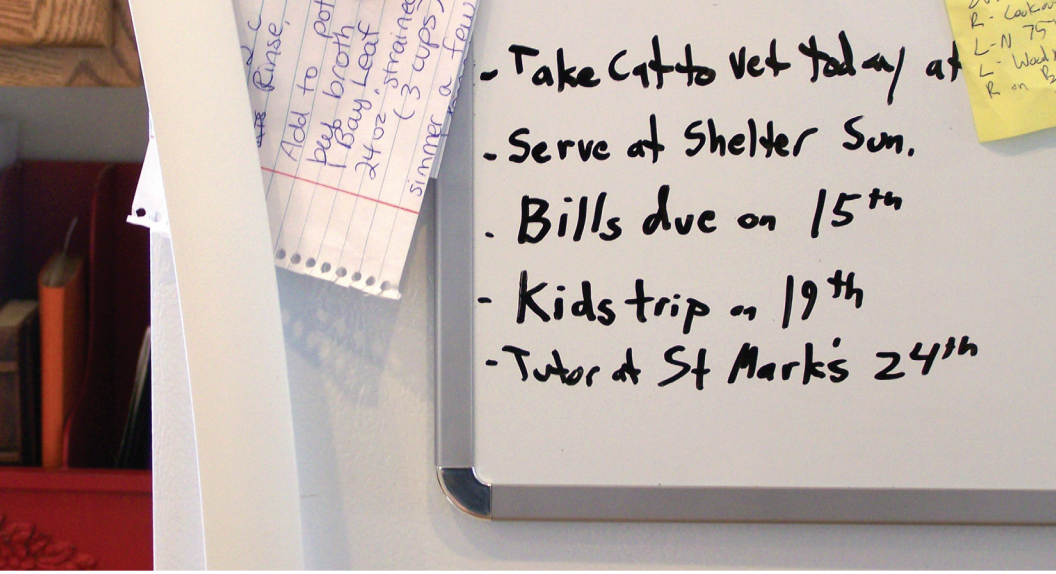

Inside Out Families

Living the Faith Together

Diana Garland

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To Dennis Myers and Terry Wolfer
My work partners and lifelong friends

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My profound appreciation goes to the families who gave so freely of their time, a scarce commodity in family life today, particularly for these families that are deeply engaged in serving their communities as well as working jobs and caring for one another. I wish it were possible for me to identify them all by name; they are the unsung heroes that daily weave the fiber of church and community life. As is customary in research such as this, however, I agreed with them that they would remain anonymous so that they could speak candidly. They will, of course, recognize themselves in the stories they told me.

This project developed with the nurture and support of a host of colleagues and friends. I am grateful to Craig Dykstra and Chris Coble of Lilly Endowment, Inc., for their encouragement, invaluable guidance, and support for this series of projects. Dennis Myers, Terry Wolfer, David Sherwood, Beryl Hugen, and Paula Sheridan were my colleagues in the Service and Faith Project. We traveled to intensive work retreats together in various places across the country, and in between, we spent countless hours interviewing congregation leaders and members and then on conference calls, hammering out together what we were learning about how

service and Christian faith are related to one another. Dennis Myers, Terry Wolfer, and I continued on in this project for what has become a decade of working together, digging through hundreds of pages of transcripted interviews, and becoming lifelong friends in the process. Early on, the scope of this project was enhanced by great consultants: Dan Aleshire, Courtney Bender, Fred DeJong, Robert Franklin, Edwin Hernandez, Bill Lockhart, Gene Roehlkepartain, Christopher Smith, Heidi Unruh, and Gaynor Yancey. Scott Taylor, Michael Sherr, and Kelly Atkinson were graduate students who worked diligently with the project in its various phases.

Once I had crafted the first draft of this book, I shared it with several of the families whose stories I have told. They gave generous feedback, corrected me where I needed it, and confirmed that I have understood the stories they shared with us. One family took the manuscript on a beach vacation together, and read excerpts out loud for family discussion. I cannot think of any use of this book that could bring me more satisfaction than as a discussion starter for a family! My colleague Gaynor Yancey and my journalist daughter Sarah Garland edited the entire manuscript and made very helpful suggestions.

Above all, I thank my husband, David Garland, my biblical scholar in residence. David is now Professor of Christian Scriptures and Dean at George W. Truett Theological Seminary and Interim President of Baylor University. We have been ministry partners and family for one another for forty years. What I learned about biblical interpretation, I learned from David. Our past writing together, and our editing of one another's individual writings, has refined my thinking. Often, I cannot remember which thoughts first came from whom. As much as he has contributed to my thoughts, he should not be held responsible for my biblical interpretations and theological musings. I am a social scientist by profession, not a theologian. My discussions of biblical content and theology in this book are my reflections as a believing Christian, shaped in a congregation and community of faith where I have lived and worked out my own understandings of how to put my social scientific self with my faithing self and my own family experiences.

This host of people whose names I have written in gratitude is testimony to God's wisdom that "goodness" comes in not being alone in any task. Although the book cover carries my name, I am only a representative of this host of friends, families, and communities who are living sacred stories that carry us through ordinary days and ordinary lives, connecting us to God. This book is only a beginning attempt to understand faith and service as dimensions of family life. I hope others can build on it. I offer it claiming the promise that God can work toward perfect ends even through "weak" efforts (2 Cor 12:9). Above all, it is my prayer that this book will help families together to pour themselves out in service and in so doing, find new life together in Christ.

Introduction

During the years our children were growing up, my husband and I were colleagues in the same seminary, where I taught church social work and David taught New Testament. Our children's growing-up years were therefore spent in a family steeped in seminary life and in the church. Church involvement was never optional for Sarah and John; they had to go with us. When Sarah was fourteen, however, she decided that church was not where she wanted to be on Sunday morning. I kept making her go with us, but she was not happy with me, and I felt fairly certain that forced church attendance was not really going to contribute to a vibrant faith-life for her. I began to cast about for what I could do that would help her live her faith on her own terms.

Our children have always cared deeply about other people, especially about people who live on the margins of society. As a young teen, Sarah cared deeply for all God's creatures, in fact—not just the human variety. About the time Sarah protested going to church, she also became a vegetarian, not because she was concerned about fat and cholesterol in her diet, but because she believed adamantly in animal rights. She also was a strong environmentalist and was concerned about the devastation of the rain

forests. That was the teenager I faced off with each Sunday morning: a young woman who never saw an injustice—human, animal, or plant—she did not want to tackle.

How could I involve Sarah in living her faith in a way that made sense to her? If being forced to sit in Sunday worship services was not meaningful to her, then perhaps serving others in a tangible expression of our faith would. One of the graduates of our social work school, Angela, was the executive director of the local shelter for homeless families. I knew that the shelter had a volunteer program, so I called Angela to ask her if we could volunteer with our children. They had never had a family volunteer before, but Angela said "Why not?" Everyone in our family agreed to try it, in itself a signature moment for us during that phase. Our family went through the volunteer training together and was assigned as a "mentor family" to a young family in the shelter, a mother and father and their two elementary-age children, both younger than my children. They had lived in tents and trailers and under bridges for much of the children's lives, following construction work or whatever employment the dad could find to feed his children. Both of the children were behind in school because they had moved so much. The little boy was failing because he had significant hearing loss from an untreated chronic ear infection—they had no medical insurance. He could not hear well in school and had not learned to read.

We began visiting the family while they lived in a tiny apartment at the shelter. Soon, the staff of the shelter helped them secure a permanent home, a very modest cinder block three-room house for rent in the opposite corner of the county from where we lived. For a year, we drove the forty-five minutes each way to visit "our family." Sarah and John helped the children with their homework and their reading skills. David and I visited with the parents and did our best to help them with the various struggles of making it from one day to the next. We did not feel like mentors at all; "mentor" implies that we had something to teach or had great advice to give. In fact, we learned so much from those parents, because they had survival skills we had never had reason to develop. We were simply friends, offering ourselves to one another. We often brought a half gallon of ice cream

to share together. John, age eleven, brought the little boy one of his baseball gloves John claimed he had outgrown and taught the little boy to throw a baseball after they finished his reading homework. Sometimes I was able to help the parents navigate the free health clinic, or figure out how to get to work when their old car stopped running. But they really knew much more about free health clinics and the unreliability of public transportation in our county than I did.

On the other hand, what they gave us was more than I could have dreamed. Frankly, I started us on the volunteering path because I wanted to do something to make faith real for my daughter, not out of a burning desire to be a volunteer. Our family's already-crowded hours, with two-career parents, included the usual rounds of children's sporting events, music lessons, church activities, and responsibility for an aging parent. Indeed, the forty-five minutes in the car each way gave us a chance to talk; anyone who knows teenagers knows that the most meaningful conversations between teens and their parents often take place in the car. We talked a lot about the stark differences in the lives and resources of our two families, about what it means to be a Christian in a world where little boys grow up with hearing disabilities because parents cannot get needed health care, a world where mommas and daddies want desperately to support their families but they cannot get to work when their old wreck-of-a-car breaks down and the only affordable housing is miles from the nearest public transportation. Sarah and I were no longer doing battle with one another.[1] We were pondering doing battle with the forces of this world that kept our new friends in poverty and on the brink of homelessness.

Did we help that family? Probably not a lot. The year we had committed to one another ended. We agreed that we wanted to continue to be friends, and we did for a while. But then we moved away for a year's assignment overseas, and when we came back, they had moved on to find better work opportunities in another state. They wrote for a while, but writing was not easy for them; the parents themselves were barely literate. The struggles they faced were so challenging that what we could do to help seemed so small. But we

did what we could; we gave our friendship and tried to be faithful to show up each week and care—and in the process, we were changed.

A Framework for Ministry with Families

Lest you give me credit for being a creative mother to come up with the idea of a family service project all on my own in the face of a fourteen-year-old's challenge to make faith relevant in her life, consider the fact that I was teaching family ministry at the time. To teach a subject means having to think deeply about it, so I was thinking a lot about families in the context of faith in those days—and still am seventeen years later. Such thinking is an interesting challenge for me, given my social scientific training. Social scientists study social phenomena to understand them and what causes them. Christian faith is certainly a social phenomenon as it is lived out in the lives of families and communities. To provide leadership for families in the church, however, we need to understand not only what *is* but also what *ought to be*. Understanding families sociologically is helpful, but it is not enough. We also need theological perspectives on family and community life. The social sciences help us know who families are and how they live their lives together. Theology tells us what God intended families to be and how they *ought* to live their lives together. It takes both to lead the church effectively from what we are today to what God is calling us to tomorrow. A framework for family ministry needs to weave these worlds of thought together. Even our definition of family involves seeing through both the lenses of what is (social sciences) and what is ought to be (theology).

Knowing a Family When We See One: Sociological Perspectives

Defining a family would seem to be straightforward; surely we know one when we see one. Unfortunately, our definitions often provide the lens for what we see—and what we do not see. For much of the last century, family sociologists wrestled with what has come to be known as a ***structural definition of family*** as defined by legal (marriage or adoption) or biological (parent/child) relationships.[2] That is, families are husbands and wives and their children, or what is also called the "nuclear" family. The term "nuclear" refers to the basic

unit of family, the "nucleus," not to nuclear energy! In addition, we talk about the "extended" family, or extensions to the "nucleus," consisting of children's grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. That picture of the family—the "traditional family"—has been the norm against which our culture measures other family-like relationships and defines them by how they differ: single-parent families, childless couples, divorced and remarried couples, and never-married adults.

As early as the 1920s, however, sociologists were questioning defining families by these role structures. The influential family sociologist Ernest Burgess suggested that families are better understood when we look not at legal concepts but at how family members interact with one another.[3] Instead of a status to which one is assigned (mother, father, spouse, child) as the primary way of thinking about family, ***a functional definition of family*** defines the family as those persons who ***function*** as family for one another. A grandmother may be a distant figure seen once or twice a year on holidays, or she may be the primary parenting figure if the biological mother is drug addicted, mentally ill, or otherwise unavailable to parent. The "grandmother" status is "extended family" when defining the family structurally, but she functions as a mothering figure and so is part of the grandchild's "primary family" using a functional definition.

A functional definition is more sensitive to opportunities for change over time—and for hope. For example, "stepfamilies" is a structural term defining families formed by second marriages with children from first marriages. Whether parents married last week with teenagers, or thirty years ago when their children were infants, the nonbiological parent is still structurally considered a "stepparent." "Blending," on the other hand, is a functional term. "Blending family" recognizes that the family is in an ongoing process of becoming a family together—it was not an action completed when the parents married and became a "stepfamily." "Blending" is a long process of figuring out together how to be family, what the relationships will be today, tomorrow, and in the future.

A functional approach sees a family as the people we stay in communication with even when college or army service or work assignments pull us apart geographically, the people we share our

resources—emotional and physical—with, the ones we share our life purposes with, the people we cling to and belong to in the bumps and bruises of life. The families I have interviewed in the studies I will share with you in this book have taught me how important this functional definition of family is when we think about congregational ministry.

When I met her, Ms. Coper was a single mom.[4] For a few months after her son Dan was born, sixteen years before, she had been a welfare recipient, but she used the time she was receiving public support to finish school. She now has a good clerical job and her family lives in a middle-class suburb. They are active members of a large National Baptist church. When I visited them in their home, Ms. Coper was running late coming home, so I had an opportunity for conversation with Dan, who was babysitting four-year-old Joe. Dan introduced Joe as his little brother. In the hour the two of us talked, Dan told me a lot about his family, about his own near-scrapes with trouble and how his mother dragged him to the pastor for fatherly talks about his behavior. She was determined that he would learn self-discipline and to use his strength in positive ways, so she had started him in karate lessons. Joe also told me this about his mother with obvious pride:

> She seems to like working with teenagers a lot. We used to have this youth ministry at church, and we always had teenagers over to the house talking about their problems and stuff. I think it helped some of them out a lot. It really didn't affect me because I always thought that, besides my father being gone, I had the perfect home.

Later, my conversation with Ms. Coper filled out some of what Dan had told me. Joe is in fact Ms. Coper's cousin's baby. Joe's mother is mentally ill, so Ms. Coper is raising Joe as her own son. She is also providing a home, at least temporarily, to a little girl in the neighborhood who will otherwise be placed in a foster home in another area of the city and have to change schools.

Apart from growing up without his father, Dan said that his family is "perfect." He recognized that they did not fit the structural norm of a nuclear family, but he spoke wisdom. Most families

these days are not nuclear families, and if we set that structure as the norm, most families by definition can never get there. In defining their family together, Ms. Coper has focused on how they live their life with one another and how they have opened their family to "strangers" who have become part of them. Ms. Coper did not have a huge income; she had to work hard to support Dan. Working and raising a son—and now sons—alone is not easy. Despite the struggles, despite how the world with its structural definition might see them, Dan sees his family as "perfect."

Thinking about What Family Ought to Be for Christians

This functional definition of the family is congruent with a theological understanding of the family based on Jesus' birth, life, and death. In the family tree that opens the Gospel of Matthew, we read fifteen verses of "begats" by one father after another. When it comes to Jesus, however, the pattern changes. Joseph is not named as Jesus' father, because "before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matt 1:18). Instead, the writer calls Joseph "the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born" (Matt 1:16). Despite the fact that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, Joseph accepted him as his son by naming him and adopting him as his own (Matt 1:25). The point on which the Gospel writer focuses is not so much the immaculate conception but, instead, the adoption. The conception is a stepping-stone to the major point, a reason for why Joseph needed to adopt Jesus.

Later, in his teaching, Jesus uses an incident in his own family to redefine family for his followers. His mother and brothers, concerned for his wellbeing, had heard that his teachings may lead to real trouble and so have come to persuade him to come home and lay low for awhile. They evidently cannot get close enough to him to talk because of the crowd, however, so they send word through the crowd that they are outside and want to speak with him. In response, Jesus says,

> "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." (Matt 12:48-50)

Jesus teaches, then, that family now means *choosing*—choosing to follow Jesus and thus adopting one another as family. Our shared faith binds us together. We are no longer limited to family relationships defined by biological kinship or marriage (the structural family). In looking at events later in Jesus' life, it becomes clear that Jesus was not severing family ties with his mother and brothers with these words. His mother was with him to the very end of his life, standing at the foot of the cross. His brothers became disciples and leaders in the early church. They *were* family, but they also *became* family to Jesus and to one another—and others—in their choice to follow him.

The Gospel of John records the last teaching of Jesus about family before his death. Mary stood at the foot of the cross with the other women, watching her son suffer. The beloved disciple stood beside her. Jesus looked at her and said, "Woman, here is your son." And to the disciple, he said, "Here is your mother." The very next verse states, "Jesus knew that all was finished" (John 19). Proclaiming this adoptive relationship finished his ministry. This was part of the plan. Would they have cared for one another if Jesus had not spoken them into existence as adoptive family? Perhaps, but clearly, naming the relationship had power. "*And from that hour* the disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:27, emphasis added). They *functioned* as family for one another, despite the absence of biological ties. Perhaps Jesus could have spoken to the group in good Southern idiom, "Y'all take care of one another." But he was not telling the church to be the community of faith in this place; he was turning two people *within* the community into a functional family. They adopted one another.[5]

Ministry with Families

Understanding family from this perspective—as a way we choose and care for one another regardless of the biology and life circumstances we have been dealt—has a profound impact on how we minister with families. A first task of the church is to encourage and nurture the process of adopting one another as family. The nuclear family is

no longer the model; Ms. Coper, in fact, is the "perfect" model of Christian family life, seeking out and folding in those who are otherwise alone in this world. Instead of seeing her family as a "single-parent family"—implying not quite whole—her family is truly living the "good news" that in this lonely world, all God's children can be adopted into loving family relationships in the household of God. She is living the first task of family ministry, which is to be sure that no child of God (whether child or adult or older adult) is alone. Everyone needs to belong to a family.

A second task of ministry with families is helping family members live in relationship with one another in ways that point to Jesus' teachings. There is no more effective and challenging crucible for learning to love unconditionally, to be angry and sin not, to confront and to repent, to forgive and be forgiven. Meilaender has called family the "school of virtue" in which God places us, day after day, with persons we are to learn to love.[6] This is the task of ministry with which we are most familiar in congregation leadership today—parent training, marriage education, support groups, and seminars. Ms. Coper's approach to family certainly took into account this dimension of family life. When Dan was flirting with trouble, she tackled the threat head on. She communicated clearly what she expected from him. He perceived that he did not have the problems other teens in his community had because his mother was actively addressing the challenges he and others faced.

The final task, as I have thought about family ministry, is equipping and supporting Christians to use their families as a channel of ministry to others within and outside the community of faith. The first family we read about in the early church is the couple Prisca and Aquila, a very busy family indeed. They instructed others in the faith (Acts 18:26), and they provided a home for those otherwise familyless—like Paul, who lived with them for some time and worked in the family business as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Their home was also the church where the Christians met for worship (1 Cor 16:9). Their relationship with one another was the basis for a shared ministry that touched others far beyond themselves. The families of the New Testament were called to open their homes in hospitality to the

community of faith and to strangers and to teach the good news to others (Rom 12:13). The focus, then, is not just ministry *to* families, but also ministry *through* families. Ms. Coper and Dan used their family as a channel of ministry to others. They may not have had a church meeting in their home, as did Prisca and Aquila, but they had the church's youth group there, complete with pizza.

Learning from the Families

My premise has been that the goal of family ministry is to empower families to live their faith with one another and in the communities and relationships in which they are embedded. With that goal in mind, I have completed a series of research projects designed to understand what faith looks like in family life, so that we could better accomplish the three tasks of family ministry. The Church Census project was based on whole-congregation surveys focusing on the family life of Christians. Those surveys have been conducted in more than one hundred Protestant congregations in the past fifteen years.[7] Next came the Families and Faith project, which identified the powerful role of family stories and of families serving together in the faith development of children and adults. That project resulted in the book *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families*.[8]

The findings of the Families and Faith project led to the project that will be the primary focus of this book, called "Service and Faith," a study of Christians who volunteer in various programs of community service through their congregations.[9] The earlier projects really focused on how Christians form families and how they live their daily lives together in ways that express their faith. The Service and Faith project went further to focus on the third task of family ministry—equipping families to serve within and beyond the community of faith. As a part of the larger project, we studied the lives of sixteen families—in a diversity of structures and life stages—who had been engaged in community ministry together for more than a year. The families told inspiring stories of service and faith, extending my understanding of family faith far beyond my previous work. This book shares what those sixteen families taught me, as well as what I

learned in the earlier projects that involved more than one hundred families and their congregations.

My understanding of families and their faiths has been significantly altered by what I learned from these families. They are really very "ordinary" families; you will find families like them in every congregation. But when I took the time to learn from them, I came to some startling conclusions. I will give away my conclusion now: the heart of family ministry is equipping families together for a life of Christian service to others beyond themselves, to turn themselves inside out in a calling larger than their own daily life together. As they serve others, they grip a deeper understanding of one another and of God. They find their faith more resilient and meaningful. Their children develop what we call "sticky faith,"[10] a faith that helps them stick to the church and to their beliefs into young adulthood, when their contemporaries are abandoning the church in droves. And adults develop a "sticky faith" that keeps them "stuck" to the church and to God, who carries them through the crises and deep struggles that life inevitably holds.

Now that you know the ending, I hope that the pages that follow will embolden you to focus your attention on ministry *through* families more than ministry *to* families. We will suggest ways to help families and their congregations get started in turning themselves inside out to serve others in the name of Jesus.

Diana Garland
June 1, 2009

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