

LEADERSHIP AND THE BACKBONE OF STEPFAMILY MINISTRY

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THE NEED

Starting a local stepfamily ministry is one thing; sustaining it is another. On occasion, stepcouples providing leadership feel disconnected from church staff and vulnerable as they work to help other couples who are struggling. The pressure can sometimes lead to burn out, and they may even succumb to their own blended family struggles making leadership impossible to sustain. But there is a way to stabilize stepfamily ministry by providing support from the church and emotional and physical help from others who share the load.

Without a staff member acting as a supportive backbone, the longevity of the average stepfamily ministry will be short.

To create a sustainable ministry, consider these suggestions.

1. The church pastoral staff needs to become familiar with blended families and stepfamily ministry.

- A church staff that isn't familiar with blended family struggles won't understand the need for the ministry or help promote it.
- Someone on staff must be designated as the ministry point-person. They can then provide the long-term support a stepfamily ministry needs. That person will authorize the ministry, lobby for budget, identify group leaders, coordinate with the church's calendar, represent the needs of the ministry to church leadership, and provide support and training to group leaders. Essentially, they are the long-term backbone to the ministry. Without a staff leader, the likelihood of the ministry surviving beyond the first generation of class/group leaders is small.
- It is important that the staff person who gives oversight to the ministry have a lot of knowledge about blended families. We recommend they read at least one book (e.g., *The Smart Stepfamily* by Ron Deal) and review at least one curriculum on the subject.
- Ideally, the entire staff needs some basic training in understanding stepfamilies. No matter what their area of ministry, they will all run into stepfamily situations at one time or another.

2. We recommend that the designated overseer identify at least two leader couples to lead the stepfamily ministry.

- In the best-case scenario, two to four couples would be chosen. This creates a leadership team. Ideally, two of the couples co-teach/lead the class or small group while the others serve support functions, such as, facility set-up, refreshments, welcome team, etc. The team can, also, look after each other and support one another in case one of the couples begins to have family struggles.

3. Choose stepfamily leader couples with these qualities:

- Previously participated in and have grown from the church's marriage/family ministries.
- Display personal responsibility for their own family.
- Have taken plenty of time for healing after divorce or death of a spouse.
- Have a few years under their blended family belt and seem to have moderate to good family stability. (Even though this isn't a long-term guarantee, a pastor should look for stability as he spends time with the family and learns about their life together.)
- Show signs of openness and the willingness to learn.
- Good facilitators of group discussion.
- Able to redirect group conversations back to a practical subject when necessary.
- Willing to be assertive and stop destructive talk in the group.

4. Once leaders have been identified (e.g., group facilitators and team members) it is critical that the church staff overseer continue to support them. This person can support by:

- Asking how they are doing in their personal family situations.
- Looking out for ways that ministry leadership may cause the couple to struggle in their own family. The leadership couple needs a place to process their own problems so they can function as leaders to the group.
- Instructing the team to look after one another personally, not just attend to ministry details.

5. If you can only find one stepcouple to lead the class/group, try to find a second couple to co-facilitate even if they aren't a stepfamily. Here are some things to know:

- The various complexities of stepfamily living make it hard for any one couple to respond to every question. Having two couples shares the load.
- When two stepfamily couples are not available, the second couple (or person) can be from a first marriage and/or a pastor couple. However, this couple must become knowledgeable about blended families so they don't give first-family answers to second-family questions. In addition, they should be good facilitators and know when to defer to the stepfamily couple about matters they don't understand or can't speak to personally.
- A word about small group dynamics: The co-leading couples should physically sit on opposite sides of the group during discussion. This fosters good cross-directional conversation and de-centralizes the "teacher" making mutual support easier and group discussion more likely. A lively group discussion enhances learning, personal application, and helps participants feel a part of the group.