**4th-Soil Parenting Project - Family Empowerment**

**-Guidelines for Implementing a Churchwide ‘Mentor Family’ Strategy-**

We live in a culture marked by people who appear to be hyper-connected through technology, but are actually more isolated and alone than ever before. That means that parents are facing daunting challenges in their lives, and attempting to live out demanding roles and responsibilities, without the social connections that offer them guidance and wisdom.

This Mentor Families strategy is one way we can intentionally, proactively connect parents who have an organic desire for an ongoing relational connection with parent “guides” in your congregation—people who are willing to give what they have learned and experienced to parents who are looking for encouragement and help. Mentor Families can offer guidance and perspective on life issues and challenges parents are facing, and offer a discipling influence for parents who are committed to influencing the faith growth of their children. Use these guidelines to plan, promote, and launch your own Family Empowerment initiative in your church…

**1.** **There are three ways to plan and launch a Family Empowerment initiative in your church**—they are not mutually exclusive, so you might consider doing all three. The goal is, simply, to connect parents who can serve as mentors and guides with parents who are wrestling with challenges or simply would like help in navigating their sometimes-daunting role as the primary influencers in their kids’ lives.

- **First**, plan a “listening session” with parents that’s tied to an obvious and broad pain point. Pick a topic (such as childhood mental health), then plan an hour-long meet-up with interested parents to gather input, discover needs, and offer help. These are parents dealing with difficult issues in the thick of life—so ask them to tell you what they need, and what they’re struggling with. At the end of this gathering, collect the contact information of families that are interested in connecting with another family for a short-term mentoring relationship that can offer help and hope for facing challenges and growing in their relationship with God. Examples of challenges that can lead to an organic desire for mentoring: “I’m new to the community” or “We just switched schools” or “We just adopted/fostered kids” or “We have special-needs kids” or “We’re older parents” or “We’re parents of a large family” or “How do we talk to our kids about tough issues such as sex and social media?”

- **Second**, announce and promote a new relational opportunity for families that are facing challenges, entering into a new season of life, or hungering for greater impact in their parenting. Create an easy way to gather the contact information for interested families (for example, add a line to your interest form that congregants can drop into the offering, or create an online form to post on your website, or make a special announcement in your service and direct people to a table after the service). Make sure you collect areas of interest from families—pain points, challenges, or needs that would benefit from a mentoring relationship.

- **Third**, as pastoral staffers (especially children and youth leaders) have conversations with parents, they keep their radar up for underlying needs they hear expressed. As these needs surface, the pastoral leadership team considers what families in the church may be a good match for the life stage or challenge that family is facing. The church then plays matchmaker between the two families, paving the way for them to get together. Mentor Families are typically those that have faced similar challenges or have come through a season in life and have emerged from it with wisdom and a desire to give. These Mentor Families also have a noticeable maturity in their relationship with God.

**2. General guidelines for Mentor Families and those who are helped by them.**

- It’s a six-month commitment which can be renewed by both parties agreeing to keep going.

- The goal is to connect families that have something to give with families that have a need. The overarching context for these relationships is connecting everyday family issues to a growing and deepening relationship with God. Mentor Families will intentionally, organically pray, intercede, and model an everyday dependence on Jesus as they relate to their Mentee Family.

- Church staffers will schedule a short interview with prospective Mentor Families to learn their story—vetting their life situation, interest areas, expertise, spiritual maturity, and capacity for engaging another family. If the staff already knows the prospective family well, this step can be skipped.

- Church staffers, in most cases, will facilitate the matchmaking between Mentor Families and interested families.

- Church staffers will provide leadership guidelines to every Mentor Family, with basic direction on how to helpfully engage other parents. These guidelines include help on facilitating conversations, ways to sensitively engage others’ story, what to do when you don’t have the answer, relational boundaries, and so on.

- Churches can consider planning a training hour for Mentor Families, with help from a counselor who can teach empathetic listening skills, learning to be differentiated helpers, and how to show up authentically in another’s life, or do that training as a part of the interview process.

- Both families will work out how often, when, and for how long they meet.

**3. The Church will regularly promote this opportunity for Mentor Family connections to the congregation.** Use regular church communication conduits, along with regular scheduled announcements in the service, with a interest sign-up table in a gathering area. The church website could list this opportunity, with contact information or a sign-up form.

**Guidelines for Mentor Families – Engaging Another Family**

Engaging another person’s story is part art, part science – it can be learned. And we can “catch” how to do this by watching other people do it, and by simply practicing and learning from our experience.

**The 7 Principles of Effective Story-Engaging – adapted from Adam Young, Counselor**

1. **Attuning to the storyteller is more important than engaging their story brilliantly.** This means that the most powerful tool in your toolbox is simply your intentional presence. As you pay “ridiculous attention” to people, thoughtfully and purposefully present to their whole person, not just their words, you “unlock” them. People aren’t used to others paying real attention to them—so prove that you are paying attention with your body language, feedback, and follow-up questions.
2. **Kindness will take you further than skill and giftedness.** As you lean into your encounter with a primary goal of kindness, the storyteller will feel progressively more safe. Kindness communicates safety, prompting more openness as the person sees more and more proof that you have genuine kindness toward them. Remember that kindness is not the same as niceness. People don't need merely a listening ear, they need someone with the courage to risk naming truth in their story that they may not see yet.
3. **Use the exquisite instrument that is your body.** Your body language communicates everything. Are you using your body to communicate compassion, openness, attention, and invitation? It’s soft eye contact, facial expressions, head nods, leaning in, and conveying emotions that prove you understand and honor the impact of their story on the person.
4. **Always monitor the storyteller’s affect—from numb and shut down all the way up to panic, rage, or terror.** What are you learning about the person from how you are experiencing their emotional presence? How are their emotional responses, or continuing affect, at odds with their words? What words would you choose to describe the person’s whole “vibe” as they tell their story—and what can you learn about them from understanding that vibe?
5. **Your right brain matters way more than your left brain when you’re engaging someone’s story.** You have two brains—they do very different things. The words you speak to the storyteller come from your Left Brain. Your tone of voice and facial expression comes from your Right Brain. Verbal vs. Non-Verbal communication. The storyteller is more interested in your non-verbal communication than your words. What are you communicating with your face and your tone? So, why is this true? Non-verbal communication is non-voluntary and unedited—you can’t hide how you really feel about what you’re hearing, so the storyteller processes that as more true than your words.
6. **There’s always a reason for human behavior. Whenever there are characters in someone’s story, these are human beings with intentionality.** They are creators of purpose and will. Any time a person is in someone’s story they’re acting with agency. Suppose the storyteller believes that the meaning of his story is that his Dad neglected him—almost always not a sufficient explanation. The question: Why did my dad not pay attention to me, when he did pay attention to my sister? Our task is to make an incoherent narrative more coherent. To make a confusing story more understandable.

1. **Repairing rupture is more important than engaging their story perfectly.** There will be times when you miss the storyteller. People go to places you don’t expect. It’s not a big deal as long as it’s repaired. It means to acknowledge that you missed them, or stopped tracking with them. Admit your misstep—frequently check in with the storyteller to surface what they’re feeling or experiencing internally. When you lose the track of the story, will you go back to recover it? We are afraid of saying the wrong thing, or saying something hurtful—but we are allowed to screw this up. We don’t keep the prospect of pursuing someone imperfectly to keep us from pursuing. Just repair anything you need to repair.