

What do you mean by "family"

I HAVE BEEN INCREASINGLY FRUSTRATED IN MY LAY PASTORS EQUIPPING SEMINARS OVER WHETHER TO CALL THE CONGREGATIONAL UNIT ASSIGNED TO A LAY PASTOR A FAMILY OR A HOUSEHOLD IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE USE THE RIGHT WORD BECAUSE, AS JUAN CARLOS ORTIZ SAID, "IF WE DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT WORD, IT MAY BE BECAUSE WE DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT IDEA." PROVERBS 25:11 COLORFULLY DESCRIBES A WORD WHICH IS DOING ITS JOB OF SPEAKER, "A WORD FITLY SPOKEN IS LIKE APPLES OF GOLD IN A SETTING OF SILVER." "FITLY" IS THE KEY PRINCIPLE IN DECIDING TO USE *FAMILY* OR *HOUSEHOLD*. CLARITY IS PREMIUM. FOR ME THE ISSUE HAS BEEN RESOLVED. READ ON.

Our rule of thumb policy is to assign a new Lay Pastor between five and ten families to care for. The reason for the number is twofold: 1) Fewer than five probably indicates that the Lay Pastor will not take the ministry seriously enough to make it a priority, 2) more than ten is unmanageable.

Because Lay Pastors already have several other people in their lives, they can relate meaningfully only to a limited number of families. In the primary biblical model for Lay Pastors Ministry, Moses assigned ten people to each non-administrative caregiver (Exodus 18). It seems that the most practical number for effective care is five to ten families.

MY CONCERN IS THE TERM

But, it's not the number that concerns me. It is the definition. Are they families? What do we mean by family? Many people in my Lay Pastors equipping seminars around the country ask what we mean by family. In my book, *Can The Pastor Do It Alone?*, published in 1987, I wrote." (Page 65)

The standard answer to the question has been, "family includes everyone who lives under the same roof." That's a pretty good answer. But the problem is the word family creates a picture in the Lay Pastor's mind that is different from the reality he or she faces in contacting many of the people. The mental picture is that of a nuclear family: father, mother and children. However, the reality is that only about half of the families assigned will be made up of father, mother and children. In fact, a Lay Pastor who is single may be assigned all singles so not even one of the families is the traditional nuclear family.

'HOUSEHOLD' IS MORE USEFUL

I now use the word *household* in place of *family* to designate the unit of congregational care assigned to Lay Pastors. They are assigned five to ten *households*. This word clarifies the mental picture a Lay Pastor has of the unit and makes the question, "What do you mean by *family*".

However, should the question, "What do you mean by household?" Using household makes for clear understanding by eliminating the mental image of a nuclear family. And it is culturally relevant.

NINE KINDS OF HOUSEHOLDS

Now, what about those living "under the same roof?" It is a great help to Lay Pastors to learn that there are at least nine different kinds of households.

Nuclear family household: Father, mother and children who all live under the same roof.

Empty nest household: A married couple without children.

Single parent household: Father or mother only and the child(ren).

One-person household: A person living alone whether in a house, apartment, dormitory, retirement center or nursing home.

Interracial family household: Two people of different ethnic origin along with their children if there be any.

"Mr. Mon" household: The roles are reversed. The husband keeps house. The wife is gainfully employed.

Multi-adult household: Unrelated singles living together (sometimes called "fictive kin"), young people, old people, disabled or homeless people.

Cohabiting household: Living together without legal marriage.

Same-sex family household: Family formation by gay and lesbian couples, with or without children.

THE CURRENT TREND CONTINUES

According to Dr. Shervert H. Frazier (Psychotrends: What kind of People Are We Becoming?) psychological and economical forces propel the trend to further reduce the number of nuclear families, erode traditional family values and increase both the number and acceptance of diverse family forms. Dr. Frazier predicts that the divorce rate will soar from the present 50% to 60% in the near future. More single women with children now prefer to remain single. Two of the proliferating forms of households, cohabitation and same-sex, though unbiblical and non-Christian, are not only growing in number but growing in secular social acceptance.

ALL NEED TO BE LOVED

A Lay Pastor is called to care for the people in these diverse units of their congregation. Did Jesus know about this diversity when he gave the new command, "Love one another?" Was the Holy Spirit aware of this when he led Peter to write not just for his contemporaries but for us as well. "Tend the flock of God which is your charge?"

If we limit our pastoral care to nuclear family households we may be missing as many as half of "the flock of God." Also if we understand only the characteristics of a nuclear family we will not be able to care for the other kinds of households effectively. Should we not include the other kinds of households we are not obedient to the spirit's call the need for love in shapes of (1) nurturance, (2) security and (3) connectedness is universal. Lay Pastors are in the unique position of loving and caring without the added agenda of judging, generating uniformity, straightening people out or getting them to change. As long as people have professed faith in Jesus Christ and continue as members of our churches, Lay Pastors are committed to love and care for them.

FOUR PRINCIPLES

Jesus cared about the adulterous woman. He continued to include Judas in the twelve and he loved Peter even though he knew he was about to deny that he was a disciple. Four principles flow from Jesus' relationship with the woman, Judas and Peter, which guide the Lay Pastor in being "love with skin on it" to all households in a congregation:

1. He came not to condemn but to save.
2. Acceptance of a person does not condone all he or she does.

3. His standards were not compromised by his closeness to those living by different standards.
4. He loved to the end.

OUR CHALLENGE KNOW AND GROW

Jesus' challenge to his disciples after some difficult teaching is also a challenge to Lay Pastors, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." Can anyone doubt that he expects Lay Pastors to grow in their understanding of the characteristics of these diverse households and to learn the skills necessary to love and care about them!