

Making a Difference: Ministering to 21st Century Families

Ron L. Deal, Family Life Minister, Southwest Church of Christ (Jonesboro, AR) &
President, Successful Stepfamilies

The following address was delivered August 12, 2005 at the Association of Marriage and Family Ministries Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. This is an expanded version of the actual plenary and is edited for print.

Have you noticed that life in America is changing? In the spirit of David Letterman, here are five signs that you live in the new Millennium:

5. You call your son's cell phone to let him know it's time to eat. He emails you back from his bedroom, "What's for dinner?"
4. You chat several times a day with a perfect stranger from South Africa, but you haven't spoken with your next door neighbor yet this year.
3. Your grandmother asks you to send her a JPEG file of your newborn daughter so she can create a screen saver on her laptop.
2. Leaving your house without your cell phone—which you didn't have for the first 30 or 50 years of your life—is cause for panic and an immediate turn around to go back and get it.
1. You get an extra phone line in your house so you can actually get phone calls.

Without question, there are a lot of things changing in our world. And family is one of them. Michelle Radin Deen from Antioch University in Santa Barbara, CA, in an article she published in *Report* (released by the National Council on Family Relations, June '05) says,

“Over the last 30 years, the face of family life has changed dramatically with trends pointing away from the Ozzie and Harriet, married-with-children nuclear family model. Families of all shapes, colors, sizes, and sexual orientations have emerged, forging a new “normal” along the way.

According to the Census 2000:

- *Less than 25% of US population lives in a nuclear family today (including stepfamilies).*
- *Gay and lesbian families have risen 300% between 1990 and 2000.*
- *The number of unmarried couples living together has increased tenfold since 1960, and rose 72% between 1990 and 2000.*
- *Single parenthood jumped 254% between 1970 and 2000.*
- *[added] 30% of all children today are born out-of-wedlock; 41% of [those] babies are born to cohabiting couples.” (pg. F5-F6)*

Certainly family life is changing and we do have some “new normals” in our world, but our task of strengthening families—whatever they may look like—and drawing them into relationship with the Master has not changed.

If we are going to make a difference for the Kingdom, I believe there are 5 constructs to which we must attend:

1. We must be Theo-centric, not family-centric.
2. Our message to families must at its heart be redemptive.
3. Our training must be relevant to families of various forms.
4. We must mature our practice models to reflect our philosophy of family life ministry.
5. We must model self-care and personal boundaries to families.

Construct I: We Must be Theo-Centric, Not Family-Centric

Now at first hearing this sounds funny from someone who has dedicated his life to ministering to families. But we don't minister to families purely for the sake of families. We do it because:

- deep within each individual there lies a soul that will not be complete until it finds rest in it's Creator;
- we minister to the family because in marriage we find the reflection of the image of God. (By the way, it's important to note that a careful examination of Genesis 1 & 5 makes it clear that it is man and woman together that reflect his image; each does partially as individuals, but only together do we fully reflect who God is.);
- and, we minister to the family because, as Royce Money pointed out in his book *Ministering to Families: A Positive Plan of Action*, the family is "the laboratory for Christian living." In other words, the home is where people will learn what it means to connect, forgive, show kindness, live in harmony, and love—all of which ultimately points them toward their heavenly Father.

You see, that's ultimately what family life ministry is about—pointing people toward their heavenly Father. After all, the family is God's plan for both keeping faith alive in the current generation and passing faith to the next (ref. Psalms 78). Family is *the* key mechanism for spiritual formation in children and is a key maturing mechanism for us as adults. For example, is it just me, or has anyone else noticed that *singleness* is God's tool for teaching us self-restraint; *parenting* is God's tool for teaching us humility and prayer; *being parented* as a child is God's tool for teaching us surrender and obedience; *sexuality* is God's tool for teaching us vulnerability and oneness; *marriage* is God's tool for teaching us sacrifice; and *family conflict, crisis, and tragedy* is God's tool for teaching us forgiveness and mercy? God uses all of these aspects of family life to mature us and deepen our faith. Our ministry to families should strive to do the same.

However, my growing concern as of late is that the social and political agendas of our day are pushing us into defending our ideal of the traditional family so much that we are inadvertently elevating the status of that ideology to a place of centrality. If we're not careful, we will become family-centric in our theology, even though we're not intentionally trying to do so. It's natural that when we dig in our heels against the social attacks of our day, we end up losing perspective on the very thing we defend. Family life ministry is not just about defending the family; it's ultimately about defending God's will for the people in families. Let's be sure that we don't lose our perspective on our ultimate objectives. Let's keep God and His purposes at the center of our ministry and teaching.

Construct II: Our Message to Families at its Heart Must Be Redemptive

I've often thought that to stand boldly on the ideals of the traditional family is to stand on shaky ground. I mean, when have you ever seen an *ideal* family? We have all seen the ideal family structure—that is, couples in a first marriage with their own biological children. But I'm pretty confident I've never seen an ideal father, mother, children, and marriage all living in the same home. In fact, one doesn't have to look far even in scripture to realize how imperfect we all are.

One of the questions I address with couples in stepfamilies in my weekend *Building A Successful Stepfamily* conference is, "How does God feel about me and my less-than-ideal family?" Stepfamilies are often plagued by guilt over a past they can't change, and they wonder if they are truly acceptable to God. Even if their local church doesn't treat them as second class (which we often do), stepcouples often project a great deal of judgment and shame on their own family situation.

To address this, I quickly survey with them Old Testament families looking specifically at the Family of Promise. The realization they come to is the same theological lesson for all of us: family performance does not dictate your redemptive value before God, nor will it keep God from using you for His purposes.

For example, consider Abraham, who is well known for his faithful walk with God and for God's promise to make him into a great nation. However, in Genesis 12:13-20 Abram coerced his wife, Sarai, to lie to the Egyptians in order to save his life. "Say you are my sister," he told her. Because Sarai was a beautiful woman, Abram feared that Pharaoh would have him killed in order to have Sarai for himself. Wives, if your husband refused to own you in public and was willing to put you in jeopardy in order to

save his own skin, how would you feel? How would you feel know that in so doing, your husband left you vulnerable to Pharaoh's desires? What if he did it *twice*?!

Believe it or not, later Abraham (God had changed his name) again said—this time to Abimelech—that Sarah was his sister. He feared Abimelech, the king of Gerar, would have him killed, so he handed her over to become another man's wife. In case you're wondering, this is not what Promise Keepers has in mind for husbands! Abraham was a man of great faith, but he was far from being a perfect husband.

But the pattern of selfish husbandry doesn't stop there. Isaac, Abraham's son, who probably wasn't even born when his father disowned his mother, told the same lie about his wife, Rebekah. He, too, feared for his life, so he told the king of the Philistines that Rebekah was his sister (Genesis 26:1-11). Abraham and Isaac's lies were eventually found out, but not before a great many people were hurt by the deception.

By the way, lying wasn't the only thing Abraham and Isaac's family's had in common. They also shared jealousy, favoritism, and family rivalry. Before conceiving Isaac, Sarah grew very weary that God's promised son hadn't come. So Sarah took measures into her own hands. She suggested Abraham take her maidservant, Hagar, to be a second wife so they could conceive a child through her (Genesis 16). But once Hagar conceived, jealousy and competition became the name of the game between Sarah and Hagar. And Abraham wasn't much help, because he refused to take an active leadership in resolving the family conflict. Anger, bitterness, and division were the result, and, of course, these negative qualities were handed down to yet another generation.

In Genesis 27 we read of how Abraham's daughter-in-law, Rebekah, conspired with her favored son, Jacob, to deceive her husband, Isaac. If it worked, Jacob would receive a critically important blessing meant for Esau. Jacob had already cheated his brother out of his birthright, but he wanted more. He wanted a special position, because the other brother and his descendants would serve the one who received the blessing. Rebekah and Jacob's plan worked, and a divided house became even more divided as Esau set out to avenge his loss and kill Jacob. Talk about sibling rivalry!

Jacob then passes on the family pattern of favoritism to his son Joseph, who was his father's favorite son (from four different wives). Jacob even gave him a special robe to signify his love. Joseph's brothers, however, didn't appreciate Joseph's favored status, so they devised a plan to kill him. Only at the last minute did they stop short of murder and decide instead to sell him into slavery. Can you imagine?

Within a few generations of Abraham there were family power struggles, failures to become properly individuated from parents, family secrets, exploitive and coercive relationships, marital game-playing, parent-child alliances, vindictiveness, anger, and sibling rivalries. But that's not all. The family pathology within the Family of Promise continues to mushroom through the family of David whose household included a premeditated murder to cover an affair, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, a son who replicates his father's disgrace by raping his half-sister, and another son who avenges his sister's humiliation by hunting down and murdering the brother who raped her.

(By the way, are you feeling any better about your home?)

Isn't it amazing that none of these families were ideal—either in family form or function? And yet, God used them and redeemed them.

My experience with divorced individuals, single-parents, and stepfamilies, is that they desperately need to hear this message. They often fear judgment, especially if they have a scarlet “D” for “divorced” imprinted in the middle of their forehead for all to see. It gets even worse, some tell me, when they remarry and put an “R” right beside the “D.” They know their family is not God’s ideal family situation, so they wonder just how worthy they are of God’s love and grace.

So what are you to do with the “D” and the “R”? By the way, some stepcouples say the “D” and the “R” stand for “Divorced” and “Remarried,” while others tell me it stands for “Dumb” and “Really dumb,” but I want to suggest today that they stand for “Delivered” and “Redeemed.” Family performance has never determined our redemptive value to God—it didn’t for Abraham or David—and it won’t for us today. The message of God’s work of deliverance and redemption in our lives is not a result of our worthiness, but His graciousness. I frequently remind stepcouples that there’s no such thing as a second-class Christian, because there’s no such thing as a first-class Christian. There are only sinners in need of a cross. That is a message that must be communicated to all families, and all peoples, everywhere.

What, then, should we do with God’s ideal? Do our ministries give up on God’s design for the family since it will never be achieved? Absolutely not! We must teach God’s ideal for marriage and the family louder and stronger than ever before. We need to drop anchor in God’s truth for the home and teach it far and wide. But we must also balance that great truth with God’s incredible grace for all who fall short of it.

One of my favorite stories is of Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well in John 4. We find Jesus wearing his family ministry hat one day, sitting by a well in

Samaria. And what does he find? A cohabiting 5-time divorcee', likely with many children with multiple fathers, who are being cooked in an intergenerational family recipe for failure—the same recipe she likely grew up in—the same one her children will likely repeat as adults.

What does he notice? She's thirsty.

What does he give her? Living water.

Watch how he goes about it: First he engages her in a conversation, and, despite their ethnic hostilities, Jesus is able to talk to her about “thirst” (vs. 5-14). When she asks for some of his “living water,” Jesus can see that even though he is pointing to an eternal, dependable relationship, she doesn't quite understand. So, he shifts the topic to her earthly, fractured relationships. “Go, call your husband and come back” (vs. 16).

Jesus touches the deepest part of her earthly soul—the most empty, unfulfilled part—to get her attention. The result is credibility: “Sir, I can see that you are a prophet” (vs. 19). Now, he can talk to her about spiritual things and he has her full attention.

Notice first that by bringing up her marital past, Jesus is implicitly reminding her that her life is not as it should be. He doesn't shy away from the truth of God's ideal, but he also doesn't leave her hanging hopeless. He gives her living water.

Secondly, notice that he taps into her earthly thirst (i.e., to find emotional security & safety) so that he can tap into her eternal thirst. We can do the same. Ministry should uphold God's ideal for the home and teach His design for the family **and** take people from where they are to a place of living water.

By the way, did you know that most Jews traveling north to Galilee crossed the Jordan and journeyed north on the eastern side to avoid Samaria? Being involved in

family life ministry in the 21st century will mean—as it always has—sitting by wells and dealing with some pretty messed up individuals and families. Yet, God’s power to deliver and redeem is alive and available to all who call out to Him. It is our privilege to offer them living water!

I’ll never forget hearing Dr. Jimmy Adcox, senior minister of the church I work with in Jonesboro, Arkansas, nearly a decade ago say that the church stands in the audacious position of upholding God’s truths to the world and yet being a spiritual hospital to all those who fail to uphold those truths. Jesus put it this way (Matt. 9:12-13) after being chastised by the Pharisees for eating with tax collectors and sinners, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

What then should we learn about ministering to families?

Lesson 1: Our ministry should often take us to sit by wells.

Lesson 2: Our message must be redemptive in nature, or we’ll leave people just as thirsty as we found them.

Construct III: Our Training Must Be Relevant to Families of Various Forms

Part of being a spiritual hospital for individuals and families means receiving them where they are and leading them forward in Christ. Doing so, by the way, does not mean we have accepted their past. We can be pro-hospital without being pro-illness, just as Jesus was. But it does mean, given the brokenness of our world, that we will encounter many different family forms. When theology and practical ministry collide, we must find a way to connect.

Therefore, if we are going to be Theo-centric, we have to let God's word tell us what is acceptable behavior for believers and what is not. And then, we have to find a way to be relevant. For example, we should uphold to the homosexual and to the cohabiting couple God's desire that they remain sexually pure, and do so in such a way that we maintain our influence with them—not heavy-handed and condemning, but with compassion as they consider a difficult truth for their lives. When they then ask, "But how?" we must have practical mechanisms of response as they begin to try to live based on God's truth.

It is this task to be practically relevant that is most challenging for many of us in ministry. Church-work is all-consuming and, at times, exhausting. Finding the time to retool and understand many different types of families so that our teaching and counsel can be directly on-target is difficult. My journey to understand and minister to stepfamilies, for example, has taught me to carefully consider the unique dynamics of many other families: adoptive families, inter-racial marriages, grandparents raising children, single parent families; remarriages in later life, etc., etc. There is so much to learn and stay informed about (it can be exhausting). But we must try.

In order to have teaching that is relevant to a wide variety of families today, I believe we need to do three things. First, set aside time each year to read or study about diverse family experiences. In addition, attending workshops at this event which expose you to multiple family dynamics and ministry ideas will help you retool and have relevant things to say.

Second, a helpful method to use when teaching is making use of "side-bars" during general marriage and family classes to publicly address different family types.

For example, when teaching about parenting, be sure to “step aside” and address how single parents and stepparents might apply a parenting principle differently. After a few minutes, you can return to your general subject and continue with the class. This raises awareness and allows you to point people to further resources or programs that might speak more directly to their family situation. We also need this from the pulpit to create church-wide awareness and communicate “grace-acceptance” from the senior pastor for families of various forms.

Third, the statistics referenced earlier support the idea that we do need classes and/or ministries that target specific types of families such as single parent homes, stepfamilies, and families with disabled children. For many of us this means retooling and learning something new so we can speak directly to their life.

For example, divorce prevention is one of the cornerstones of family life ministry. However, our typical marriage education course only speaks to the issues of first-marriage couples. While the information is very helpful to stepcouples, as our research is confirming, such marriage education doesn't completely speak to the unique stressors and broader stepfamily dynamics that most effectively erode a stepcouple's relationship (stepcouples are divorcing at a rate of at least 60%, perhaps as high as 70%). In other words, it turns out that not all marriages are created equal and, therefore, need specialized education. If the church is going to help stop the multigenerational cycle of divorce and remarriage divorce, we must get serious about retooling in order to speak directly into the lives of couples in stepfamilies.

Construct IV: We Must Mature Our Practice Models to Reflect Our Philosophy

For years I've felt like our rhetoric about what family life ministry is supposed to be is much better than our practice. To make a difference in the 21st Century, I think we need to mature three significant aspects of our ministry:

1. We must practice Biblically-based, research informed family life ministry, not secular scientific family life ministry.
2. Have an integrated, not segregated model of ministry.
3. Strive to become a service oriented family ministry.

First, we must make sure we are practicing “Biblically-based, research informed” family life ministry, not “secular scientific” family life ministry. Let's consider each of those phrases.

A “Biblically-based” ministry will ensure that scripture forms the basis of our understanding of marriage and the family and that we constantly draw people back to the heart of God. I remember logging on to Amazon.com one day to see that someone had posted what they considered to be very negative comments about my book *The Smart Stepfamily*. They complained that God, faith, or the Bible was mentioned on nearly every page in the book. I was thrilled and took it as a compliment. We should strive to make sure scripture is the basis for all our teaching on the family.

To be “research informed” means embracing the notion that *all truth is God's truth* and that we should utilize the social sciences to uncover God's truth for the family. I distinctly remember hearing John Gottman at the 1998 Smart Marriages Conference say, “Unfortunately, when it comes to marriage education, you don't have to be right, you just have to be interesting.” He was saying that many marriage educators are

entertaining and interesting in their presentations, but not accurate in the content of what they teach. I believe we should be both—make that “all three”: interesting, accurate in our content, and grounded in scripture.

To not have a “secular scientific” family life ministry means not giving into the temptation to indiscriminately utilize secular materials in Christian settings. We can learn much from secular family life education, but we shouldn’t regularly feed our churches a diet of secular family-centric, not Theo-centric, education. The family studies academic world is struggling with old and new definitions of family, and if we blindly follow their lead, we are going to drift away from our anchor of truth. For example, the National Council on Family Relations, the premier academic and scholarly organization in the US on family relationships, will have its annual conference here in Phoenix in November. The theme is “Multiple Meanings of Families,” which reflects a current struggle to define the family (How does one define family when *everything* is to be tolerated?). One keynote speaker is Judith “Jack” Halberstam, a professor from USC and author of books like *Female Masculinity*. From her picture I can tell you that “Jack,” as she likes to be called, is quite a handsome man herself. She will be speaking on “Forgetting Family: Queer Studies and Anti-Oedipal Discourse”. (You can count on her not speaking at an upcoming Association of Marriage and Family Ministries conference!) Friends, we can learn a lot from secular research, but we shouldn’t forget where our anchor lies.

Maturing our family life ministry practice also means having an integrated, not segregated ministry. This needs to happen on three levels:

1. Strive to network the various ministries of the church for the common good of the home.
2. Integrate the church-family as a whole to minister to one another.
3. Attempt to balance segregated age-appropriate learning experiences with opportunities for “family units” to learn spiritual truths together.

Organizationally we should strive to network the various ministries of the church for the common good of the home. When I was studying youth ministry in my undergraduate program, we were challenged not to become the “thumb” of the church. Youth programs and classes that always segregated teenagers from the rest of the congregation eroded a sense of community and mutual service. Oddly enough, it seems that most ministries today, especially in larger congregation tend to be distinct silos of effort, like separate fingers on one’s hand. Each “department” such as student ministry, children’s ministry, worship ministry, men’s ministry, women’s bible study, etc. etc. has its own leadership, decision making process, programs, and purposes. The cumulative impact on the church, or more specifically, families of the church, is an overcrowded schedule that separates, divides, and inadvertently erodes the family’s opportunity to be the primary source of faith formation and growth that God designed it to be. Instead of trying to do it all for them, churches need to find ways of helping families to minister to themselves.

Family life ministries, then, can strive to be the “palm of the hand”, bringing together the various fingers of ministry: Worship ministry, men’s ministry, marriage education, student ministry, children’s ministry, etc. Together, ministries work to support the family (not institutional church programs) and minister to and through the

home. Together, ministry staff structures their church calendars keeping in mind how busy and how divided families are as a result of the activities planned. Together, there is a synergy of effort that builds up family members and connects them to their primary ministry target: their own home and unbelievers in contact with them.

A second component of having an integrated, not segregated, ministry involves integrating the church-family as a whole to minister to one another. The fractured nature of families today makes the intergenerational connections of the church-family even more important. Singles are invited, then, to be part of family outings so that they can have an influence on the children of their adult friends. Couples married over 20 years are invited become mentor couples to engaged and newly married couples. Single parents are invited to share themselves with senior adults who need an extra set of hands a couple hours each week.

There will be many barriers to accomplishing this, but one that immediately stands out to me is confronting our “study model” of discipleship. Dr. Darrell Tippins has noted that the “Study Model” of spiritual formation, i.e., having bible study to become more Christ-like, arose with the invention of the printing press. However, the scriptural model of spiritual formation is the “Imitatio Model” which emphasizes apprenticeship and imitation—first the imitation of Jesus and then of those who imitate him (Paul said, “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ” 1 Cor. 11:1; see also Phil. 3:17; Heb 13:7).

That’s why I’m so excited to see the increase in marriage mentoring ministries and “family to family” ministries that so naturally take place in the small groups of the church. When one husband is able come into the home of another more mature

husband week after week during a life group discussion, and learn first-hand what spiritual leadership is, family ministry is taking place. This kind of relational discipleship is very powerful and takes them beyond what “study” can.

An integrated, not segregated, ministry will also attempt to balance segregated age-appropriate learning experiences with opportunities for “family units” to learn spiritual truths *together*. It occurred to me a few years ago that because of an emphasis in having specialized children’s worship and bible classes each and every time we gathered at the building, a young family in our congregation didn’t ever have to worship God together. A child could be in the third grade before ever experiencing worship with his or her parent. I’m all for having a children’s bible hour, but that’s ridiculous. Needless to say, that has begun to change.

Churches need to ask themselves, *How does this program or that philosophy support parents and marriages? How can we balance our efforts so as to bring families together to learn spiritual truths instead of always dividing them?* Doing so facilitates what Ben Freudenberg, in his book *The Family Friendly Church*, called a “home-centered, church-supported ministry” that encourages parents to be primarily responsible for the spiritual development of their children.

One way we are trying to emulate this principle at my church is through an all-church retreat. Later this coming fall, our student, children’s, worship, and family ministries have combined efforts to sponsor a church-wide retreat. It is open to all households—no matter what type their family. The theme is simple: “It’s About Time.” Our strategy? First, give families an opportunity to be together away from the hustle and bustle of life; second, create opportunities for parents, children, and family groups

to connect matters of faith to the camp activities. This, then, becomes a metaphor for faithful family living. As families “sit at home” (or in the lodge) they can tell stories of faith; as they “walk along the road” (on a horse) they can connect experience to God’s truths; and as they “get up” and go for a hike, they can share in the beauty of God’s creation (Duet 6:7). What we won’t do on this retreat is have one break-out session for women, not one children’s worship time, or one parenting workshop. Parents can share faith lessons with their children; families can share with other families; and singles can join parents in supporting each other’s faith walk. (Sounds a little like what the church is supposed to be, huh.)

Finally, maturing our practice of family life ministry means becoming a “service oriented family ministry.” Here I point to Diana Garland’s concept of “Families in Ministry, Ministry” (*Family Ministry*, Intervarsity Press, 1999). For far too long have we viewed families as the “audience” in our training and not “participants” in the ministry. Family ministry may start by meeting the needs of people you find sitting by the well, but it can’t stop there. If we want to mature people as husbands, wives, grandparents, stepparents, parents, and disciples of Jesus Christ, we must minister *through* them, not just to them. To some degree this will happen naturally, as it did with the woman at the well who went and told everyone what Jesus had done for her. But we must also facilitate that through our ministry structure.

So we strive to get, for example:

- a) parents ministering to their own children through regular family spiritual times;
- b) couples teaching 5th grade Bible class *together*;
- c) single parents reaching out to the elderly;

- d) a repentant addict to lead a support group;
- e) family households serving together at the city mission soup kitchen (not just the teenagers);
- f) seniors to come out of spiritual retirement to walk along side younger families as spiritual grandparents.

These are the efforts that will mature God's people and grow God's church and help to bring an end to the consumerism that plagues so many of our churches.

Construct V: We Must Model Self-Care and Personal Boundaries

Does life at your church seem busy? It should not surprise us that churches over-program their families, spreading them thinner and thinner, because we—the leaders of those programs—over-program ourselves. In today's hectic fast-paced family living, we must learn to practice the "less is more" approach to ministry, not just for the sake of families, but for our sake as well. Yes, there's always some good work to do—and churches should continue to be very intentional in their programming efforts. But we must also constantly assess the activity level of the entire church and how that is impacting families and our personal lives. It's a strange thought, but sometimes the best family life ministry decision is to do nothing. At other times, good ministry choices focus on consolidating efforts between ministry groups so that families have less demand on their time and energy. And, of course, this helps to keep our lives in balance, too.

You see, to help families make positive choices that enhance their family, we have to model for them good self-care choices. In other words, we have to be good

leaders. And leadership is as much a function of who each of us is as a person as any technique that we might read in a book.

It is common in American leadership today—from the federal government to local civic officials, from CEOs to parents, from managers to church elders—to tailor leadership decisions to the immaturity of the people being served. We give people what they whine for. But on-demand-feeding does not bring about a maturing of disciples. In fact, it facilitates immaturity and perpetual weakness, which can only be dissipated by clear, decisive, well-defined leadership. Practicing what Edwin Friedman calls differentiated leadership (*A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 1999) not only advances the work of the church, it models for parents how to raise children and for families how to make critical decisions that will grow their family.

Believe it or not, thriving in ministry has less to do with the externals (e.g., the congregation's personality or preferences in worship style; whether the elders are shepherds or a board of directors) and more to do with who you are and how you manage yourself. So let me offer you a picture of well-defined, differentiated leadership.

Be responsible to your congregation, not for them. The first quality of differentiated leadership is knowing what is yours to manage and what is someone else's. Truly the lure of helping never runs out. There is a very fine line between being responsible "to" others, but not "for" them.

Being responsible "to" another means you respond with competency to their needs, occasionally making personal sacrifices of time and energy, but keeping the burden of responsibility for growth on their shoulders. The goal is to create a context for change, without trying to force the change on the individual. Being responsible "for"

another happens when you make it your goal to see change in their life. A good indication that you've fallen prey to this temptation is when change doesn't happen in someone's life and you feel guilty or responsible or increase your efforts to tip them into growth. I remember a few years ago another minister in our area tried to refer a number of couples to me for marital therapy. Not having a great deal of counseling training himself, my friend worked with the couples as best he could and when they didn't show improvement, he rightfully referred them to someone more qualified to help. But when the couples hesitated, he quickly backed away from the referral and continued to see them. Inadvertently, he was becoming part of the problem. For the one couple who did actually come to see me, I later found out that he paid from his own personal pocket for their sessions. Simply put, he was a rescuer with an above-average Messiah complex—and he wasn't helping. Taking on their burdens and making them his own was sabotaging their need to take firm responsibility for their own lives and find a way to change.

But to be able to make such decisions, we must learn to unhook from the spiritual and emotional maturity—or immaturity—of the people we serve. For example, the best parents are adults whose personal identity and emotional health is not based on the obedience of their children. Good parents naturally work hard at raising their children, but in the end they stand alone in their sense of self, despite who their children become. Once a parent's identity gets wrapped up in the behavior, educational performance, or emotional maturity of their children, they become dependent followers. Not leaders. The same is also true for effective church leaders.

The second practice of self-care is to be self-defined. Knowing your identity in Christ and your purpose in ministry lies at the foundation of being self-defined. Jesus is the most perfect example of self-definition and balance with his boundaries in ministry. He first demonstrates his self-definition when at the age of 12 he remains in the temple to study and talk about the holy scriptures. It is an inconvenience for his parents, but creating rest, peace, and convenience for his parents is not what being about his Father's business entails. He again shows his self-definition at the beginning of his ministry (Matt. 4) when he spends 40 days preparing himself for the start of his ministry. He gets intimate with God; focused on his purpose; and bold for his calling. No wonder he can stand up to Satan.

Then in Mark 1:29-39 we read about how Jesus has been healing in Capernaum and the people have flocked to have themselves or a loved-one healed. According to verse 33 "the whole town gathered at the door". Yet despite these expectancies, Jesus gets up the next morning and goes off to pray—alone. When the disciples find him they can't believe he's not available. Imagine them telling him about an elderly woman who has traveled many miles just to be healed by Jesus. "She's come a great distance, Lord, and she has great hope that you will heal her this morning," they might have said.

He replies, *"Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come"* (Mark 1:38). Did you catch that? He said, "No"! In fact, not only did he say "no," he said "no" to hurting people which is even more difficult to do. In order to remain true to his calling and purpose, Jesus was willing to be unreasonable in the minds of others.

Leaders really become hamstrung when they maintain an unreasonable faith in being reasonable in order to gain consensus from the people they lead (Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 1999). Being self-defined means that sometimes you simply have to draw the line with others and boldly stand alone.

In John 13 Jesus shows us another example of self-definition when he washed the disciples' feet. He didn't wash their feet to get their approval or applause. In fact, when Peter objected, Jesus continued any way. He did it because that's what servants do. You see, being self-defined *sometimes means making sacrifices for others* to meet their need; *sometimes it means saying "no,"* and *sometimes it means disappointing people.* But it always means living out of an identity rooted in God and focused on his purposes.

If we are going to be effective in ministering to families over a long period of time, we need to self-defined. This will allow us to do self-care in responsible and balanced ways, which will increase the longevity and overall impact of our ministries. Let's strive to be rooted in Christ, driven by purpose, caring **first** for our families, then for others in our ministry.

Conclusion:

Well friends, our world is certainly changing and our challenges will not end any time soon. But our God doesn't change. And on that mighty Rock we can stand.

There are so many people sitting by wells in this world. And they are thirsty. You and I may not have every answer for their life, but we do have living water.

May God bless you as you seek make a difference in the lives of families.