

Is the Church Really a Family?

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

Many churches identify themselves as a “family church.” It sounds warm and cozy; they are friendly, welcoming, open, big-hearted. Be part of our family; it’s a good place to belong.

However, I’ve always had problems with this image. Partly, it’s because my own family was neither healthy or welcoming or big-hearted. But there are deeper reasons as well. On the surface, it sounds good to say that a church is just like a family.

But let’s question that for a moment. A friend recently sent me a newspaper column from Seattle in which Church Culture Consultant Anthony Robinson raised the same question and suggested it may not be quite as healthy an image as people think.

He reminds us that the core purpose “of the church is to transform both society and the individual to be more Christ like. This concept goes way beyond family... Religious congregations are, or should be, in the business of transforming despair into hope, fear into faith, and death into new life.” Families have a different purpose, “the comfort and satisfaction of members. The core purpose of a congregation is displaced in favour of keeping people happy.”

For Robinson, these two purposes are in conflict. A church’s vision and ministry ought to be outward-focused, while a family is more inwardly focused. “The prevailing ethos [is an] inward focus and clublike feel. After all, a family may be a warm and wonderful group (or not) if you’re a family member. But if you’re not part of the family, that same warm and wonderful group can feel pretty cold and unfriendly at times. Families aren’t easy to join.”

Thinking of the church as a family fails to honour the gospel vision of being a transformative, all-inclusive community. A church becomes a small club where like-minded people can gather to feel good. And if someone should—God forbid—leave the family, it feels like the worst thing in the world. To avoid it, a family will focus all its energy on trying to keep its members happy. It becomes a “dysfunctional system which ends up empowering grumps and bullies” and inevitably starts to decline.

Theologically, to view the church as a family goes against Jesus’ teaching in Mark 3. Someone tells him that his mother and brothers are looking for him. He asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Answering his own question, he says, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” He redefines what it means to be church.

Joining together in the economy of God goes far beyond family. It’s not about being related to others, or being friendly, or keeping each other happy. It’s about being bound by a common vision and mission of partnering with God in transforming the world with the good news of God’s all-inclusive love.

If we continue to use the image of family, we lose that sense of a larger vision. I believe it’s time to find other, better images for the church. We need larger, more outward-looking, inclusive language.

I recently became aware of a scholarly book about the gospel of John in which Mary Coloe identifies “the Household of God” as a primary metaphor. It seems to me to be much more suitable as a metaphor than family.

A household is comprised of so much more than people who are related by blood. By definition, a family is comprised of people “who are just like me.” A household is much broader and more inclusive.

I know several households in which different people join together in a larger house to live together in cooperative living for the benefit of all. One of the key elements is a mutually agreed upon set of values which will be honoured by all who live in the household. The household is held together by a shared vision of mission and vision which all agree to maintain.

For me, that is a much stronger image for the church. A household can embrace a variety of people who share a common vision. A household invites different people to work together not just for the benefit of those who live in the same house, but also to reach out to others to inspire them with a similar vision.

There are other reasons why “household” appeals to me as a much more suitable image for the church. Families are groupings of fathers and mothers, along with children born to the happy couple. A family can expand a little bit through adoption or marriage. But we’ve also heard about families which have disowned family members who are “not like us”—children who are gay or lesbian, transgender, or non-binary in their gender identity.

A household has room for those who identify differently. It can embrace those who use other pronouns. A household can function as what members of the LGBTQ community identify as a “family of choice” in place of the family of origin which disowned them for being different.

Unlike a family which struggles with someone who is different, a household incorporates more easily people with very different ways of living as long as they can honour the core purpose and vision. And if your sense of purpose and vision changes, there is less stigma in leaving a household than there is in trying to leave a family.

It seems to me that the “household of God” is a much more suitable metaphor for the church. It is a much broader and inclusive metaphor than “family” ever can be. It can incorporate all the familial images of “brothers and sisters” and “Father”, as well as the “stranger” who over time becomes part of the household and honours the way in which Jesus redefines family.

A congregation’s work is not to be a “happy family,” but to stay focused on the core vision of the gospel.