

# Church Family Ministry And The American Family Crisis

Dr. John P. Splinter

**Today's family American family is in crisis, and the Body of Christ is its only hope.** Our culture is unraveling and it is clear that *the church must position itself as the "go-to" source for family wholeness.* Research facts will be presented as you read through this ministry idea.

Most models of church "family ministries" are still rooted in the 1950s era, in which the "traditional family" was the norm ~ where dad worked and mom stayed home to raise the kids. However, that family system is all but gone in today's culture ~ somewhere between four and seven percent of families are defined in that way.

So here are ten preliminary questions to start the juices flowing ~ to help you ponder your church's ministry to families:

1. Most of today's families have very little ongoing connection with own parents. Have you thought about equipping **pre-marrying couples** by training and using seasoned senior couples as mentors? Do you provide sage mentors for marital support ministries?
2. Because most young families are not closely tied to their families-of-origin, do you provide high **quality parent-training** for couples with children of all ages?
3. Because today's culture is massively sexualized, do you provide tools **helping parents protect their children from pornography**, sexting, on-line predators, cyber-sex, etc?
4. American males are isolated ~ most have no deep relationships with other men. Do have an **effective men's ministry** ~ stabilizing marriages ~ providing servant-leader training ~ linking men in open, honest *iron-sharpening-iron* relationships with men?
5. Seventy percent of men between 15 and 35 use pornography regularly. Do you provide tools to help men of all ages with **common male sexual struggles**?
6. In our era of 50% divorce rates, do you provide regular **marital enrichment**, to keep marriages Christ-centered, strong?
7. Do you provide **divorce recovery** healing for those whose marriages have failed?
8. Research is clear, that kids raised in single parent homes have far greater social, academic and law-enforcement problems. Do you provide specialized help for the **children of divorced or single parent** homes?
9. Forty percent of kids today are born to single parents; fifty percent of marriages fail. Do you provide training and specialized support for **single-parents**?
10. Step-family issues are the #1 reason for second-marriage failure. Does your church provide training and specialized support for **step-family** systems?

At the Family Legacy Institute we are passionate about, and professionally trained in family ministries, and would love to help you in any way possible. The following pages reflect an in-depth family-oriented approach to ministry.

In His service ~

John Splinter, Ph.D.

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### **Understanding The Times**

For decades, spiritual and social leaders have written about the erosion of the traditional American family. This erosion **now threatens to all but erase the basic building block of American society, the “traditional family.”** For example, in the 1930s more than 90% of families had both mom and dad in the home. By 1960 married families still made up nearly 75% of all households, but by 2000 that number had dropped to 53 percent, a decline which has continued in the decade since 2000. One source (the Population Reference Bureau) now estimates that only seven percent of U.S. households consist of married couples with children in which only the husband works.

The destruction flowing from this diminution of the traditional family is pervasive and escalating. Research has long shown that what happens in core urban areas migrates to become new realities in suburbia. One need only understand what’s happening in the core urban areas of America, to understand how (and to a certain extent, when) these realities become suburban realities. In inner cities today marriage is almost a thing of the past, as in almost *zero*. One urban pastor told me that in a ten square block region of his city, he knew of one married couple. People hook-up, make babies, single moms carry 98% of the load, and the absence of fathers thereby forces multi-generational single-parent maternalistic family systems. The result is generation upon generation of spiritually and emotionally depleted children.

Although fatherhood still remains in many suburban homes, it is a diminishing role as divorce erodes marriages, and as married men give their best shots to career and other priorities outside the home. Parenting in general is in crisis as married couples are less attached to the guiding influence of their families-of-origin, as the pace of American life incrementally escalates, and as home relationships are replaced with TV and computers. Typical American families no longer share most meals together; few have even one evening per week reserved for “family.” Research by the University of Virginia found that the children of families who eat even one meal together daily are 61% less likely to become involved in drinking, drugs and sex.

Generations of children, both urban and suburban, are growing up today without the basic attachment needs of their lives being met during the vital early years of personality and spiritual formation. Since values formation is tied to emotional attachment, we are now witnessing generations of children with little sense of right or wrong, good or evil, and who are so attachment-hungry they'll *take almost any measure to meet their own needs*. In extreme cases this dynamic is called the "sociopathic personality disorder." Most children don't reach that pathological level, yet large percentages are today affected by the attachment deficit driving it.

The stunning rise of single-parent families, plus the impact of divorce, has driven young couples to cohabit rather than marry. The research on cohabitation is profoundly negative, boding even greater ill for future generations.

### The Church's Calling

This moment represents a "tipping point" of staggering potential. Churches today have an opportunity to bend their efforts in the direction of training couples and supporting Christ-centered, wholesome family functioning ~ **or** ~ watching the documented and escalating generational drift away from hearth and home, and away from faith in Christ. This is *that* profound a moment. In 2002 researcher George Barna estimated that 2/3 of kids from evangelical homes would leave church and faith when they left home. It now appears that estimate may have been low.

Churches have historically built their leadership cores upon people of faith coming from intact family systems, providing emotionally healthy, spiritually mature adults as deacons, elders, teachers, and staff. Today that cadre of emotionally healthy adults is evaporating like morning mist on a hot summer day. Younger generations are entering the life-stream of our culture damaged and dysfunctional. In one notable example, a large Midwestern seminary reports that only 2 – 4% of men and women preparing for careers in ministry, come from emotionally healthy, intact family systems.

Complicating matters, the dominant philosophy of this era is Post-Modernism which teaches there are no absolute values – nothing is always right or wrong – it's always up to the individual to interpret his/her values based upon unique situations plus personal need. To the vast majority of today's kids, *the Bible has become just one opinion source among many, no more credible than other sources*. When pastors say, "The Bible is the Word of God," many don't believe it.

The wreckage of what was once called the "American Christian culture" now provides fertile ground for the injection of overwhelming pornography into the moral lifeblood of our culture. Research confirms this venom is being pumped equally into churched *and* non-churched homes like a timber rattler with fangs in the jugular. Forty-six percent of Christian homes surveyed said that pornography was a problem in *their* home. Fifty percent of Promise-Keeper men said they'd used porn in the week prior to the PK event, and 65% of PK attendees reported that male sexuality was the #1 struggle of their lives, with no other issue even reaching double digits. Cultural sexualization has become so pervasive that the American Psychological Association estimates today's kids receive an average of *14,000* sexualized messages, per year.

There has never been a time when American culture has so desperately needed the church to provide credible Christian family modeling, training, and healing. Impacts of the demise of the family in America are stunning:

- 26% of our nation's girls aged 9 – 19 carry at least one sexually transmitted disease (source: Centers for Disease Control).
- 25% of our nation's adults now carry incurable Herpes (same source).
- 70% of couples cohabit prior to marriage, thereby reducing the probability of ever marrying, while magnifying the probability of marital violence, cheating, and divorce.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death in American children's lives.
- In urban areas, gangs have replaced male parenting.
- Pornography is replacing normal healthy attachment in 50-70% of males and 35% of females.

The family in America is in crisis and the church is the only agency in a position to provide broad, spiritually based, credible effective leadership. **Churches must stand and lead.**

In our nation's history there has never been a time such as this, in which Christian family modeling and training is so desperately needed. Research finds that with each successive generation, smaller percentages of kids are remaining with church and faith. A core reason for this phenomenon is the demise of the Christian family system as the primary faith-teaching source. Kids tend to disbelieve what they don't see their parents taking seriously.

What can churches do? Here's a family ministry paradigm to consider. In each item below we'll begin by articulating the problem, and then will provide thoughts regarding solutions.

### A. Pre-Marital Preparation

**The Problem:** In our culture it's easier to get a wedding license than it is to get a driver's license. *Most* marrying couples today receive very little training prior to tying the knot. And *most* couples today come to the moment of marriage carrying so much personal emotional damage, coming from homes which provided such counterproductive modeling, and having such tenuous or non-existent support systems, that divorce is a statistical probability. Yet *most* churches provide *limited* preliminary tools and *almost no ongoing marital training*.

**Solutions:** At least two elements are needed in regard to solving this problem.

1. Solid premarital and post-marital mentoring utilizing mature, seasoned and happily married Christian couples as trainer/mentors. Most pastors don't have the time to provide extended premarital training to each marrying couple, so most pastoral premarital counseling is somewhat pro forma, one-size-fits-all, and limited to a few one-hour sessions. Churches need to develop training for, and then mentoring by, mature Christian couples whose ministry is that of premarital mentoring, *plus* following up after the wedding with some level of check-in and possibly ongoing mentoring.

2. Engaged couples need tools to help them understand and process through the attachment phase of a life-long relationship, tools for example that distinguish between need, infatuation, loneliness, lust..., and love ~ tools which provide a strong biblical understanding of what it means to love ~ tools that lead couples to discuss deeply significant personal history plus lifetime attachment-related subjects *prior to* their making lifetime vows.

## B. Men's Ministry

**The Problem:** Most males in America today are profoundly isolated. One survey of a Christian men's group found that only 25% were completely open and honest with their wives. And less than 2% of American males have in-depth, open, honest, trusting relationships with other men in which they intentionally and regularly share their lives. Some men have church buddies; others have golf buddies, or tennis buddies; some have old high school or college buddies. But virtually no men in America today have the male relational depth, trust, integrity and commitment needed for one man to share, for example, his struggle with pornography and masturbation, or honest concerns about his eroding marriage, or his fears of career failure.

Furthermore, extensive documentation on the decline of the family in America has made it clear that *the single most important factor in the many social problems presently confronting our culture is the failure of fathers* ~ the fact that men have all but abandoned their role in the family. This is more true in urban areas than in suburban, but the phenomenon is gaining ground in suburbia.

Adding to the problem, most fathers today have had little or no parent-training. They are not aware of the problems inherent in making their children's sporting events the primary focal point of the family, or of the deficit in character development resulting from the TV and internet taking over what used to be family "talk time." It also explains the critical error being made by many dads and moms today, of attempting to be their children's "best friends" rather than functioning as their parents.

It is my considered opinion that the best ministry option for men on the church scene today is an operation called, "Men's Fraternity." I have used this tool in ministry and found it to be very helpful to men. Yet as good as it is, "Men's Fraternity" is limited in its ability to provide solid tools for empowering ongoing and ever deeper man-to-man attachment. The deficit in deep male attachment with other males, and older men mentoring younger men, is at least partially why Christian men are so susceptible to Satan's lure of pornography which strikes 50 – 70% of males in the pew. It is also at least partially why church divorce rates are slightly higher than national divorce rates, and why men can sit in the pew for decades eluding the basic character change that reflects the transformation and renewal described by Paul in Romans 12:2. *Men need men in an "iron-sharpening-iron" capacity*, but almost no churches seem to know how to create this level of regular attachment and trusting openness in men.

In the area of male sexuality alone, few if any churches provide man-oriented tools to help guide, empower and heal men. Few churches provide strong positive leadership regarding male sexuality and God's plan. Few churches provide Christian leadership training for their men to help men with male sexual struggles. Almost no churches are repositories of multiple, scripture-centered, clinically solid, helpful tools providing guidance and healing for men who wrestle with male sexuality and related issues. Nor do most churches have tools to train men to parent their sons, especially as respects their boys' emerging sexuality.

**Solutions:** Churches need to create men's ministries that provide attractive and effective vehicles for men to form deep relationships with other men, regularly, intentionally, and for at least the following four purposes: **1)** To strengthen their faith walk; **2)** to strengthen their marriages; **3)** to learn and utilize the process of godly goal-setting in order to steer their lives toward leaving godly legacies; and **4)** to move their lives in the direction of servant-leadership as taught by Christ.

Churches also need multiple written tools to put into the hands of dads raising sons, as well as of men wrestling with sexual issues. Churches need to create circles of men who are not afraid to discuss the issues of male sexuality but rather, look at it as one of God's greatest gifts and one of Satan's most lethal weapons. Churches need to train and empower leaders who can take on these challenges of men's ministries.

### C. Marriage Enrichment

**The Problem:** Few marrying couples understand the complexities and challenges that lay ahead of them in a lifetime of marital commitment. The high standard of life Americans enjoy (lovely homes, two cars, expensive electronics, expensive vacations, etc.) all but demand dual-incomes. Dual-income family systems are therefore the norm today, a fact driving daycare, latchkey, and other surrogate-parenting institutions. This dynamic pits career development against the investment needed to meet children's emotional and spiritual needs. It also drives much of the emotional separation precipitating divorce.

*Most* marrying people today come from emotionally damaged home backgrounds. *Most* marrying couples have lived together prior to marrying, which research has found to be deadly to marital success. And today's cultural pace is so fast, so sexually jaded, and so controlled by impersonal dynamics (TV, Internet, texting, blah blah) that by the time many marriages realize they're in trouble there's so much damage that the most reasonable option appears to be divorce.

Of those couples who come from martially intact family systems there are still high percentages of families with severe dysfunction including substance abuse, marital infidelity, physical, sexual or emotional child abuse (20 – 33% of girls reach 18<sup>th</sup> birthday having been sexually abused), emotional abandonment issues, mental problems (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders), dual-income work-a-holism, and “dead marriages” which remain married in name only ~ to name just a few common family system dysfunctions.

Pornography is now a leading contributor to the destruction of marital attachment ~ 75% of divorces today cite pornography as a leading factor precipitating divorce. Research estimates that average people today spend between 12-20 non-working hours per week on the Internet, and another 20 hours per week watching TV. This used to be couple and family “talk time” ~ but no longer.

**Solutions:** There are at least two major solutions that are essential for churches to provide.

1. Churches absolutely must position themselves as *the primary resource* for ongoing marital enrichment and training. It's *simply not enough* to have a Sunday School class for young married couples. The vast majority of young couples today are not closely bonded with their families of origin, so they are missing the strong multi-generational family support system enjoyed by previous generations. The large majority of young couples today bring substantive issues to their marriages, and most don't have a clue as to how to manage them. Churches need strong and ongoing marital enrichment and training to turn the tide from our culture's solution of divorce.
2. Churches absolutely must provide some format of clinically solid and biblically sound marriage counseling, to help couples whose carts have already fallen into the ditch. There are several ways of structuring this level of assistance, and churches need to provide strong leadership in their communities in this regard. Churches, rather than therapy shops offering post-modern philosophy, need to become the “go-to” place for couples in crisis.

#### **D. Parenting Training**

**The Problem:** Most parents in today's culture are untrained regarding what it takes to raise children, and the role of parent has become infinitely more complex in the last 25 years. Ask any educator about meta-changes in the classroom over the past 30 years, and the discussion will inevitably lead toward the subject of inadequate parenting resulting in chaotic and emotionally wounded kids. Putting together the fact that 40% of kids are born to single parents, and 50% of kids experience their parents' divorce before they're 18, today's kid culture is fractured! Extensive research demonstrates that these kids will have greater social problems, more run-ins with police and prisons, lower academic performances, more children born out of wedlock, greater substance abuse, lower marriage rates, higher divorce rates, and on and on. That's not where our culture is headed ~ *it's where we are right now*. The future can only be substantially worse.

**Solution:** Churches *must* become lighthouses of regular, ongoing parenting training, providing not only sound clinical skills but solid biblical support, plus solid mentoring from seasoned couples who have been trained in mentoring. Churches also need to provide access to licensed Christian family therapy sources, to help struggling marriages overcome the chaos and pain inherent in high percentages of younger family systems in this culture.



## E. Divorce Recovery

**The Problem:** Research has found that divorce rates in churches are slightly higher than the overall national divorce rate of 50%. Most often, divorcing couples quietly leave churches when they divorce, thereby cutting themselves off from essential spiritually and emotionally supportive relationships. Some churches' sole solution for the problem of divorce, is "church discipline," which often adds greater trauma to the crisis and often precipitates separating wounded people from Christian care.

Divorce is always traumatic and life-bending. Most divorced people do not know how to heal from this trauma, so they carry their unresolved struggles into their next marriages thereby poisoning the water before the cup is drunk ~ 85% of divorced couples remarry. Overall divorce rates of second- and subsequent-marriages *begin* at 65% and go up from there depending on factors including time allowed for healing, educational level, finances, racial makeup, emotional support systems, etc. And longitudinal research has found that children of divorce often *never* really get over the pain of their parents' divorce, thereby taking that unresolved anxiety into their adult lives and marriages, injecting their hopes and dreams with the toxin of mom's and dad's marital failure. Since 50 percent of American kids will witness their parents' divorce prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and since 40 percent of kids are born to single parents, the underlying stability once assumed for all kids (i.e., stable two-parent homes) is melting away.

**Solution:** Churches need to offer solid divorce recovery ministry, not only teaching biblical truth about the subject, but providing a nurturing environment in which people whose lives have been wounded by divorce, may be gently led toward healing and hope. Churches also need to attend to the special needs of the children of divorce, single parents, and step-family systems.

## F. Specific Parent-Training Regarding Our Sexualized Culture

**The Problem:** It may sound like an overstatement, but it is not: *We now live in the most sexualized culture in the history of human kind since the days of Sodom and Gomorrah.* The primary reason has to do with the Internet, not only making pornography affordable, available and anonymous, but hunting its victims through pop-ups and tricky URLs. America has become the world's leading purveyor of pornography. And based upon percentages of teen pregnancies, teen STDs, teen abortions and teen self-reporting, today's American kids are *the most sexualized kids in Western culture* –more sexually active than their peers in nations like Sweden, Italy and France.

There is little if anything that is more destructive in shaping a child's future marital success or failure, *and* according to research, a child's faith formation, than premarital sexual activity. And sex can quickly become deadly, not only due to a pandemic of incurable STDs, but due to suicide. The Heritage Foundation published research finding that of kids who are sexual and then break up, girls are three times more likely to attempt suicide; boys, eight times.



**Solution:** Churches need to become credible sources, providing parents with multiple tools to help their kids avoid the sexual land-mines strewn throughout today's kid culture.

Examples of tools would include: 1) Parent training regarding how to talk with their kids about sex; 2) tools for parent/kid discussion regarding how far one should go on a date; 3) tools for parents to dialogue with their kids about why God created sex in the first place; 4) and training for parents re: their responsibility to provide guidance pertaining to cellular and computer use.

### **G. Other Family Life Ministries**

As churches begin to really drill down into providing tools and healing for families, other kinds of ministries emerge as potential assets. The goal of these ministries is to bond families together into meaningful faith in Christ, and create supportive attachments with other Christian families. A few tools in this genre would include:

1. **Summer Family Camp** – Christian camping is able to provide an environment in which people let their hair down and are willing to drink more deeply from spiritual fonts than often takes place in sanctuaries. A week at a summer camp with other church families can provide not only a place to play together, but also an opportunity for structured training in which adults may deepen marital and parenting knowledge and gain skills aimed at intentionally strengthening family functioning and maturing in Christ.
2. **Couples' Clubs** – Churches provide a real service to family strengthening when they create circles of couples who are committed to one another, honest and open with one another, praying regularly for one another, supporting one another's marriages however possible, perhaps involved in weekly Bible studies. Parents need other parents from whom to draw wisdom, prayer support, encouragement, and sometimes even parental back-up.
3. **Men's Adventure Series** – Many men won't come to a "men's church group" but they will willingly participate in hiking the Colorado Rockies, spending a week in the Minnesota Boundary Waters, white-water rafting, cycling, hunting, fishing, running, etc., with other men. An active men's adventure series can be a powerful way to attract new men to the church, and draw church men into deeper man-to-man relationships.

### **Concluding Comments**

Today's family needs are profoundly more complex than those of our grandparents. This era in our culture's history aches, screams, for wise and in-depth family training, support and reconstruction ministries. **Today's church must position itself as the "go-to" source for family wholeness.**

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**About the author:** Having grown up in a Christian home which, on the surface looked solid and calm but on the inside was chaotic and painful, I developed a profound interest in helping people learn to create and enjoy “family” in a manner that is healthy, wholesome, positive and empowering ~ in short, Christ-honoring. This passion is reflected in my 40-year career in pastoral ministry, extensive research and writing experience, plus training in the fields of Counseling Psychology and Family Therapy, in which I hold a Masters and Ph.D., respectively.