Discuss: Our Families

With someone next to you:

• Say your name.
• Who do you consider to be part of your family?
• What is ONE THING you love most about your family?

Competing Narratives about Families

What We Hear

• Families are broken, dysfunctional
• 64% of parents say: Families have declined

What We Experience

• Families are the most important part of life
• 75% of adults say: They are very satisfied with family

In Summary

Today’s families are really messed up. Nothing is more important to me than my family.
The Changing Family

We are seeing evidence of families changing everywhere:

- Interracial and inter-religious families
- Families being “spiritual” but not always “religious”
- Families taking in other kids
- Dads at the bus stop
- The growing prominence of pets
- Blended families becoming even more blended
- Single parents linking with other single parents

Changing Families

Pew Research Center

2015

Survey of 1,807 U.S. parents with children younger than 18.

www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/parenting-in-america/
Most mothers are now in the labor force, including mothers of infants and toddlers.

A minority of children under 18 (46%) live with two parents in their first marriage.
Families Today: Some Facts

Those in single-parent families are most likely to be living in poverty.

Families Today: Some Facts

A majority of births among African American and Hispanic children are to unmarried women.
Half of all moms (51%) believe they are doing “a very good job” as a parent.

The vast majority of parents see being a parent as central to their own identity.
Families Today: Some More Facts

Even with the challenges, most parents say being a parent is rewarding and enjoyable.

Adaptability: A Core Family Strength

"Families still matter greatly, and families can and do tend to perform well those functions that are particularly relevant to the lives of children, even in different social and historical contexts, household arrangements, and living conditions."

How Do We Frame the Path Forward?

How do these larger trends align or conflict with what you experience in your own family and the families you touch?

How do our congregations engage with these trends?

The Changing World Families Navigate

Multi-Cultural and Global
Religious Pluralism
Digital World
The Changing World Families Navigate

Opportunity and Income Gaps

Declines in Participation

Social Poverty and Isolation

Where Are Our Churches in All This?

Changing Families

Changing World Around Families
Six Narrative Transformations

1. Pathologize, Idealize → Strengths, Resilience
2. Parenting Strategies → Relationships in Families
3. “Passing on” Faith → “Living into” Faith
4. Reach thru Programs → Reach thru Relationships
5. Serving Families → Empowering Families
6. Congregation Centered → Community Centered

“Most studies . . . tended to dismiss the family as hopelessly dysfunctional and to seek positive extrafamilial resources to counter the negative impact. Thus, families were seen to contribute to risk, but not to resilience.”

— Froma Walsh

A Dominant Story about Families

• “In crisis”—Risks, deficits, dysfunction
• Structure and place in society = destiny

Implications for Ministry

• Need us (professionals) to “fix” or “help” them
• Work around, compensate

An Alternate Story about Families

Most families . . .

• Want the best for kids
• Are strong and resilient, even amid challenges
• Have capacities to learn, grow, heal
Reframing Families

• Move your thinking from “bad families” to “bad situations” to “difficult situations”

• Sheila’s story: single mom working two jobs with a deadbeat ex-husband

• How can you discover the truth about your families so you can really minister to them?

Six Narrative Transformations

1. **Pathologize, Idealize**
2. **Strengths, Resilience**
3. **Parenting Strategies**
4. **Relationships in Families**
“Whether the **burdens** come from the hardships of poverty, the challenges of parental substance abuse or serious mental illness, the stresses of war, the threats of recurrent violence or chronic neglect, or a combination of factors, the **single most common finding** is that children who end up doing well have had at least one **stable and committed relationship** with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.”


*Harvard University*

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**Six Narrative Transformations**

1. **Pathologize, Idealize**
2. **Parenting Strategies**
3. **“Passing on” Faith**
4. **Strengths, Resilience**
5. **Relationships in Families**
6. **“Living into” Faith**
The Metaphor Shaping Our Approaches

**Passing on the Faith**
- “I have it to give to you”
- Parents teach what they know (or believe, practice) so kids will know and believe it, too
- Set-aside “faith time”

**Living into the Faith**
- “The Spirit is at work in you”
- We create and participate in shared experiences and practices through which faith comes to life
- Integrated into life

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**Six Narrative Transformations**

1. Pathologize, Idealize
2. Parenting Strategies
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5. Strengths, Resilience
6. Relationships in Families
7. “Living into” Faith
8. Reach thru Relationships
Relationships: The Active Ingredient

“The effectiveness of child-serving programs, practices, and policies is determined first and foremost by whether they strengthen or weaken developmental relationships. . . . When this type of relationship is not available or is diluted, interventions show limited effects.”

— Junlei Li & Megan Julian, 2012
University of Pittsburgh

Relational Questions to Ask

• How do we express care with families (in church AND community)?
• How do we challenge growth in families?
• How do we provide support when families really need it?
• How do we share power with families?
• How do we encourage families to expand possibilities?

• Listen to them
• Show interest in their lives
• Invest in them

• Give them a voice in things that matter
• Collaborate with them

• Follow their interests
• Connect them with new, different people
• Introduce new opportunities and ideas
Six Narrative Transformations

1. Pathologize, Idealize → Strengths, Resilience
2. Parenting Strategies → Relationships in Families
3. “Passing on” Faith → “Living into” Faith
4. Reach thru Programs → Reach thru Relationships
5. Serving Families → Empowering Families

Talking Past Each Other

SCHOOLS SAY . . .
- Families don’t care what happens at school.
- We communicate with families ALL THE TIME.
- Families don’t take advantage of school-based services, like tutoring.
- Families won’t return our phone calls.

PARENTS SAY . . .
- School doesn’t care about families.
- School NEVER communicates.
- They have TUTORING?
- They’ve CALLED?
Barriers: What Families Said

- Really busy.
- Haven’t felt welcome in the past.
- Worried that they won’t understand.
- Think immigration status might be questioned.
- Believe that everything’s okay; they haven’t heard otherwise.
- BIGGEST: *Families did not believe they could do anything to make a difference.*

Connecting Families with Opportunities

- **Start by listening:** What’s really important the family?
  - Putting faith into practice around a burning issue for the family
  - Spending time together
  - Supporting family members around a particular issue
  - Being with people with shared beliefs and values
  - Expanding the family’s horizons
  - Making a difference for others or for a cause
- Create opportunities for reflection, integration
- Resist pressing families to “volunteer” for things that aren’t important to them.
- Guide families in a path toward deeper engagement
## Six Narrative Transformations

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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Strengths, Resilience</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Relationships in Families</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Empowering Families</td>
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### Parenting Strategies
- Pathologize
- Idealize
- Strengths, Resilience

### “Passing on” Faith
- “Passing on” Faith
- “Living into” Faith

### Reach thru Programs
- Reach thru Programs
- “Living into” Faith

### Serving Families
- Serving Families
- Empowering Families

### Congregation Centered
- Congregation Centered
- Community Centered

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## Community-Centered Engagement

**From . . . Congregation-Centered**
- Activity based
- Parents as individuals
- Parents follow the organization’s agenda
- Workshops that provide information
- Organization-to-parent communication

**Toward . . . Community-Centered**
- Relationship based
- Parents as members of the community, networks
- Parents as collaborators in setting the agenda
- Build capacity for growth and leadership
- Mutual exchange of relational power

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Shaped by a Web of Relationships
(as depicted through PowerPoint clip art)

Parenting Adults
Other Family
Friends
Congregational Leaders

Mentors
Community Members
Teachers / Coaches / Program Staff

Six Narrative Transformations

1. Strengths, Resilience
   - What themes or patterns stand out for you?

2. Relationships in Families
   - What affirmed or encouraged you in your work with families?

3. “Living into” Faith
   - What could you apply now in your work with families?

4. Reach thru Relationships
   - What do you want to explore with others in more depth during this symposium?
Application Perspective

Survey

926 Parents & Grandparents

- 74% Active @ church
- 35% Parenting children
- 30% Parenting young adults
- 43% Parenting teens

- 30% Grandparents
Practices

- 79% Pray together
- 77% Worship together
- 76% Eat together
- 71% Celebrate rituals & holidays
- 58% Serve those in need
- 55% Engage in family conversations
- 51% Nurture my own faith as a parent

Emergent Factors

Intention

Connect with others

Routine => Ritual

Do what works
Congregation Response

- Raise awareness
- Be highly relational
- Facilitate like-to-like
- Create support networks
- Curate good resources
- Teach the basics of faith
- Leverage "gathered" => home practice

Use by Category

- Learning About Faith: 16%
- Caring Conversation: 19%
- Ritual & Tradition: 20%
- Prayer: 14%
- Bible Story: 18%
- Serving Others: 13%
Characteristics

1. KISS . . . Keep it Simple & Short
2. Give It Legs
3. It They Build It . . . They’ll Use It
4. Season / Event Connected
5. Family Moment Connect

Characteristics

6. Life – stage Connected
7. Learn Something New
8. Bible is NOT a Deterrent
9. Model in Gathered Setting
10. Go Deep
11. Hits Home