

# **Ministry to the Nouveau Family**

By Earl Creps  
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Everything has changed. The family unit that came to church a generation ago has been replaced by something that many pastors hardly recognize. Accustomed to dealing with a limited range of predictable issues, congregations are often unable to respond to the needs of what George Barna has called the "nouveau family" (N-family, N-household, or N-home).

The church that hopes to be relevant to its culture in the next generation must develop sensitivity to those who make up these families and a strategy that ministers to them. These initiatives must answer the two questions most prominent in N-households that are considering a church: Will we be accepted without conditions? and, What is offered here that we cannot find in the world?

## **DEVELOPING SENSITIVITY**

Our challenge is to reach out to families where they are instead of where we might like them to be. This means converting our comfort zone into a grace zone that welcomes people on a come-as-you-are basis. It also means viewing family ministry as a cornerstone of the church's commitment to discipleship.

### **Understanding**

The wrong way to approach our concerns for family ministry is to slap together programming that shunts people out of the mainstream of the church into demographic holding tanks. This pigeonhole approach has left hundreds of congregations with midweek family nights that barely function. The idea of Mom and Dad attending a Bible study while the kids are spread out in their age-level slots is becoming an endangered species, especially in many urban areas.

These days, Mom and Dad may not be living together; children could be offspring from other relationships; a teenage daughter may be pregnant or an elementary-age son experiencing a serious depression in the wake of a divorce; both adults working swing shifts or multiple jobs, making attendance as a unit impossible. For the N-family, calling a cluster of activities Family Night hardly makes it so.

We have witnessed a cultural revolution produced by millions of individual decisions. Taken cumulatively, those decisions have changed everything. The traditional Leave It to Beaver family model offered stability based on a binding set of roles (mom, dad, child) and rules (respect for authority, etc.). While this still tends to be the ideal against which families are measured, it is becoming the exception.

In the 1990s, only 26 percent of households were composed of married couples with children under 18. Also, 3 million unmarried couples lived together. The homogenous family arrangement of the 1950s has been replaced by a variety of personalized

approaches—the nouveau family. Barna summarizes this change as a shift from family as, "people who are related to each other by marriage, birth, or adoption," to one that sees family as, "two or more people who care about each other."

These seemingly simple words embody one of the most radical transitions in our nation's history. The patriarchal model has been replaced by what we might call the *Friends* or *Seinfeld* model in which my family is "the people I care about who care about me." This definition of the family has supplanted the concept of a permanent commitment to one person of the opposite sex for the purpose of forming a household and raising children. Only 46 percent of Americans now define family in traditional terms, while two-thirds of adults describe their families as nouveau to some degree.

The challenge for the church, then, is much greater than just adding a singles ministry to its normal programming. The presence of the single adult, and especially the single parent, are only symptoms of a much more profound change in our culture and values.

### **Acceptance**

Nouveau households will not arrive at our church as trends, but as individuals searching for answers. The key to reaching them is empathy for their lifestyle coupled with love and grace.

The N-household will sense in a few seconds whether or not they are welcome. The N-family head tends to be more sensitive to issues of acceptance, while the traditional family patriarch is more attuned to programming and the quality of the church. One study found that fewer than 50 percent of adults felt Protestant churches were sensitive to the needs of families. We can safely conclude that the figure is much higher for N-households.

Being truly sensitive to the N-home means more than simply establishing a ministry for every conceivable format. Those initiatives have a necessary place, but they are not a substitute for what happens in the heart of the leadership. Sensitive leaders believe in three things:

- *Unconditional love and acceptance.* Romans 15:7 puts it simply: "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (NIV). There can be no authentic sensitivity to the N-family apart from a heart full of grace for them. Realizing that we could be an N-family member is a great catalyst to grace. N-families, especially pre-Christians, will not come to a church where they are viewed as a threat, an inconvenience, or a permanent underclass.
- *Uncompromising stand for the truth.* While welcoming pre-Christians without conditions, the church must also teach the truth. This does not mean a public critique of every nontraditional lifestyle. Such a stance will evoke amens from those who do not need to hear it, while driving away the very people to whom God wants to extend mercy.

- *Undaunted confidence that we can make a difference.* Many social agencies offer support for the family, but only the local congregation can bring a family into genuine Christian community. A living relationship with God is the beginning point for everything. Through it, some will find their way into a more traditional household format; others may not be able to do so. However, every family will have the best possible chance to thrive.

The research is conclusive: Christianity works for families. The church simply needs to believe this and begin helping families live out their faith in Christ.

The sensitized church will attract N-families. The question then becomes what to do about it.

### **DEVELOPING STRATEGY**

Christian publishers and parachurch organizations are now producing resources for family life. Books, videos, courses, seminars, and web sites abound. The issue is not so much finding material as it is figuring out how to use it in a coherent way.

Touching lives in N-households means putting certain fundamental things in place, doing as much as possible with the resources at hand. The goal is not to engineer solutions to personal problems but to give the church's love for these families a tangible expression.

#### **Starting Points**

- *Reverse your assumptions.* Families do not exist to support our programs; we exist to support families. The church that means business does not see single parents and other nontraditionals as audiences or constituencies. They are God's creation and simply want to be treated like human beings, not like some segment of the church's market share. Sow into them unconditionally, and you will reap.

- *Raise your expectations.* Nouveaus are not looking for a spiritual welfare state. The conventional model of ministry views them as broken people who require a hospital-like environment, surviving on perpetual life-support. This attitude simply confirms the negative messages the world sends them; it rots their self-worth and robs them of the power to do real ministry. Moreover, it's insulting.

Express your faith in N-householders—challenge them to make commitments, serve in appropriate ministries, give to missions, and find their purpose and calling in God. Single adults, for example, need to receive scriptural encouragement to use their lifestyle in service to God (1 Corinthians 7). The kingdom of God is not a caste system based on marital status. Everyone has a role to play in God's redemptive plan for the earth. Nouveaus hunger for these things and will respond to a church that extends them dignity by allowing them a chance to fulfill their role.

- *Push the positive.* Pastors have spent so much time decrying the decay of the family that it sometimes seems there is little good to say about it. This has contributed to the

crisis of confidence and the fear of commitment that haunts our marriageable population. Many adults want to find their way into a more traditional family format, but they need their church to provide the right kind of encouragement. Indeed, 84 percent of singles report that they would like to be married some day. The church needs to hold up the high view of the family. We need to do so without condemning the N-household, without vehement denunciations of the pre-Christian population, and without the smugness behind which the real dysfunctions of married life often hide. In preaching, teaching, and modeling, give N-persons a clearly lit path to follow, while expressing that their worth in God is not connected to their marital status.

- *Talk to them.* The only thing more dangerous than no information is wrong information. Tools such as surveys and focus groups can provide insights into the needs and aspirations of your families.

I recently asked our singles ministry to list the top-five needs of the nontraditional household. Their responses included the following: companionship, mentoring, accountability, feeling included, parenting, guidance, acceptance, and help with practical needs. Overwhelmingly, they did not want to be treated like sick people for whom marriage was the cure. As another group of singles told me, "Just teach us how to follow Jesus. We already know we're not married."

A recent survey of college students in our church indicated that their biggest concerns were not finding God's will or choosing a life partner, but money and stress. Insights like this can put strategy development on the right track. And they only come by connecting on a personal level. Encouraging these adults to become a part of the process in forming the ministries will give them ownership and connect the ministry to real world issues. A simple approach to managing this information is to survey your families about their needs, interests, and how the church can help them. Then follow up with several informal, open-ended, small-group discussions held in private homes.

- *Major on prevention.* Many N-families are formed against the will of the participants. Divorce, desertion, and dysfunction are major causes. A caring church owes its community an effort at preventing these casualties. At a minimum, this would mean mandatory premarital counseling for all couples, hopefully supplemented by a citywide agreement among area churches. Prevention also includes providing for or referring troubled people to Christian counseling services. A vibrant single adult ministry is another key element of prevention and discipleship. Accountability groups can also serve this dual role. Many churches have had good results implementing such groups through their men's ministry.

- *Support healthy families.* Most of family life is a learned enterprise. Consequently, the congregation's teaching ministry offers an outstanding opportunity to touch the lives of N-families. Adult electives or small group studies on parenting, the single life, finances, or stress management can contribute greatly to the N-adult. Healthy families are built out of healthy people, so anything the church offers for discipleship will have positive implications on families.

- *Healing for struggling families.* The N-home can face stresses and strains that we never dreamed of a generation ago. The availability of compassionate ministry during a difficult time can make the difference between living and dying for many families. Christian counseling, couple mentoring, and support groups can provide lifelines to a family in crisis.

- *Take it to the streets.* N-families can be very open to the message of God's love because they are looking for answers to their questions about life. Anything that is taught in the church for families should be considered for community-wide involvement. For example, conduct a marriage or divorce recovery seminar at a local hotel conference room and advertise in the local media. The church's N-family members probably know others whom they could invite. Mobilize your nontraditional adults for evangelism and outreach. They want to be in the front lines.

The radical changes in American family life are leaving some pastors reeling. The challenge is simple: Will we be intimidated and defensive, or will we use this as an opportunity to extend compassion and bring the gospel to our cities? Millions of adults and children are waiting for an answer.

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