

Contents

Foreword	9
Introduction	13
Part One—Our Family Album	
1. You Can't Feel at Home in an Organization	19
2. Ruth: The Love That Will Not Let Us Go	31
3. Brothers and Sisters	43
4. Love's Coat of Many Colors	53
5. Philemon: Fresh Starts Refresh Hearts	67
Part Two—Interior Design:	
The Spiritual Art of Decorating a Church Home	
6. God's Family at Rest	85
7. Company's Coming	99
8. Personal Attention	113
9. What Care Looks Like	125
10. The Whole Church Preaches	137
11. Parenting the Church Family	149
12. Close to Home	163
Afterword	177
Acknowledgments	181
Notes	183
About the Author	187



You Can't Feel at Home in an Organization

It seemed simple enough. Our Elder Board asked an ad hoc committee to provide guidelines for hiring future pastoral staff. I chose not to be on the committee, feeling others could easily handle the project. When they began to meet, the chair, a management consultant, felt that the place to start was making sure the ministries of our church were properly aligned. They took the name Alignment Task Force. That's when things got complicated for me.

It's what healthy organizations do, I know. Align. Get everything and everyone going in the same direction as their stated mission. Shed the distractions. Refocus.

As our Associate Pastor, Michael, excitedly reported to me on the task force's developments I grew increasingly agitated. It started like a dark cloud, about the size of a fist, on the distant horizon. A storm was brewing in me. It's pretty simple: I don't like this stuff. Actually, I'm unreasonably suspicious of it. I grumbled in my journal, "What is with the power of

diagrams and lines?” It all felt like some kind of corporate plastic and chrome to me. On the morning after one Elders’ meeting, I wrote, “This morning I feel like I have seen my own resignation around the bend. Maybe it’s the headache talking.”

The weeks passed as I brooded and thrashed about. I was a pain about it all, especially to my Associate who bore the brunt of my frustrations. I was well aware that this process is endorsed by church leaders everywhere. But there was no motivation in it for me at all. Yet I didn’t know what to offer as an alternative. I tried to pray through my frustrations, but it was slow going and I probably was just grumbling to myself at least half the time.

Then it dawned on me. This was so hard for me because in our alignment efforts there seemed to be a subtle but unmistakable way of thinking of the church primarily as an *organization*. I’m motivated as a pastor to help create the right kind of *environment* for a church to be healthy and effective. That environment, to me, is best described as a *home*. As a pastor, I’m a “homemaker.”

Years ago the church I served in Pennsylvania was featured in a front-page article in the local paper’s Sunday edition. There was a big picture of me in our modest multipurpose auditorium. The article described our growth and our fresh approach to worship. The reporter had asked me about the challenges of pastoring a larger church, and I’d lamented that sometimes I felt more like a CEO than a pastor. Over the next few days, there was some more public response about me being a CEO pastor in my plush executive office (anyone with this opinion had clearly never seen my office)! In the end, anyone who misunderstood that quote in the paper could

have just talked with me about it and I would have heartily agreed that a CEO is not a good pastoral model, even though sometimes that role can't be avoided.

Thinking of a church as home changes a lot. A home is considerably different from an organization. Church leaders have to be very careful when we take our cues from companies, nonprofits, civic organizations, and the like. But when we conceive of our church as home our priorities shift. Names matter more than numbers. We invest in the high priority of loving one another as the precursor to loving the lost. We take on the inefficient responsibility of caring for individuals. We learn to leave the ninety-nine in order to search for one lost sheep. We worship differently when we worship as a family. And leaders shepherd their flock more as parents than executives.

“Members of His Household”

It has been right before our eyes in the Bible all along. Scores of references to “brothers and sisters,” to God as our Father, to Jesus as both our Bridegroom and Elder Brother, to the essential loving unity of God’s family, and to the household environment of holiness, spiritual nurture, and safety. Paul taught Timothy “how people ought to conduct themselves in *God’s household*, which is the church of the living God . . .” (1 Tim. 3:15). He told the Ephesians, “You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of *his household*” (Eph. 2:19).

New Testament Greek uses the word *oikos* to refer to God’s people about a dozen times. For example, in Matthew

24:44–45 Jesus refers to Himself as the head of the house and His followers as His “household.” Hebrews 3:6 says, “Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s *house*. And we are his *house*, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.” Peter twice refers to the “family of believers” or “brotherhood” (ESV) with the Greek word *adelphotes* (1 Peter 2:17; 5:9). Translators may not use the word *home*, but it is obviously a suitable synonym for our Christian family.

Commentator Robert Banks wrote, “A whole cluster of terms from family life are applied to the Christian community. Some of these are among the most frequently used terms in Paul’s vocabulary.” He also says, “So numerous are these, and so frequently do they appear, that the comparison of the Christian community with a ‘family’ must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all.”¹

Almost always, as with Banks, the description of the church as God’s family is regarded as a metaphor, like the bride, field, or temple. But it isn’t really a metaphor at all. God’s household is the very definition of the church. We’re not *like* a household or family. We *are* one.

Pastor and writer Mark Buchanan affirms this: “Jesus is not ashamed to be called our brother. The Father gives us the Spirit of adoption through whom we cry, ‘Abba!’ Jesus asks who his mother and brother and sisters are, and answers they are those who do the Father’s will. From the cross Jesus says to the disciple John and his mother Mary, ‘Behold your son; behold your mother.’ And he says that our loyalty to him must transcend biological attachments.”²

Where Vision Gets Fuzzy

To think of church as a home rather than an organization changes the way we lead. For one thing, vision statements—which many churches wrestle with—aren’t very important in most families. I know a vision statement can be useful, but they’re overrated when it comes to church families. Marshall Shelley, former editor of *Leadership Journal*, captured the problem in a 2017 column for *Preaching Today*:

Once upon a time, a leader decided his family needed his leadership. And leadership equals vision, right? He’d been raised in a home with a passion for reading, so he had a similar vision for his family: “Our family honors God by being people of the Word and of words.” Sort of catchy, he thought. He envisioned evenings spent reading and telling stories.

For a while, the vision fit. Child #1 loved listening to stories and developed a knack for telling stories with great detail.

Child #2 complicated the picture. She didn’t have Child #1’s interest in books. She was a natural athlete, developed into an outstanding gymnast, and while tolerating the reading-and-story culture, wasn’t fully engaged. Family conversations shifted from books to balance-beam routines and flyaway dismounts.

Child #3 complicated the picture further. She was born with serious mental disabilities. Reading would never be within her experience; even learning to speak would prove impossible. Child #3 led the family into another world—medical centers, physical therapy, support groups for families of children with disabilities.

Question: what takes priority—the vision or the people? For the family above (with whom I’m, uh, somewhat acquainted) telling those members who weren’t “aligned with the vision” to find another family simply wasn’t an option.

No, the vision needed to be expanded to include the new

realities—the needs of all those God brought into the family. The family's vision enlarged: "To honor God through words, deeds, and presence." It was lived by each family member differently.

When a church's vision and the church's people clash, what's the answer? Sometimes it's adjusting the vision. A church, like a family, is at least partly defined by those God has placed within it.³

Every church has outliers—people who don't get with the program. They seem like a drag on our progress. Too needy, maybe; or stubborn, or immature. I've heard of churches who

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tell those who won't commit to their vision to take a hike. Find another church. It's hard to pull that off in a family. You not only take what you get, but you must love them, too.

The people in a church, just as in a family, have a way of going off in odd, unexpected directions. Some turn out to be more remarkable than we ever bargained for, like gifted or lion-hearted kids, a credit to the family. Some live for a long time in the fog of finding themselves. There are some who break our hearts. I imagine every pastor knows what it is to watch the horizon along with the Father for prodigals, loved but long gone. With such unpredictable families it is hard for a church to stick to the vision.

The family members are the primary concern of a healthy home. So it is in the church. It sounds nearly heretical to say so, but the lost are not our first concern as church leaders nor as church members. Our first responsibility is God's household. Peter told elders, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under

your care” (1 Peter 5:2). Both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles spend almost all their ink addressing the hearts and relationships of God’s people.

Opening Our Home to the Orphans Outside

I read about a remarkable family in West Virginia. Paul and Jeane Briggs have thirty-six children. *Thirty-six children!* Thirty-one of them are adopted from the United States as well as Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Ghana. Paul and Jeane seek out hard-to-place older and special-needs kids. Jeane says, “It’s not for everybody, but it’s what my husband and I feel called to do by our faith.”⁴ I wasn’t surprised to read that they are Christians.

Not many parents can open their homes so wide, but that’s just what churches were born to do. Churches should have that kind of attitude toward the spiritual orphans, outcasts, and outlaws whom God brings to our attention.

But . . . so often we in our churches don’t have that attitude. And that mindset, that indifference to the spiritually homeless outside our church doors, is what more than anything else keeps us from building a community that feels like a real family of God. After all, what if “they” don’t fit in? Churches that pride themselves on their warm fellowship can easily forget to go out into the alleys and back roads to bring in the spiritually hungry and homeless.

It’s sad how cold a “friendly” church can be. A church consultant told me once that most church people, regardless of whether their congregation is big or small, don’t really want their church to get any bigger. They’re afraid it won’t feel like

their home anymore. And getting bigger isn't really the goal of a church family (believe it or not). But effective outreach starts with a *healthy* church family.

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If we are to think of our church as *home* we must remember to be an *open* home, or we will fail to be the kind of family Jesus called us to be. Colossians 3:11 says, “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or

free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” Yes, that kind of sibling blending is easier said than done—in the early church as in ours—but it is the mark of a healthy church home.

Two striking Bible stories illustrate the kind of family God calls us to be—Ruth, in the Old Testament, and Philemon, in the New. We'll get to them in chapters 2 and 5.

When a church family matures in Christlike *qualities* we naturally develop Christlike *concern* for the lost. A healthy church family creates a kind of gravitational pull toward the gospel. Or to put it another way, we become like salt, giving people a thirst for Jesus and light illuminating the way to Christ.

There were three kids in my family, and our friends often hung out at our house. Recently, I asked one of my sister's best friends—let's call her “Greta”—what our home meant to her. She wrote,

My niece, who is now 40, asked me a few years back why I am so different than my sisters who share the same genetics and grew

up in the same house. So why am I quick to give a hug, wipe a tear, and offer encouraging words? My only thoughts were that I really grew up in two households, that of my parents (very stoic and undemonstrative) and YOUR household with parents that praised us, prayed with us and for us, and freely gave hugs. I remember needing to check in with your mom when we came home at night. Even if your folks were in bed, we knocked, went in, got a hug and maybe a quick prayer before we went to bed.

Contrast that to my place where I crept in as quietly as I could, not because I was past curfew but because I shouldn't disturb my parents at any time. Hugs? I got one from my mom as she was dying—sitting on the couch in horrible pain. And one from my dad when I flew home from Berlin on emergency leave from the military to visit him in St. Luke's after he had a major heart attack. I believe the praise, prayers, and hugs from your parents really did make a difference in my life.

Churches can be like that in the lives of people who yearn for a home for their hearts.

It Takes Time

Can you imagine that Briggs household with all those kids? Just a couple of kids can wear parents out. But parents have no choice but to take a long view of things. “She’ll grow out of it,” we tell each other on bad days. “She’s growing up too fast,” we say on good days. Still, growing, whether “out of” or “up,” takes a long time. It’s the same at church. When you’re the pastor of a church *family* you had better learn to be patient. I have a clock on the wall of my office that I made from a broad, weathered piece of fence. In it, next to the clock face, I carved the words, “Things take time.”

The beautiful thing—the real wonder, as any parent knows—is that children do grow up. Likewise, pastors watch infant believers become godly and wise. Some prodigals come home to the Father. Relationships heal as they should. Tiny seeds of faith grow into “oaks of righteousness” (Isa. 61:3). Captives walk free. Dispirited mourners are perfumed with joy and dressed in praise.

“God Sets the Lonely in Families”

Home is my favorite word. It undoubtedly started with my own family, a gift of God to me, but my many years of pastoral ministry have reinforced my belief that God embedded in our hearts a deep longing for family that not even the finest of earthly homes can satisfy.

For many people, of course, *home* is not a word resonant with warm memories. Terrible things happen in families. Parents abandon their kids. Home is not safe. Or, like Greta, we may recall our homes as cold and remote.

J. D. Vance, in his bestselling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, writes about a former high school classmate. When she posted on Facebook that “she had finally found a man who would treat her well (a refrain I’d seen many times before), her thirteen-year-old daughter commented: ‘Just stop. I just want you and this to stop.’ I wish I could hug that little girl, because I know how she feels. For seven long years, I just wanted it to stop. I didn’t care so much about the fighting, the screaming, or even the drugs. I just wanted a home, and I wanted to stay there. . . .”⁵

God designed the church to be home for people who feel like that. Psalm 68:4–6 says,

Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds;
rejoice before him—his name is the LORD.
A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing.

The families we grew up in, whether exemplary or heart-breaking or somewhere in between, are not our *first* family. When we are born again we are born into a new family, utterly unique in this world and the only family enduring forever in the next. We are children of the heavenly Father, brothers and sisters of Christ. That makes them our first family.

It was a great relief and motivator to me when I realized that as a pastor I was not called primarily to be a project manager, a goal-getter, and a strategist. I admire those who can do those things but I'm called to work with the Father to create an environment of a healthy home for God's people.

Many, if not most, churches have features of home without ever thinking too much about it. It is natural for God's household to exhibit the traits of a family. But I have been surprised that what should be so natural has required considerable rethinking on my part (and maybe on yours). I'm reluctant to put it this way, given how this all started, but I'm still learning how our church can *align* with this *vision* of church as home and how I, as a pastor, can be a homemaker.

In our congregation there is one compliment we especially love. It's when someone new says, "When I came here, I felt like I was home."

To consider:

What details define your congregation's environment? Does your worship time define you, or is it your teaching? Are you characterized by your ministries beyond the church or your intimate sense of fellowship? Are there common strands through your main influences?

How does your congregational environment shape your ministries?