

Familying The Faith

Effective Ways to Equip Parents as Faith-Influencers

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Familiying the Faith: Effective Ways to Equip Parents as Faith-Influencers

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Introduction

At Vibrant Faith we're exploring, with 20 partner churches across the U.S., what the "Fourth Soil" in Jesus's "Parable of the Soils" means for families that want their kids to grow up into a deep and lasting relationship with God. "Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" (Matthew 13:1-23). How can we "enrich the soil" that surrounds kids in their everyday life, making it a fertile ecosystem for faith formation?

In His parable, Jesus is teaching about the difference in growth environments—three that prevent an "owned" and mature faith, and one growth environment that enriches and promotes it. Our mission is to partner with Jesus in creating this "Fourth-Soil" environment of growth. The research of Dr. Christian Smith and many others confirms, over and over, that parents who have a close, intimate relationship with God and a warm but high-expectation relationship with their children offer this kind of "soil."

Parents are the primary faith-influencers in the lives of young people, and that influence overshadows all other factors (children's and youth ministers, peers, parachurch leaders). But though we know this truth, the church has largely been unable to "bend the trajectory" that represents conventional ways of capitalizing on this inherent influence.

- What will it take to tackle this intractable challenge and show real impact?
- How do we plant a new culture of home-centered, church-supported faith-growth practices and habits among families and congregations?
- What motivates people to shift their habits and practices?
- What catalyzes parents' own depth of relationship with God?
- And how do we help plant faith-forming habits in parents in the midst of their everyday life?

Our mission as the church is to partner with parents, and people who are like parents, to focus on enriching the soil of the home. And we believe the way forward is an approach captured by the word FAMILYING.

CHAPTER 1:

The Foundations of 'FAMILYING'

At Vibrant Faith we use the word FAMILYING to describe a highly relational, organic “faith infection” process. It’s a word family ministry pioneer Dr. Dick Hardel invented to express how faith is *actually* formed in young people. It’s a relational process, not a program or curriculum. The foundation of FAMILYING is built on the Rabbi-Talmid relationship Jesus modeled—our faith is formed in us not through self-discipline, but through *relational immersion*. This is another way of describing an accompaniment mindset in parenting, or everyday relational immersion. This is how the ancient Rabbis of Jesus’s time shaped their Talmids, or apprentices—it was much more than a student/teacher relationship. Jesus described it using His Vine/Branch illustration, reiterating the “mechanics” of an accompaniment relationship twice for emphasis:

“Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

To be formed by Jesus is to remain in Him. For a Talmid, that meant leaving your parents and your community to live in the same household with your Rabbi (your surrogate parent)—eating together, learning together, laughing together, weeping together. The life of a Talmid meant immersive togetherness. And that’s the best way to describe what “remain” means. Of course, parenting already provides an environment of immersive togetherness. Kids immersed in their parents’ presence soak up their “viral identity.” So an accompaniment mindset means that we pay attention to “what’s in the water” of the home environment.

The focus of FAMILYING, or Parent Accompaniment, is expressed simply through The Progression: “Get to know Jesus well, because the more you know Him, the more you’ll love Him, and the more you love Him, the more you’ll want to follow Him, and the more you follow Him, the more you’ll become like Him, and the more you become like Him, the more you become yourself.” As parents relationally immerse themselves with Jesus, it kicks off a progression that is transformational. The “water” kids are immersed in is the truth about who their parents really are—the self they are becoming. As the parent is transformed, they “infect” their kids with that transformation. In everyday life, and everyday moments. FAMILYING, then, is a “downstream” process. Kids get “saturated” by whatever is in their parents’ “water.” So the goal is to guide parents into “Get to know Jesus well...” which kicks off the progression toward transformation.

FAMILYING is lived out in a circle of relationships that includes parents but extends to people who are like parents, and environments that include all ages. FAMILYING is simply the relational process that the Spirit of Jesus uses to form faith. In the biblical story, from beginning to end, we see story after story of people who are related by *both* blood and faith. That’s what FAMILYING means. In contemporary culture, people no longer connect faith in Jesus with a “know and be known”

community. It's American individualism... It's our mobile society... It's a failure of the church to be church... It's the fruit of a "me and Jesus alone" Christianity. It's all of these things. As the number of people living in extended families shrinks, churches have more and more lost the ability to BE defining community for people.

But stop to consider what drives the popularity of most classic television shows—shows like *Friends* or *Modern Family* or *Parenthood* or *Downton Abbey*, and so many others. These are shows about extended families in action, and that's why we love watching them. People connect with these families at a deep level because they reflect our heart's desire. FAMILYING is simply built into us, because it reflects the image of our triune God. Our mission is to re-connect people's faith in Jesus to their deeply buried desire to know and be known—to help them find that in and through extended family-like Christian community.

Here's an example from an unlikely source...

My (Nancy's) husband Art loves Bluegrass music. Actually, he LOVES, LOVES, LOVES Bluegrass music. Me? Not so much. When Art wanted his Saturday morning bluegrass fix, I'd usually leave the house. But I did agree to go with him to the largest Bluegrass festival in the country, held right in our own Raleigh, North Carolina backyard. I'd been looking for examples of FAMILYING in everyday life, but never expected to find what I was after at a Bluegrass festival. I saw...

- Jam sessions with circles of musicians OF ALL AGES happening everywhere—not just on the stages,
- Workshop sessions populated by people of all ages,
- Stages where young people were brought up to play with their bluegrass heroes,
- Parents and kids lugging musical instruments everywhere,
- Space made in the program to hear what new things young people were doing with this music, and
- Bands made up of families—second- and third-generation musicians.

In newspaper reports about the event I discovered the "engine room" of FAMILYING among participants. One young girl said: "When you're a kid, you can join a jam with a 70-year-old guy or a 30-year-old woman or whatever—you become friends with people that you would never dream in your life that you'd be friends with. It wipes out your age." And a dad who presides over a family band said: "Bluegrass, perhaps more than any other genre of music, welcomes young people and sees the value of nurturing the next generation. People involved in Bluegrass see it as much more than a musical genre; they see Bluegrass truly as a community. It's a kind of music that generally is passed on from person to person to person."

You can see why this Bluegrass culture has such a powerful forming influence on all ages. And it's also an immersive way to plant a foundation of faith in young people—with a FAMILYING approach to infectious influence that involves parents drawing closer to Jesus while accompanying their kids in their faith journey.