



## Why We Need Family Ministry

Pr Les Ackie

The prayer of affirmation known as The Shema is considered to be the most important prayer in Judaism. It states, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength . . . These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

The Shema stresses the importance of parents passing on a spiritual heritage to their children. Ellen White reiterated this thought when she wrote, "Our work for Christ is to begin with the family, in the home. . . . There is no missionary field more important than this" (Adventist Home, 35).

When Christian researcher George Barna set out to discover what was the most effective form of evangelism in which churches can engage, he was so surprised by his results that he discarded them. He started again from scratch only to repeat the same findings, namely, that the most effective form of evangelism is evangelism to our children. He has also shown that the optimum ages at which children make decisions for Christ are between 5-14. The Barna Group research is a confirmation of what Mrs White said many years ago that, "It is in these early years that the affections are the most ardent, the heart most susceptible of improvement" (Review and Herald, December 17, 1889).

In light of this 'window of opportunity', what initiatives do we have in place to intentionally maximise this crucial period to hold and empower our young people for Christ? While we are blessed to have ministries like Sabbath School, Pathfinders etc., faith transmission remains the primary responsibility of parents. Parents continue to be the major influence on the children's spiritual choices, being two to three times more effective in leading children to faith than any church programme. The role of these church agencies is one of support. As a church we need to place responsibility back into the hands of parents by empowering them and resourcing them to fulfil their high calling.

If we accept the validity of Barna's research, it carries major implications for how we organise our churches and how we allocate our resources and our funding. I was once told that if you want to know what a church's priorities are, the best place to look is the church budget. If that is the case, what do our church budgets say about how we value our children? It is not unusual for churches to invest thousands of pounds organising elaborate evangelistic endeavours, while allocating a pittance, if anything, for ministry to our children.



Effective ministry to our children requires us to modify our concept of evangelism. The term almost automatically creates in our minds outreach to the unreached masses within our communities. However, our children are not born believers. They may be raised within Christian homes but a personal faith in Jesus Christ does not happen by accident.

Don McLafferty, former director of Kids in Discipleship recognised this anomaly when he founded the ministry in 2003. He saw the need to create a specifically Adventist ministry and resources to enable parents and mentors to intentionally disciple their children for Jesus. McLafferty has since recognised that empowering and equipping parents to pass on a spiritual heritage to their children has a profound effect on the parents' own spiritual growth. Kids in Discipleship has developed another arm called 'In Discipleship' to formally recognise and develop this aspect of the ministry. Parents who are confident in mentoring and discipling their own children also become more confident to engage in the wider outreach efforts of the local church.



Around the mid-noughties, church pastor and consultant Mark Holmen founded the “Faith At Home” movement which equips congregations to make the home the primary place where faith is nurtured. This was in response to findings that fewer than 10% of parents who regularly attend church with their children read the Bible together, pray together (other than at meal times) or participate in an act of service as a family unit. Add to this statistic the findings from the last ValueGenesis study conducted in the Trans European Division indicating that we are losing over 51% of our young people by the time they reach their 20s, and we have a major crisis on our hands.

Our young people are the lifeblood of the church and we are haemorrhaging at an alarming rate. In order to stem the flow we need to enlist, empower and equip parents and mentors to pass on our rich spiritual heritage. We are told that, “Men and women, children and youth, are measured in the scale of heaven in accordance with that which they reveal in their home life” (SDA Bible Commentary, 1085). This being the case let us support families to live out the reality of The Shema.