

*Tending the Flock*, edited by K. Brynolf Lyon and Archie Smith Jr.

reviewed by [Brad Wigger](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

What is a family and what does family ministry entail? These are the difficult questions explored in this book, the latest contribution to Don Browning and Ian Evison's *The Family, Religion, and Culture* series. Are families an oppressive relic of patriarchy or a means of grace? Are they something to outgrow or essential to acquiring spiritual depth? Are they a hotbed of dysfunction or a key to moral formation? Is the nuclear form crucial or can single people and homosexual partners be considered families? These are just a few of the questions that have paralyzed many congregations and prevented them from doing family ministry.

The nine congregations studied and described in this book are exceptional in their devotion to the work and theology of family ministry. Each chapter is written by someone who was a participant-observer in the congregation. Though most of the congregations are urban, they vary widely in their roots and affiliations: Christian Methodist Episcopal, American Methodist Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Assembly of God, Reform Judaism and Baptist. Some are megachurches, others small congregations; some are made up mostly of gay and lesbian members, and others promote nuclear heterosexual families; some are Afrocentric, some multiethnic and some predominantly white. Poor, rich, professional, destitute, hierarchical, egalitarian, conservative and radical congregations and neighborhoods are all presented here in what cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "thick descriptions." Such a kaleidoscope could make a reader dizzy, but in these studies form and beauty eventually emerge.

All the congregations pay deliberate attention to families, and a few explicitly define what a family is (for example, yes, we include homosexual couples but we promote monogamy), but most have a high tolerance for ambiguity. For example, a church might offer counseling or crisis services (recognizing how fragile and even destructive families can be) and at the same time expect parents to be their children's primary religious educators (recognizing the formative and redemptive power of families). Another church might preach celibacy and the devastation of out-of-wedlock births yet have a special ministry of care and support for single young

mothers. Like families themselves, family ministry is a bit messy and unpredictable.

Family ministry in these congregations includes anything from family counseling to health education to family night suppers to support for family devotions to parenting classes to providing family libraries. Though the line between congregational ministries in general and family ministry in particular is thin, some common themes emerge when churches intentionally emphasize families:

- *Home.* The congregation pays attention to what happens in neighborhoods, households and between family members. This includes attention both to family piety and religious education in the home and to meeting basic needs such as having safe housing and enough to eat. A congregation's ritual of eating, learning and worshipping together all lend the theological impetus for continuing such practices in the home.
- *Intergenerational concerns.* The favorite metaphor of most congregations is that they are a family. When this metaphor combines with explicit attention to family ministry, a church more and more comes to appreciate intergenerational activities. These may or may not involve new programs. It may simply mean engaging in traditional activities such as worship and education in ways in which both adults and children can participate meaningfully. It may mean working harder to integrate young people into the life of the church, rather than just creating separate groups for them. In a culture increasingly segregated by ages or stages or generations or developmental tasks, the church may offer one of the few opportunities for the generations to be with and learn from one another.
- *Fragility.* While most of these congregations bank upon the strength of families, family ministry intensifies their awareness of family brokenness as well. Congregations are served by the constructive power of families even while they rely upon this vitality to care for those who have been broken by their family relationships.

Two paradoxical themes emerge in these churches. First, an emphasis on families immediately raises questions about those who might be excluded, particularly those living alone. These questions seem to lead to a deeper awareness of how singles can serve and be served by family ministry. Talk of families raises awareness of human relationships generally, and their potential to be a "means of grace," whether through biology, marriage or friendship.

Second, some people worry that family programs will create a closed, narcissistic world of navel-gazing families unconcerned about the larger society. But the evidence from these studies suggests quite the opposite. Whether churches are conservative, liberal or radical, concern for families actually appears to intensify concern for the larger societal context, especially for society's effects on children and youth. Though responses vary from congregation to congregation, engagement with the larger public world generally heats up. Because good family relationships demand commitment, service, cooperation, tolerance and stability, such values are seen as crucial to society. This offers a kind of countertheme to our culture's emphasis on choice, consumption, hyperautonomy and developmental segregation.

Archie Smith and Brynolf Lyon have provided a very helpful guide through various possibilities for family ministry. Pastors and congregational leaders would be well served by reading this book as they reflect on their own situations. Readers will not agree with or want to replicate everything the book's congregations have tried, but that is not the point of congregational studies. Readers can learn from the powerful ministries of others, and perhaps be inspired to overcome their own paralysis. As one of the authors put it, family ministry is "not primarily about defining and defending the family but about proclaiming the grace of God and nurturing discipleship."