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Study guide

Expanding the idea of family

By Robert C. Blezard

“You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family,” says the old adage, implying that we are simply stuck with whatever oddball characters who comprise our families of origin. But we can choose our families of faith. Many people find “new” families among the siblings in their congregation, fellow children of God and united together around a common mission.

Exercise 1: Healthy families

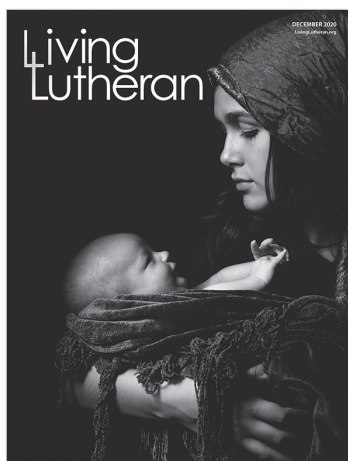
What makes for a strong, healthy family? Love and trust are given characteristics, but what are others? As a study group, brainstorm as many words or ideas as you can. Make list of them, then discuss:

- How would you rank the characteristics, from most important to least important?
- What do the characteristics have in common?
- In a healthy family, how do the characteristics interrelate?
- Does any family exhibit all of these characteristics all the time? Explain.
- What is a realistic expectation for healthy family dynamics?
- How does a healthy family work through problems and conflict?
- Do those dynamics and characteristics apply to a congregational “family”?
- As a study group, end by coming up with a consensus definition of a healthy family.

Exercise 2: Non-related “family”

The “Dutch Uncle” and “Dutch Aunt” are well established in our culture as friends who are not related by blood but nonetheless have a strong familial bond. Discuss:

- Can you share about a relationship with a non-relative that has grown so strong that the person is like family? How did it start? Why does it continue?
- Describe how this dynamic works and why it is often very helpful and mutually rewarding to all parties involved.
- Are “Dutch” relations limited to only uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews? What other family-like relationships are possible?



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Exercise 3: Siblings in Christ

Jesus expands the definition of family in Matthew 12:47-50. Read carefully and discuss:

Someone told Jesus, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

- What do you make of Jesus' pronouncement? Why do you think he makes it?
- What do these non-relative the members of Jesus' new family have in common?
- Jesus says in Matthew 12:50 that all who do the will of God are his family. How does the common mission of the gospel unite members of a congregation?
- If people are related to Jesus, how does that automatically make them related to one another?
- What does this mean for you? For your congregation? For the Christian church?

Exercise 4: Congregational 'family'

You hear many Christians comment, "my congregation is like family." Let's explore this phenomenon.

Many churchgoers describe their congregation as a "family." From your experience, what are the primary reasons they do so? How much of it has to do with common mission? How much has to do with the close relationships they have developed over the years?

How can the relationships of members in a congregation parallel the dynamic of any family? What are the pros and cons of this?

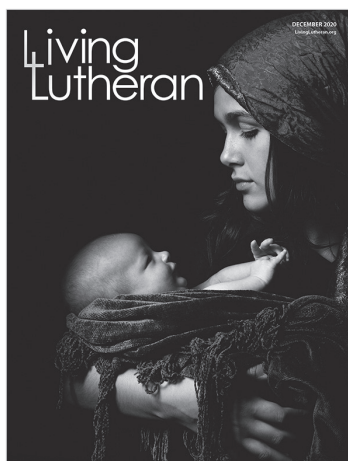
What characteristics does an ideal congregational "family" have in common with families of origin?

To what degree would you describe your own congregation as a "family"? Explain. What reasons do you have for doing so?

What are ways that a congregation can encourage healthy relationships among members to bring them together as "family"?

Discussion questions

- Why do we need "family" in our lives? List the reasons and purposes for family. If we have no family of origin or our families are unsuitable or unavailable, is it healthy for us to seek non-relatives to fill that role? Why or why not?



About the study guide author:

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- Through baptism we are called children of God. That being the case, we have a common divine parent, God. Therefore, we are brothers, sisters and siblings through Christ. In your life and in your congregation, how do you recognize and celebrate those relationships? Why would it be important to do so? How can you and your congregation do a better job strengthening and celebrating those relationships?
- Family members sometimes don't get along, but they find ways to handle conflict and disagreements without losing sight of their bond of love. It's the same way in a congregational family, isn't it? What are coping strategies that help your congregation's "family" to manage conflict while maintaining your mutual bond of love and care for one another?
- In today's highly mobile world, some people live too far away from their family or origin. Other people may not have deep and loving relationships with their families of origin. How might we, as siblings in Christ, be family to these people? Is it appropriate that we do so? How might your congregation help people to be healthy family to such folks?

Expanding the idea of family

By Petra Rickertsen

When many people picture the holidays, their family comes to mind, even if it's accompanied by commentary about having to tolerate certain members' irritating qualities. And then there is the ever-present "family" theme in holiday stories, movies and advertising that resonates with many Americans.

In movies, characters who come together for Christmas work to quell arguments, set aside differences in opinion, and look past clashes of personality in the name of enjoying the holiday. In real life, people might do this, too, thinking that they

can't change their family and feeling societal pressure to come together.

But letting go of a narrow definition of family as those with whom you share blood allows Christians to more fully embrace the "kin-dom" of God. This is practiced when Christians welcome children of God of all ages into the family through baptism and a shared mission.

In Matthew 12:47-50, Jesus learns that his mother and brothers have arrived in Jerusalem: "To the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my



mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”

Living as “little Christs” (from the Greek *christianos*, the root word of “Christian”), then, means family is everyone who lives together in Christian mission. But what does it mean to make a congregation one’s family?

“Your chosen family is waiting to be made.”

Mollie Ryan defines family in two “prongs”: one of origin and one of choice. Ryan, a pastor in another denomination, embraces her chosen family at Lord of Life—the campus ministry at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks—with whom she connected as a college student and still feels most “comfortable and purposeful.”



Photo: iStock/shinonov

After cutting ties with her family of origin, Ryan calls this congregation her family. “They’ve modeled for me what radical hospitality and acceptance looks like, and what it means to not settle for anything less than you deserve,” she said. “Everyone needs and deserves to be loved, and if your family of origin doesn’t do that ... your chosen family is waiting to be made.”

Louis Moehlman, ministry associate at Living Lord Lutheran Church in Lake St. Louis, Mo., agrees: “Beyond the sense of biological, I believe that family also expands to include those who offer support, guidance and grace.” At Living Lord, Moehlman journeys with others through their lives, from celebrating their anniversaries and baby showers to keeping vigil with them as they are dying.

From Moehlman’s perspective, what makes a congregation family is not just sharing these life-altering experiences but giving the Spirit an opportunity to move: “When I am comfortable and thus able to take people into the gospel in ways that they haven’t been able to before, that is when I know that I have found a family with the community.”

Similarly, the people of Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Chicago, are what form Betty Ramos’ calling to her church family. When she offers to take care of kids in the congregation during worship services and make bread pudding for the annual holiday picnic, the congregation in which she has found a family graciously accepts. Because her church celebrates her gifts of helping others instead of dismissing her, Ramos said, “Being in church with the people makes me happier.”

For some people, however, the word “family” has been too damaged by broken relationships. Peter Carlson, a religion professor at Cal Lutheran, cautioned against a congregation presenting itself as a family to people who seem to need one for the holidays. Instead, they should welcome people to Christ’s table—not just the altar but also home dinner tables or physically distanced picnics—throughout the year.

“Then, when the holidays come around, those of us whose lives are lived on the edges and in those in-between spaces, for whom ‘family’ and ‘home’ are damaged goods, might experience something new and redemptive,” he said. “We might have to come up with new words to describe it, but it will be available to us and will be safe and filled with nourishing love.” †

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Petra Rickertsen is a coordinator for network engagement with ELCA World Hunger.