

Spiritual Formation @ Home

Leading Edge Churches Driving Family-Centered Redemption



April 2007 Session One Executive Summary:
The Strong Families Innovation Alliance

by Kurt Bruner (with Steve Watters)

Just The Beginning

In April 2007, leaders from 14 evangelical churchesⁱ gathered in Scottsdale, Arizona to launch a two year innovation process. From the nation's largest congregation to a recent church plant, participants represented churches from a wide range of sizes and traditions. They came together around a common recognition that generational faith-transference must be a key priority for the local church. While reliable data on the topic is difficult to obtain, even the most optimistic estimatesⁱⁱ suggest that fewer than half of kids raised in evangelical homes embrace the Christian faith as their own by the time they graduate from high school.

The gathering was hosted by *The Center for Strong Families* and co-sponsored by *Family Life* and *Focus on the Family* ministries. These organizations have spent decades motivating individual families to become intentional about the spiritual development of their children through media, events and resources. But they recognize the local church as God's primary instrument for spreading the gospel in every generation – and hope their support will enable the *Alliance* to develop working models for local church-driven family redemption.

Goals for the initial innovation session included creating a shared vision and common framework for innovation, providing a “kick-start” for participating churches to launch their own innovation efforts, and establishing a network of like-minded relationships for shared learning.

Vision & Framework

The scope of innovation was reviewed by each participant prior to gathering in Scottsdale and served as the general framework within which all brainstorming occurred.

Problem Statement

Evangelical families are failing to win and keep their own children in the Christian faith.

Vision

To create an innovation movement among evangelical churches that seeks to turn the tide by acknowledging the home as the center of God's redemptive strategy.

Innovation Categories

- **Strengthening Relationships:** Children need to experience a loving relationship between mom and dad that reflects the gospel and between parent and child that makes kids want to embrace their parents' beliefs.
- **Winning Our Kids:** The overwhelming majority of those who ever become Christians do so as children, most before age thirteen. Most parents recognize it is their job to pass the Christian faith to their kids in the context of the home, yet feel ill-equipped to do so.
- **Launching Our Youth:** An alarmingly high percentage of teens raised in Christian families abandon their parents' faith during the teen and young adult years. And while this trend has created tension between parents and youth ministers, partnership between church and home is vital to keeping our youth.

Innovation Kick-Start

Several presentations focused on how participants might initiate and facilitate a family ministry innovation effort in their own churches. For some, this goal seemed daunting since “family” is a second or third tier emphasis of existing church priorities. Some drew encouragement from the Ventura Missionary Church “Faith at Home” model and the “Spiritual Formation @ Home” initiative underway at Lake Pointe Church.

- ***Faith At Home***: Mark Holmen has developed a model for family-centered church strategy that he presents to churches to help them mature from being a “church that does family ministry” to a “family ministry-centered church”. (Manuscript available upon request.)



- ***Spiritual Formation @ Home***: Kurt Bruner has launched a church-wide initiative with the 10,000 member Lake Pointe Church, designed to create a culture of intentional homes. (PowerPoint overview available upon request.) Key “leading change” and “innovation” principles have helped ensure leadership buy-in and vision momentum, including...



- Establish a Sense of Urgency
- Create a Guiding Coalition
- Develop Shared Vision and Strategy
- Communicate the Change Vision
- Generate Short-Term Wins



Clearly, working models are needed to serve as examples for other churches to emulate – which will become a primary focus of the next Innovation Alliance gathering.

Like-Minded Relationships

Perhaps the most important part of the first gathering was the opportunity for leaders from large and small congregations who hold a variety of church positions (senior pastors, student ministry leaders, children’s pastors, spiritual formation pastors, etc.) to dialogue about the common issues facing evangelical families. All participants share a passion for home-centered redemption and a desire to develop momentum in coming days in order to share what is learned with others.



Major Themes

Several themes emerged throughout the two days of discussion that are useful for framing specific church initiatives. Highlights by category include...

The Present Situation

Each church represented made a brief presentation describing their profile (location, size, audience demographics, etc.) and giving examples of recent innovations – and offered their church’s assessment of how they see themselves doing in the areas of...

- 1) nurturing strong marriages
- 2) parents introducing children to Christ
- 3) teens developing a strong Christian faith



The majority assessed themselves as having a “strong desire” in each of these categories with “periodic programs and some participation.” None, however, believed they had a “compelling vision with effective programs and high participation” on all three elements.

Some innovations already underway include...

- Willow Creek stated that their ministry was moving from one of providing family spiritual development to partnering with families in spiritual development.
- Mark Holman shared a range of activities that have taken place at Ventura Missionary Church ever since they committed to becoming a “faith at home-driven church” and made a long-term commitment to encouraging their families to take baby steps in their homes.
- Sonrise Church shared having great success with a periodic intergenerational service and adding a “bring back” element to their “take home” resources.
- Bill Walton of New Life described the theme printed on posters and t-shirts that reminds parents, “Sunday is the kickoff, the rest is up to you!” He consistently explains to parents in the church, “I’m not your children’s pastor, you are.” He fears the church has become an obstacle to parents spiritually disciplining their children because we’ve made it easy for them to think they can just outsource the job.
- Several discussed the way our churches tend to “dis-integrate” families (by splitting them up into various gender and lifestage groups) in contrast to the church plant philosophy of Grace Family Baptist where they fully integrate their church and treat the family as a unit instead of a collection of individuals.
- One church talked about the potential for delivering family spiritual development messages through existing small groups. Another recognized the value of developing men’s and women’s groups out of existing couple small groups so that the gender-specific ministry would be balanced by couples’ ministry.

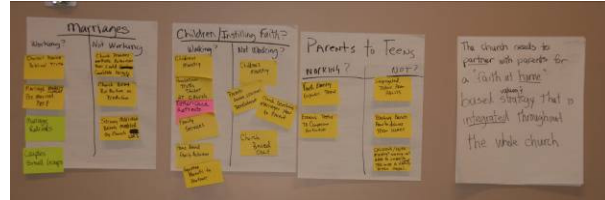


Brainstorm Category One: What Is and Isn't Working?

Four teams brainstormed the question, “What is and isn’t working in church-based family ministry?”. Common themes included...

Not Working

- Lack of church-wide strategy, making marriage/parenting an “after thought” rather than a core strategic target.
- Enabling “drop off” children’s ministry because it perpetuates “outsourced” child discipleship.
- On campus family separation – a symptom of “silo” ministry that treats everyone as an individual (or couple) rather than part of a family unit.
- Failing to connect the dots between a strong marriage, effective parenting, and children embracing the faith.
- Just telling parents, “It’s *your* job,” and assuming they know what to do.
- Segregating teens and parents
- Doing children’s and youth ministry without the “umbrella” of a family-centered model
- Reactive marriage ministry vs. proactive strategies
- Church leaders failing to MODEL strong marriages
- Programs are important, but they are the means – not the end. We need to create a church culture that drives family intentionality!



Working

- Creating intergenerational, shared experiences such as family-based small groups, parent-with-teen events, parents-with-child services, on-campus events, etc.
- Church providing tools for parents to use at home with kids
- Children’s ministry teaching core truths (i.e. Awana)
- Home-based family activities
- Parents and teens serving together (SS, Mission Trips, Etc.)
- Family services
- Pre-marriage prep
- Marriage retreats
- Couples’ small groups
- Marriage mentoring (couple to couple)
- Annual sermon series on priority of home



Brainstorm Category Two: How Might We Measure Impact?

A different assembly of teams brainstormed potential measures a church could use to determine success for family-driven ministry strategies. Top ideas included...

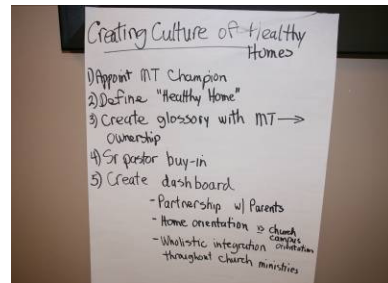
- Survey all attendees on “family intentionality” in categories such as marriage, passing the faith, etc.
- Percent of marriages proactively building their relationship and/or marriage health measure of trends (getting better or worse?)
- Percent of parents who proactively disciple their children
- Annual family health survey on marriage satisfaction, parent/child relationship, faith
- Survey teens re: relationship between and with parents
- Exit Interviews: Interview those heading into adulthood (college, career, etc.) regarding whether they feel prepared for coming challenges, etc.
- Divorce rate of regular attendees
- Number/percent of kids receiving Christ as savior by 13 years old
- In-home surveys (360° family assessment, long-term family health, etc.)
- Percentage of participation in family-driven spiritual growth process
 - Example: Number of “bring back” papers submitted--reversing the take home paper” idea by having child rewarded when parents do activity

Brainstorm Category Three: Big Dreams

We broke into three teams to craft high-level strategies individual churches might use as a basis for their own church innovation initiative.

Team One: Create a Culture of Healthy Homes

- Appoint a management team level champion
- Define “Healthy Home” for church
- Create a common vision with management team ownership
- Get senior pastor buy in
- Create a dashboard for success...
 - Partnership with parents
 - Home orientation vs. church campus orientation
 - Integration throughout church ministries



Team Two: Intact Families

- Vision: Intact families that live incarnationally and have generational influence for generations to come
- Goals:
 - 100% of church leadership is part of a healthy, intact family
 - 0% divorce rate (for new marriages)
 - 100% of high school grads are retained in their faith and fulfilling God’s purpose for their lives four years later
 - Intentional fathers leading their homes

Team Three: Faith at Home

- Vision: To become a faith-at-home-driven church that leaves a strong legacy to the next generation
- Goal: Equip the home to be the primary place where faith is nurtured
- Bottlenecks: Key obstacles to the goal include...
 - Parents are not equipped
 - Health of the pastor's family
 - A culture of "let the professionals do it"
 - Cost (money and time) of intentionality
 - Paradigm shift for all stakeholders
 - Current church leadership structures
- Opportunities: Top opportunities to move forward include...
 - Partner with people in "You can do it, we can help!" spirit
 - Make resources known and available
 - Small group coaching
 - Build and equip coaching leaders
 - Families learn common messages in common strategy
 - People are desperate for help
- Driving Force: All church leaders/stakeholders must buy in to the dream/vision

Of Special Note

Several themes surfaced throughout various sessions worthy of special note...

- **Current Realities:** Each church presented a "current reality" summary which surfaced the following common themes...
 - The "want to" for family impact is ahead of the "how to" in most churches
 - Church organization structures are an obstacle to family integration
 - Language matters because people have pre-conceived notions of what one means by "family ministry"
 - Good plans today are better than perfect plans tomorrow!
 - Senior Pastor commitment is a huge factor in success
 - We've been so sensitive to "non-families" that we fail to impact the majority of congregations – married couples and parents with kids at home.
- **The Divorce Link:** The group noted the need for data on any correlation between parental divorce and kids leaving their parents' faith. Are all Christian families hemorrhaging at the same rate, or do intact homes beat the odds? Intuition and anecdotal experience suggest divorce makes faith transference far more difficult. Are the majority of those abandoning Christianity those experiencing parental divorce?
- **Ideal vs. Real:** A brief disagreement occurred reminding all that we face an ever-present tension between upholding God's ideal for the home and the reality of broken families. Since the church does not have the luxury of choosing one or the other, we must find ways to do both--teaching and modeling God's design for families while extending grace and hope to "bumpy road" homes like those lead by single parents. Since a strong marriage is the foundation of every stable, healthy home – we must work to increase the likelihood of families remaining intact. At the same time, we must bring the hope of Christ's redemption to those living with the fallout of divorce, abuse, or other painful realities. Kurt Bruner reminded the group that this likely will not be the only tension to emerge during the

innovation process because a family-centered approach to ministry may call into question existing programs and priorities.

- **Church/Home Partnership:** A dominant theme of all participants can be summarized as follows: “The church needs to partner with parents for faith-at-home-based values and strategies that are integrated throughout the whole church.” Individual programs are great. But it is time to move toward integrated strategies.
- **Incarnational Gospel:** The church proclaims the gospel, but it is at home that it becomes “incarnational” – especially in marriage and parents living their faith.
- **Worth Considering:** Several “outside the box” ideas surfaced that can help trigger further innovative thinking, including...
 - **FAMILY TOOL BOX:** Offer parents a “tool box” of easy-to-implement ideas for creating faith transference moments at bedtime, mealtime, drive time, etc. Make them “bite sized” suggestions vs. complicated and long.
 - **ANNUAL FAMILY PLAN:** Host a New Year retreat/event in which families dream and plan the coming year together for connection and spiritual growth. Every family in the church writes a faith training plan with quarterly goals. The church celebrates progress throughout the year with a big “bash” celebration.
 - **INTRODUCING CHILD TO CHRIST EVENT:** Create experiences (church service, event, etc.) where the pastor walks children through their salvation decision with the child’s parents present and ready for follow-up.
 - **“MY FUN FAMILY” ESSAY CONTEST:** Develop a church wide essay contest for kids to highlight why their family is fun and intentional about faith training. Grand prize = family trip to Disneyland. Use same approach to emphasize marriage via “My Romantic Parents” essay contest with a romantic get-away prize.
 - **PARENT REPORT CARD:** Have the kids/teens give their parents a quarterly report card on the health of their marriage and parent/child relationships.
 - **FAMILY MISSIONS/SERVICE:** Host all-family missions and service opportunities to enable intergenerational service experiences.
 - **FAMILY SERVICE:** Conduct a monthly/quarterly intergenerational service that models spiritual formation at home principles.
 - **PARENT/TEEN MOVIE NIGHTS:** Host parent-with-teens movie discussion events to create dialog on worldview in media, etc.
 - **SIX WEEK LAUNCH:** Organize six week integrated launch strategy for your family initiative – including a sermon series, small group emphasis, parenting tools, etc.
 - **JOINT CREATIVE SESSIONS:** Host “parental guidance” sessions with parents and ministry leaders to brainstorm holistic strategies for strengthening families.

After completing our brainstorm sessions to generate common themes and dreams, all committed to launch or continue their own innovation initiative back home. The group set November 6-7 for our next gathering, when each church will give an update on progress to date and where we will begin exploring working models that surface among participating churches.

For additional information or questions from the Strong Families Innovation Alliance, contact Executive Director Kurt Bruner at kurtb@lakepointe.org

ⁱ The following churches were represented at the first Innovation Alliance gathering...

- **Lake Pointe Church** in Rockwall, Texas (www.lakepointe.org)
- **Lakewood Church** in Houston, Texas (www.lakewood.cc)
- **New Life Church** in Colorado Springs, Colorado (www.newlifechurch.org)
- **Sonrise Church** in Clovis, California (www.sonriseclavis.com)
- **Grace Family Baptist Church** in Spring, Texas (www.gracefamilybaptist.net)
- **Celebration Church** in Green Bay, Wisconsin (www.bcfgb.com)
- **Highlands Church** in Scottsdale, Arizona (www.highlandchurch.org)
- **Willow Creek Community Church** in South Barrington, IL (www.willowcreek.org)
- **Northridge Community Church** in Cave Creek, AZ (www.northridge.org)
- **Saint Peter Lutheran Church** (www.stpeterriley.org)
- **Saddleback Church** in Lake Forest, California (www.saddleback.com)
- **Ventura Missionary Church** in Ventura, California (www.vmc.net)
- **Scottsdale Bible Church** in Scottsdale, Arizona (www.sbcas.org)
- **Woodmen Valley Chapel** in Colorado Springs, Colorado (www.woodmenvalley.org)

ⁱⁱ Data from the Southern Baptist Convention indicates that we are currently losing 70-88% of our youth after their freshman year in college. ^[3] In a report to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, T.C. Pinkney observed that 70% of teenagers involved in church youth groups stop attending church within two years of their high school graduation. ^[4] The Southern Baptist Council on Family Life**reported an even more staggering statistic — that 88% of the children in evangelical homes leave church at the age of 18. ^[5]

- The vast majority of those who ever come to faith in Christ do so during the years they spend under their parents' roof. (The Barna Update: *Evangelism is Most Effective Among Kids* -October 2004)
- A 2002 general market study revealed parents' number one concern as "raising a child who is well-behaved and has good values" – with 61% saying it is "essential" to help their kids develop a strong religious faith. (*A Lot Easier Said Than Done* - Public Agenda, 2002)
- Close to nine out of ten parents of preteens believe they have the primary responsibility for teaching their children about spiritual matters, with ninety-six percent saying they are primarily responsible to teach their kids good values. (The Barna Update: *Parents Accept Responsibility...But Struggle With Effectiveness* – May 2003)
- Children ages 5-13 have a 32% probability of coming to Christ. Those in and beyond their teens have a 4-5% probability. According to Barna Research Inc. "if a person does not accept Christ as Savior before the age of 14 the likelihood of ever doing so is slim." (The Barna Update *Parents Accept Responsibility...But Struggle With Effectiveness* - May 2003)