



Congregation as Family? Yes, Count the Benefits

JENNIFER BENSON MORAN

*T*ime magazine recently released photos from “Portrait of a Presidency,” in which Pete Souza collected personal photographs of President Obama. One amusing photograph showed President Obama working at his desk in the Oval Office, while in the foreground his daughter was hiding behind the sofa, seconds from jumping out and yelling in an attempt to scare her dad.¹ There can’t be many people in the White House who would interrupt the president that way! Ideally, however, a daughter can sneak up on a president at work without a thought for his response. She knows he will be happy to see her. She expects to be received with unconditional love, so she is free to live and laugh, play and work with confidence and security.

This image came to mind as I pondered what can be gained by using a family model of congregational life. Scripture has many references to the family of God and the brother- and sister-hood we all share in Jesus Christ. In Mark 3:35, Jesus teaches that “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” If Jesus is our brother, then we are his siblings. We aren’t his employees, or his servants, or his acquaintances. We are his sisters and brothers, and that makes us siblings with *everyone* who does God’s will. Jesus calls us to this radical reorientation and redefinition of family.

We still might ask, however, about the benefits to understanding the congregation as family. Let’s consider three: everybody matters, images of family are redeemed, and everyone belongs.

When our congregations have a family model, we live a theology that asserts that everybody matters. Ideally, no voice is dismissed, no person is marginalized. As brothers and sisters of Jesus, we are all equally beloved children of God, important and valuable simply for who we have been created to be; not for what we might earn or accomplish, but because God has given us life and loves us.

Second, there is a redemptive aspect of congregations striving to live as family. For many, the image of God as father is not helpful. When our nuclear families are broken and toxic, when we have suffered abuse and pain within our families, it is difficult to trust in a God who is held up as father. By striving to be family, the church has the opportunity to reach people hurt by their nuclear families and,

¹See <http://lightbox.time.com/2012/10/08/pete-souza-portrait-of-a-presidency/#105> (accessed February 20, 2013).

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Congregation as Family? No, Know the Pitfalls

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In Exod 3:15, God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This God is one who cares for families and works through families. The first letter of John describes the Christian community as “children of God” (1 John 3:1–2). The author often calls the members of his church “little children.” These are just two examples from Scripture that have influenced the church’s use of the family metaphor to describe how it functions.

While useful, the family metaphor has several pitfalls. I will discuss four that I have experienced in my work as a pastor. First, the metaphor shapes a closed, exclusive identity. Second, it places a parental role onto the pastor. Third, it allows members to act out their individual family dysfunctions in the church setting. Fourth, it encourages the expectation of intimacy rather than “a company of strangers”¹ engaged on behalf of God’s world.

First, when a church identifies itself as a family, it can evolve into a closed, exclusive organization. Leaders of one such church described their congregation as a family place where they take care of their own. New people were welcomed warmly; however, they were not easily assimilated into the life of the community. Occasionally, new members were invited into various congregational ministries, but they were rarely given authority or power to make important decisions or changes. When newer members were invited to participate, and did so, longer-term members with power corrected the newer members about how they did things or discouraged them from offering new ideas, because that “had never been done here before.” In two churches that self-identified as a family church, individuals who had been connected to the congregation for as long as ten years said that they still did not feel that they were fully welcomed and included as members of that community.

The second pitfall with the family church metaphor is identifying the parent. Often that role falls upon the pastor. When the pastor is seen as the parent, the congregants become the children. This can lead to several malfunctions in discipleship. The pastor/parent takes care of the member/child. The member/child gets his or her needs met by the pastor/parent. Discipleship and the mission and ministry of the church become the responsibility of the pastor rather than all members.

¹Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). See, e.g., p. 16.

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through the power of the Holy Spirit, help bring healing and wholeness to God's beloved children.

Third, the family model in congregations offers a deep sense of belonging. When everyone matters and redemptive work is done, people know there is a place of love and hope where they belong. Let me share a story to illustrate.

Our congregation's treasurer, Bruce, loves baseball card shows and often invites our eight-year-old son Evan to go with him. At ten o'clock, a couple of Saturdays a year, Bruce (name used with permission) pulls into our driveway, Evan hops in the car, and off they go. Evan always comes home thrilled with whatever new card he has collected, often one he got free from a kind vendor. The hot dog and Cherry Coca-Cola that he otherwise never gets is a big draw, too!

If it weren't for Bruce living the family model of church, Evan would not have a single baseball card. More important, Bruce is teaching Evan that there are people in his life other than his immediate family who care for him enough to spend a quarter of their weekend with him. Evan is learning that there is someone he can trust in his church family. When Evan comes to church on Sunday and sees Bruce in worship just as he saw him at the card show on Saturday, Evan is learning that Bruce can help him grow in his faith, just as he can help him learn the joy of card collecting. This is what it looks like to "belong" in a church family and it is a beautiful expression of God's love for us.

Clearly, there are significant gains with a family model, although there certainly are challenges. No nuclear family is perfect; neither is any church family. Yet, as people who live in the "already but not yet" reality of God's kingdom, we can work towards the fullness of what family can be. This model requires a lot of hard work. It requires care and thoughtfulness to be sure the family system doesn't become toxic or harmful. It requires us to pray, clothe, feed, house, forgive, listen, rejoice, celebrate, weep, and sometimes rescue one another, becoming an intimate part of each other's lives. This model also means that we, like Sasha Obama, are free to live and laugh, play and work with confidence and security within our congregational families. While this model is a responsibility, it is also a privilege.

First John 3:1–3 declares, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (NIV). We are, indeed, all God's children, sisters and brothers in Christ. As children of God we have the privilege, the responsibility, and the calling to live as family in our congregations. As family, we may not always live perfectly, but we can live faithfully. ⊕

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When the pastor or leaders try to encourage member participation in visitation or confirmation, for example, the classic response is, “We hired the pastor to do that.”

Another danger of identifying the pastor as parent is the expectation that the pastor will save the congregation. The pastor will bring in new members and bring back inactive members. The pastor will get people to give more money to the church. This is an especially deadly expectation because the church already has a Savior, Jesus the Christ—and saviors get crucified.

A third pitfall is that the family metaphor enables members to act out their individual family dysfunctions within the church setting. In one congregation a man who acted as an autocratic patriarch in his family brought that behavior into the church. He demanded that the pastor and church leadership revoke the new church constitution and return to the former, one in which he had played a prominent role in writing. In another congregation, a woman was unable to tell her parents that she was a lesbian because of their public, vocal condemnation of homosexuality. As a result, she transferred her anger toward her parents onto her pastor. In another congregation, a middle-aged man had grown up with an alcoholic and verbally abusive mother. When his congregation called a woman pastor, he refused to attend worship until “that woman” was gone.

In *Generation to Generation*, Edwin Friedman identifies congregations as family systems.² Because they inevitably function as such, these types of negative behaviors can happen whether a congregation identifies itself as a family church or not. However, when a congregation embraces that identity, it can encourage and exacerbate the frequency of individuals playing out their personal family dysfunctions within the church setting.

Finally, the family metaphor fosters an ideology of intimacy rather than “a company of strangers” engaged on behalf of God’s world. Members might come to value close, warm relationships so much that they believe these intimate relationships are the purpose of life and the purpose of the church; they might come to believe that such intimacy can be achieved through human effort and will.³ Consequently, members expect the pastor to be on intimate terms with every member and all members to be intimately connected with one another. This expectation is not only unrealistic; it distorts the biblical understanding of church as household, respecting the diversity and uniqueness of all members.

How we identify ourselves as church plays a crucial role in our understanding of God’s mission to bring life to all, including all families, all tribes, and all nations. We must take care that our metaphors encompass the inclusivity of God rather than our human tendency toward exclusivity. ⊕

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²Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985) 195.

³Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 24.