

The Heart of Serving God As A Family

Jenni Ho-Huan

The world has changed tremendously in the last few decades. This can cause us to lose our bearings about our faith and how to live it out. In particular, the old days of a family that goes to church together and find ways to serve in the same church is becoming less common. There are many reasons for this, from the availability of online sermons to the rift between the generations. Additionally, life has become much busier these days such that even the basic mealtime is a challenge for many families.

But isn't it God's will that families grow and serve together? It is undoubtedly so, and we shall unpack this healthy desire by looking at the key words in the phrase 'families grow and serve together'.

To Grow and Serve

Let's begin with 'grow and serve'. This is central to the Christian view of life: we are created to flourish under the watchful care of God. This is a teleological view that gives us a sense of purpose and a framework to order our lives. Thus, parents are entrusted with the holy task to disciple their children to embrace the gift of life, the gift of who they uniquely are and to develop life skills and a worldview that aligns with the revelation in Scripture.

This primary and ongoing task through the seasons of parenting takes deliberate and disciplined effort. While some may moan that this task is made more challenging today as children become more empowered and informed, we can see this difficulty as a gift - because the light shines more distinctly when it is dark.

While we tend to see serving as taking on specific tasks in church or ministry, and this is important, the posture of servanthood is something Christian parents are to model and teach through the way the family operates. Is serving each other and making allowances and sacrifices a part of daily life? This faith-in-action provides a formation process that is what discipleship is all about.

I remember struggling with my teens over chores. Unlike me, they have grown up in a home where someone took care of the chores. It was a headache to decide how to train them to have a team spirit, sense of ownership and consideration for our shared space. Naturally I nagged at them to little avail. They were comfortable with the messes they made and failed to see why I was so upset. In the end, I had to share openly why I valued their contribution. As I had this conversation, I helped them see that something greater than a clean laundry basket was the concern. It was about whether we supported and served each other through taking the effort to upkeep the home. While

they may be okay with the mess, it was necessary for them to see why cleanliness was important to me and learn to be supportive of my values. Over time, the nagging decreased as we talked about the nub of the issue. It also helped them to think about their own values. This leads us to the next part, 'together'.

Togetherness

Most of us, especially in Asia, value communal experiences deeply. This is good and to be upkept, but it must not be narrowed to 'being in the same place doing the same thing'. For reasons God has not fully revealed, he delights in diversity. Our tolerance for diversity is often a limited range we can manage emotionally and control practically. Yet if we were to ponder, the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17 and which the Psalmist describes so beautifully in Psalm 133 carries a force unknown in this world, one where we can bear with and honour each other, to the extent that Paul calls us to in Philippians where we esteem others over ourselves. In a world bent by sin which causes each one to seek the self as a mini-kingdom, a posture that serves and values the other is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. It is only by the grace of the indwelling Christ that we can hope to mature towards this attitude and lifestyle.

This kind of togetherness, of sharing a vision and being united can be expressed in various ways. The family that runs a business but sends the firstborn into the field, the family that may worship in different church communities due to calling and the young family in a cross-cultural context can all be fiercely united and serving God together.

The key is whether their hearts are set on the LORD's will and each are turned towards the rest and learning to support each other.

Habits That Foster Growth And Unity

To grow and serve with a sense of unity require deep roots that have grown over time. These roots are nourished through regular family devotions, prayer, play and healing.

Family devotions are times when a family prioritises the worship and discovery of God together. This is something that adjusts as the family goes through different seasons. Young children, school-going children, teens and adolescents have different needs and different capacities to seek and know God. The parenting task is to take these seasons seriously and embed a regular time of meaningful family devotion. Many families use a time of Scripture reading and prayer. But if this is done in a cold, legalistic manner, it will backfire. While children can be fed stories and

told a clear right or wrong, teens will begin to question some of the stories (did Noah really build an ark?), and it will be imperative to engage these questions. Parents who fear this can turn to many wonderful resources and embrace this needed growth.

Prayer is critical as it helps us to step away from our reflexes or stereotypes to seek God's perspective and power. Parents need to pray for insight into their children's unique makeup and for the provision and wisdom to love them towards wholeness and full faith. Our children will give us many opportunities to get anxious and have to turn to prayer for solace and assurance. The prayers of a parent soften the ground and allow the roots to penetrate and anchor.

Being a performance-oriented specie, play is rarely prioritised, and in fact often devalued in families in ministry and mission. This is counterproductive. There is plenty of evidence that rest and recreation help us to be more creative, generative and healthy. God instituted the Sabbath to give us a healthy rhythm so that we will not burn out. Alas, many ignore this to their peril. Naturally there are seasons when a full-day Sabbath may be difficult or times when a family may be stretched due to illness or crises. But it is foolhardy to not implement regular times of rest that will enable us to slow down, enjoy our relationships and refill our emotional tanks. Where there has been strain in relationships, seeing a counsellor and getting help is a form of Sabbath rest that is clearly needed. Another dimension is being too serious or severe. While we do deal with weighty matters of eternal consequence, we must not confuse our participation with the power to effect change. God alone can transform lives and societies. Our role is to partner him in a sphere where he has called us to by developing the capabilities he has given us and growing a humble loving heart while at it.

All families will experience tension and conflict. It can be unsettling to imagine that each household can be filled with such drastically different personalities! This is where families that give space and time for different ones to heal is also important. Sometimes, this may indeed mean that the parent or child needs some time out. This must be an intentional process as far as possible. God wants our homes and families to be spaces and places each person gets to mature and flourish. This takes a good degree of management and leadership, and while the parents' play a primary role, the growing children must be given the empowerment to disagree and contribute to the process and experience. This is what makes the 'together' happen, and this is a blessedness God desires his children to have.

Finally, the family unit is under assault today and we have many forms of family: nuclear, extended, single parent, blended and so on. This calls us to rethink what a family means. When asked about this, Jesus prioritises those who seek God as constituting family over biological origins (Mark 3v33-34).

Thus, for a biological family to seek the Lord, to learn how to grow deep roots so that they are growing

and serving together is clearly a sign of the Kingdom of God. But we must beware not to stereotype and limit how that can look like and miss the heart of it.

Reprioritizing Family

There is clearly a need for the church and ministry agencies to relook at how the family is understood and supported, especially when it is being threatened today. While we may focus on the more obvious breakdowns in terms of divorce of the current liberal climate regarding gender, it can be said that these are outcomes rather than causes. Unless we reach a depth understanding of the family and wrestle with how society may be undermining it, we may see even more fractures and perilous outcomes in the coming days.

There is an urgent need for the church to arise to teach about a theology the human body, relationships, marriage, family and ministry. This must be taught from the perspective that each has intrinsic value and are meant to flourish by God's design.

The earlier paragraphs describe the values and practices that we need to reconsider to have a more robust view and expression of a family that is united and fruitful in Christ. These must be undertaken at theological institutions, denominations and local congregations. These must work collaboratively with other partners who may bring other capacities and gifts.

In Singapore, Trinity Theological College in Singapore has been providing a core course on the Family for their undergraduates. These has helped the students reflect on their own family histories and reflect on their convictions regarding the dynamic of family and ministry. Whether the students are single, married or parents, the course is crucial for them to sort through a fundamental dimension of life and ministry. After all, we all began life in our families, and they will continue to influence us.

Most local churches focus on the Sunday worship service, and often have followed the secular trend of separating parents from children by sending children off to their own Sunday School or Children Ministry. In recent years, it is recognised that this may not be the most helpful way to help the family grow spiritually. Among many reasons, it tends to perpetuate two weaknesses: parents' lack of confidence in the spiritual upbringing of their children, persistent consumer attitudes of personal ease about being in church. Many have a low tolerance for the 'noise' children make, and this reinforces a faulty and low view of children.

A vibrant attempt to address this was begun by a young couple through their ministry called The Treasure Box. They seek to equip those who serve children and families to develop spiritual habits and inculcate godly values through their training, curricular and coaching.

Other parachurch organisations have also played a significant role in strengthening families. Some of these are local adaptations of established organisations like Focus on the Family (USA) and the Durano School (Korea). These provide training, education,

counselling, premarital preparation and mentoring. The Durano Father and Mother School takes small cohorts of men and women through experiential learning about their roles as father and mother.

Then there are more formal NGOs like the Centre for Fathering that has made a significant contribution towards men developing conviction and gaining confidence in their call and roles as fathers. This work over the last two decades has birthed other initiatives such as the Dads for Life movement and the Moms for Life movement. With changes in expectations, there is also a community of stay-home dads. Then there are more Others like Fatherheart Ministries seek to restore the biblical identity of sonship for both men and women to address the deep wounds of life such as abandonment, neglect or abuse.

In view of human brokenness, there is also a need to have outreach efforts such as a ministry that offers hospitality & a connecting space in the red-light district zone. The team journeys with those who identify as transgender and their families, seeking to offer a restful shalom atmosphere.

Home for Good and The Safe Place are other ground up initiatives that address the needs of unwanted pregnancies and children in need of safe, loving care.

It is easy to see how the family as the basic unit of any society is often vulnerable and in need of support. From economic and relational stressors to spiritual tensions, each family has much to navigate. Without a clear vision of why God sets us in families, how each family unit is to relate with others, and how God desires us to be woven together as a fabric of stability and strength, the family unit will find it well-nigh impossible to grow and serve together. This is the work of many hearts and hands.

Helpful References:

1. Home for Good (<https://hfg.org.sg/>)
2. The Safe Place (<https://safeplace.org.sg/>)
3. Durano School (<https://www.facebook.com/durannomotherschoolsg/>)
4. Fatherheart Ministries (<https://fatherheartsg.com/>)
5. Focus on the Family, Singapore (<https://family.org.sg/>)
6. Centre for Fathering (<https://fathers.com.sg/>)



Jenni Ho-Huan
jhohuan@gmail.com

Jenni Ho-Huan is a city-pastor known for her contributions in the realms of writing, speaking and mentorship. With a background in various disciplines, she is a thought leader who inspires and empowers individuals to thrive where they are, in turn creating healthier systems for homes, churches and communities. She is married to Rev Dr Philip Huan.

