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Research Summary

Effective Practices for Training Parents in Family
Discipleship: A Mixed Methods Study

The purpose of this two-phase sequential mixed methods study was to explore the best practices for training parents to pursue household family discipleship among churches identified as holding and conducting a family ministry philosophy and approach. This research used quantitative methods to measure the parents' perception and practices, and qualitative methods to explore the best practices.

Expert Panel: In order to establish a sample population, an expert panel was assembled. The expert panel consisted of nine individuals who have a significant voice in the evangelical world as it pertains to family ministry. The panel included representatives of the three primary models of family ministry – family-equipping, family-based, and family-integrated. The expert panel provided a list of churches that, in their estimation, conducted family ministry well. Seventeen churches were nominated; twelve agreed to participate.

Phase One: Parental Perceptions and Practices: All eligible parents from each participating congregation were invited to take part in an online survey. The Family Discipleship Perceptions and Practices Survey (FDPPS) was hosted by an on-line data collection service. The core questions of the survey had been previously validated, exhibiting a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.88. The entire survey, including requests for demographic information, consisted of twenty-five questions and should have taken no more than ten minutes to complete. The questions identified the parents' perception of their role and responsibility as well as gauging the household practices in which the parents engage on a regular basis. This first phase resulted in usable data from 933 parents.

Phase Two: Telephone Interviews and Case Studies: The second phase consisted of phone interviews with all nominated churches that were willing to participate. The

interview explored the church's overall ministry approach and the specific plans or processes in place to equip and to encourage parents to become primary disciple-makers in their children's lives. In addition, three churches were selected to participate in case studies. These churches were selected purposively based upon the high performance of parents on the survey instrument.

Key Findings: One question that drove this research was, "To what degree do parents perceive their role and responsibility as primary disciple-makers, and in what ways do they practice family discipleship as a household parental responsibility?" In the participating churches, parents perceived themselves as primary disciple-makers to a very high degree. The data also indicated that perceptions, in the case of these churches, do correlate with behaviors.

One item on the survey requested agreement or disagreement, in degrees, with this statement: "Parents-and particularly fathers-have a responsibility to engage personally in a discipleship process with each of their children." The stronger the parents' agreement with that statement, the more frequently the parents read or discussed the Bible with their children, the more frequently the parents discussed biblical or spiritual matters with their children while engaging in day-to-day activities, and the more frequently the parents engaged in family devotional or worship times.

Another item requested agreement or disagreement with this statement: "I prioritize consistent family devotional or worship times in my family's schedule." Stronger agreement with that statement correlated with higher frequencies of discussing the Bible, higher frequencies of discussing biblical or spiritual matters while engaging in day-to-day activities, and higher frequencies of family devotional or worship times. The patterns of prayer with children also related positively to prioritization of family devotional times. Interestingly, respondents with three or more children were more likely to prioritize family

devotional times.

The stronger the disagreement with the statement, “I would like to do regular family devotions or Bible reading in our home, but my family is just too busy for that right now,” the higher the frequency in discussing the Bible, discussing biblical or spiritual matters during day-to-day activities, and engaging in family devotions or worship times in the home. The inverse is also true. For those respondents who indicated that they were presently too busy for family devotions or Bible readings, the frequency of the assessed behaviors was lower. This supports the reality of their situation, they desire more because their reality affords them little, if any. The case could be made that these respondents actually have a desire to do what is right when it comes to the spiritual lives of their family members. The negative correlations appear when the behaviors are directly tied to family engagement in faith. Uncovering the reasons, or disruptors, could prove to be one way to help families overcome disengagement in family faith building.

The more someone agreed that the church is the primary place where children should receive their Bible teaching, the less likely they were to be engaged in any home based family discipleship activities. These parents were also less likely to engage in discussions with others regarding the spiritual development of their families.

Through interviews with the twelve participating churches, as well as the three case studies of churches that performed strongly on the FDPPS, it became clear that seven particular practices marked these churches (see Table 1 below). Churches where parents were deeply engaged in practices of family discipleship tended to engage in more of these seven practices. No church leaders or members were ever asked whether they engaged in any of these practices. The seven practices became apparent as data from interviews and case studies were coded and analyzed. No church’s practices looked identical. Although every congregation practiced one or more of these seven practices, each church did so in ways that

were unique to the congregation's context.

The majority of churches (8 out of 12) provided a take-home of some sort for parents to connect teachings at church with conversations in their homes. Almost every church that participated in the study provided some level of training beyond weekend worship celebrations; the most significant training was specifically aimed at men. Nine churches indicated specific, intentional efforts to protect the schedules of families by limiting church activities. Eight of the twelve churches had instituted what they referred to as home groups or family life groups – small groups that meet as families in homes. Ten of the twelve churches that participated in interviews did not have a children's worship time separate from the larger community of faith. A handful of the churches practiced intentional hospitality and fellowship in addition to the hospitality and fellowship that take place at the home groups. The practice of preaching was quite often one of the first practices that the interviewees mentioned. Of the twelve churches interviewed, four specifically mentioned using "expository preaching" as a primary means of instructing parents on their roles as primary disciple-makers. Six other churches mentioned the significance of preaching, teaching from the pulpit, or the message proclaimed in weekend worship celebrations.

Although much of the discussion related to family ministry has revolved around retaining young adults after they graduate from high school, not once in all the research did anyone suggest that their church's practices were for the sake of retention. Instead, all efforts fell into one or more of three categories. These categories - strong fathers, strong families, and a strong church - can be seen in the diagram below. Although these categories have certain characteristics that can and do stand alone, they appear to function in a coexistent manner. Second, the categories feed one another. Although churches will have fragmented families, a biblical understanding of the family will recognize the unique role of the father. When the father is strong, this will help to facilitate strong families. When the families of the

church are strong, this will strengthen the congregation. A strong church will seek to develop strong fathers, and so on.

Although exceptions were observed, one underlying key in the practices explored here was that, in churches where parents were most engaged in practices of family discipleship, age-segmented programs had been minimized (though not necessarily eliminated) while intergenerational activities had been maximized.

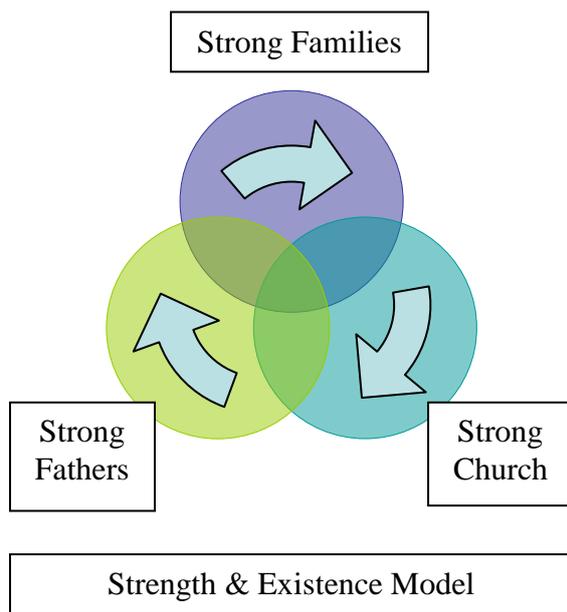


Table 1: Seven Practices for Effective Equipping of Parents

<i>Churches ranked by mean score on FDPPS</i>	Take-Home Guides	Focused Men's Training	Limit Activities to Protect Family Schedules	Home Groups	Integrated Worship	Hospitality and Fellowship Emphasis	Pulpit Ministry
Church I – FIC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church J – FIC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church A – FIC		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church C – FEM		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
Church L – FIC		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church D – FIC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church F – FIC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church K – FEM	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Church B – FEM	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes
Church G – FEM	Yes	Yes	Yes				Yes
Church E – FBM					Yes		
Church H – FEM	Yes	Yes					

FIC indicates a family-integrated church (all or most age-organized activities eliminated). FEM means family-equipping ministry (some age-organized activities retained but with complete reorientation of purpose). FBM indicates family-based ministry (intergenerational and parent-equipping activities added to current age-organized structures).