



MINISTERING  
*to* FAMILIES  
*in* CRISIS

*The Essential Guide for Nurturing  
Mental and Emotional Health*

Jennifer S. Ripley, James N. Sells & Diane J. Chandler, editors



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# ESTABLISHING HOPE AMID THE STORM OF FAMILY CRISES

JENNIFER S. RIPLEY, DIANE J. CHANDLER,  
AND JAMES N. SELLS



The beautiful but now stolen artwork of Rembrandt *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* depicts a ship tossed at sea, with Jesus at the bottom of the ship just waking up. The characters in the painting have their way of trying to handle the storm. Some seem to be working extremely hard to trim the sails, manage the rigging, and keep the bow to the wind. Others are mortified and are hanging on for dear life. One appears to have tied himself to the mainsail to survive. One sits passively at the bottom of the boat while another retches over the side. Several are sitting by Jesus, pleading with anxious faces, trying to get his attention. A copy of this painting is in my (Jennifer's) home and reminds me of the quiet calm of Jesus navigating threatening storms with sailors all around him. Jesus' calm demeanor reflects how I desire to respond to family crises. We hope this book will help you find calm assurance in the storms of ministering to families.

Being a capable minister to families is like being a qualified sailor. You are skilled in sailing various storms and sea conditions. The chapters of this book take us through some of the most challenging storms of church

ministry and family crises. A family minister might ask: “What am I supposed to know about this issue?” and “How do I respond to this situation with Christlike calm and confidence?” “How do I support a person or family with biblical and practical guidance?” Ministry leaders are often expected to have expertise in addressing various problems, much deeper than what ministry training or seminary provides. This book was created as a hands-on ministry resource for your digital or physical office shelf when family issues arise in ministry. Each chapter is written by a “master sailor” to help you with your family challenges.

Think back to your first days as a new ministry leader. Perhaps you stepped into the role as a young person with little experience or later in life with an excellent graduate degree. You likely started with a sense of calling from God on a new journey ministering to others. You were excited and confident that God was with you and that you could create pathways in which people could faithfully follow Jesus. Then, a problem or crisis confronted you for which you felt unprepared. A “people challenge” likely emerged early in your leadership tenure. Did you feel prepared to respond?

When families seek help for problems, many church leaders feel unprepared to respond. Perhaps their issue was related to a substance-abusing deacon, stress about a gay family member, a blended family disagreement, or maybe a relational nor'easter blew into your office with allegations of family abuse. Possibly, a family with an autistic child or adult with an anxiety disorder asked you for prayer. Maybe a family struggling with racial discrimination looked to you for wisdom, or a parent living in poverty asked for assistance with groceries and rent. These challenges overwhelm us all—even when they don't pile up before you preach your first sermon or lead your first meeting. How did you respond, and how did the situation resolve? Few in the ministry anticipate the extent of family crises that occur.

### BEING COURAGEOUS IN THE STORM

Many church leaders work hard to avoid family storms in ministry. Perhaps you have been tempted to dodge “that situation” or “that family” as they approach you during Sunday services. Whether you are the

church's senior pastor, youth leader, family life ministry coordinator, elder, or a dedicated Sunday school teacher, you likely hoped someone else would help that family. Everyone feels that way sometimes, even those with years of experience. Yet, just like unpredictable weather in your city, the storms of crises are unlikely to stop. Therefore, we are here to you prepare for the current or next storm. Excellent preparation can equip you to know what to do, where to go for help, and what is likely ahead as the storm continues to rock the boat.

Vincent van Gogh is credited with saying, "The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore." Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and called Peter and Andrew, asking them to become fishers for people. Similarly, church leaders like you have refused to remain ashore. The twelve disciples had no way of knowing the difficult journey ahead when they followed him. Crises and stress would become a new way of life for them.

Yet God did not leave them alone. They had the teachings of Jesus, the Scriptures, the history of Israel, the community of believers, and the Holy Spirit to guide their work. From the world's perspective, a group of followers of a rabbi who gained few possessions in their lifetime were often shipwrecked, jailed, and far from their own families seemed like failures. But God doesn't work in the way we expect. He brings beauty from ashes, gladness instead of mourning, praise instead of a faint spirit to build oaks of righteousness (Is 61:3). This is the work of church leaders at their finest when working with families in crisis.

### **BEING PART OF A FAMILY**

No one enters the world without a family. The "family ministry" stereotype includes images of a young couple with little children. Everyone looks perfect. The images convey tranquility, order, and relational perfection, void of tension, conflict, or sorrow. The concept of family is complicated, even messy. It transcends the boundaries of the nuclear unit, extending far beyond the confines of a singular household. You have grandparents raising children, single parents, and foster families in your church. Even those who attend church alone have family

members somewhere. One pastor said, “I haven’t seen a ‘normal, typical’ family come to my church in years.” Regardless of one’s life journey, every individual is inherently woven into the fabric of family in ever-changing constellations, including a dynamic and expansive network that reaches across generations and embraces diverse relationships. While contemporary society often emphasizes the nuclear family structure, the true richness of familial experience lies in the extended family’s expansive embrace.

While spouses and parents have unique responsibilities and roles in each other’s lives, they do not always typify the depth of family influence. Grandparents play an essential role in most families and are often the source of transmission of faith.<sup>1</sup> Beyond blood ties, the church family is the spiritual family that contributes profoundly to the mosaic of our lives. In recognizing the depth and breadth of these connections, we unveil a broader understanding of family—one that reflects the diverse tapestry of shared experiences, collective wisdom, and enduring bonds that shape the essence of our existence. We believe these family characteristics are closer to the idea of family as laid out in Scripture and church teachings across the millennia.

### **RESPONDING TO THE CALL FOR COMPASSIONATE MINISTRY**

Our voyage begins with a simple yet profound call to compassionate ministry. The heart of Christ’s teachings lies in love and compassion. As his followers who minister in his name, we have a sacred duty to extend compassionate care to those navigating the turbulent seas of family crises. Ministering to families in their darkest hours requires more than just knowledge; it demands a spirit of empathy that mirrors the boundless love of our Savior. The authors of each chapter provide a clear, compassionate vision of the needs and struggles people face in various family crises. Whether families are facing end-of-life care, disability, conflict, or mental illness, we can improve our effectiveness with a compassionate

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<sup>1</sup>Dudley Chancey and Ron Bruner, “The Transmission of Faith and Values through Generations,” *Dialogismos*, 6 (2022): 36-54, [www.oc.edu/uploads/images/documents/Chancey-and-Bruner-Passing-on-Faith-Dialogismos-6.2022.pdf](http://www.oc.edu/uploads/images/documents/Chancey-and-Bruner-Passing-on-Faith-Dialogismos-6.2022.pdf).



understanding of the needs and dynamics at play when that particular type of storm is underway. That is an important distinction. The crisis is the storm outside the boat, threatening its safety. Too often, families turn toward one another, making the problem internal and everyone less effective. This was the disciples' response to Jesus in the boat: "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" (Mt 8:25). Our call is to address the storm, not fight with the people who are essential for survival.

### **DEVELOPING FAMILIES AS THE KEY TO A THRIVING CHURCH**

The need has never been greater to address families in crisis in churches everywhere. I don't need to convince you regarding the hurting of the family, which is well-documented. J. P. De Gance of *Communio Ministries* has made a compelling case for generational succession, passing down the faith to younger generations through intact families. There is considerable concern about declining church attendance, with weekly attendance dropping nationwide.<sup>2</sup> One exception, however, counters this decline in church attendance. Adults who grew up in intact families who regularly attended church and practiced their faith at home stayed in the church.<sup>3</sup> While less than half of young adults today enter adulthood with continuously married parents throughout childhood, 80% of people attending church today came from intact married parents across age groups.<sup>1</sup> That doesn't mean single parents and struggling families can't pass on the faith, but the data is stark. Therefore, anything churches can do to encourage healthy lifelong marriages and families will trickle down to create a thriving future church community through the children raised in those families. Take notice that we have not used the phrase "declining family." We prefer to use the term hurting or suffering family as it takes on the storms of society. Families get turned broadside and receive the full brunt of crashing waves. Your task is to help families get pointed into the storm, to balance the weight, and to steer it to safety.

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<sup>2</sup>ChurchTrac, "The State of Church Attendance: Trends and Statistics [2023]," [www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023](http://www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023).

<sup>3</sup>John Paul De Gance, "Nationwide Study on Faith and Relationships," *Communio.org*, November 2023, [https://communio.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/COMMUNIO\\_Survey-of-Faith-and-Relationships-1.pdf](https://communio.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/COMMUNIO_Survey-of-Faith-and-Relationships-1.pdf).

The chapters in this book are authored by various Christian leaders, offering expertise across multiple ministry problems. Each chapter provides a unique understanding of family issues and practical suggestions when faced with common ministry challenges.

- Do you need to fit family ministry within a larger vision of spiritual formation? Diane Chandler, associate professor of Christian formation and leadership at Regent University and an expert in spiritual formation, introduces a vision for spiritual formation within family ministry.
- Are mental health problems arising in your church? Psychiatrist and director of KEY Ministries in Ohio, Steve Grcevich, offers an excellent primer on mental health challenges experienced by families so you can sensitively and effectively support families with members who have mental health diagnoses.
- Do you hope to offer effective marriage ministries in your church? Jennifer Ripley is a professor of psychology at Regent University, John Van Epp is a psychologist who leads the Love Thinks organization, and J. P. De Gance leads the non-profit ministry *Communio*. Together, they describe how to understand and respond to marriages on the individual marriage level, whole-church level, and larger community level of care.
- Are families with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender members bringing issues and problems to your church community? Mark Yarhouse, professor of psychology at Wheaton College, and Anne Brose, a doctoral student in psychology at Wheaton College, cast a vision for marriage ministries when LGBTQ+ issues arise in the family. In a second chapter, Janet Dean and Steve Stratton, professors of counseling at Asbury Seminary, with Mark Yarhouse, address the needs of parents who have children who identify as LGBTQ+.
- Has family violence been an issue you have had to face? In her practical chapter on domestic violence, Darby Strickland, an author and faculty member at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation, advocates for ministry leaders to respond well to family aggression.

- Is divorce something the people in your congregation have experienced? Perhaps you could use a briefing from a Christian lawyer, Lynne Marie Kohm, a family law expert. She provides a thorough understanding of legal avenues and experiences of divorce in family law to support ministry leaders walking through divorce with a partner or family.
- If children or adults with disabilities in your church attend your church, how might you want to minister to them creatively? Ryan Wolfe, a disability ministry pastor and leader of Ability Ministry, equips churches to provide excellent ministry to those with various disabilities. His chapter will open up new ideas and avenues to meet the needs of the many people with disabilities in every church.
- How do you handle kids and teens who are always on their phones and screens at church meetings? Or do parents complain about their kids' screen use? Educational psychologist Kathy Koch, who speaks and writes on children's ministries with Celebrate Kids ministry, raises our awareness of the issues of children and teens' screen use and how to offer an effective response as a church leader.
- Maybe it's not just the kids on their screens, but the adults are also struggling with screen time, internet sex temptation, or social media problems. Writer and speaker Arlene Pellicane, host of the podcast *The Happy Home*, addresses the adult side of digital screen discipleship.
- Does your church have members who face stress from racial division and discrimination? Cassandra Page, professor of psychology at Regent University, and Eric Brown, pastor and professor of counseling at Boston University, orient us to practical ways to respond to race-based stress.
- Do family conflicts ever make their way into small groups, classes, or counseling ministries within your church community? David Olsen, director of Samaritan Counseling Center in upstate New York, provides an excellent orientation to the family systems concept of differentiation to help church leaders respond well to conflict.

- When families ask for help with the rent or electric bill, and you want to minister well to them, you will want to read the chapter from Kristen Kansiewicz, professor of counseling at Evangel University. Her chapter illuminates the needs of those struggling with poverty and effective church responses.
- Has trauma become a more common experience among those in your church community? Whether childhood abuse, military combat, witnessing the death of loved ones, or common traumas like bullying, large numbers of Americans increasingly struggle with trauma symptoms. Fred and Heather Gingrich, professors at Toccoa Falls College and former missionaries to the Philippines, share their expertise in caring for those with trauma histories.
- Are blended families part of your church community? David and Suzanne Mikkelson, counselors at Hill City Counseling in Lynchburg, Virginia, describe creative ideas to address the needs and considerations of these families. Their chapter contains ways to be more sensitive to blended families.
- Have you had church members, or even leaders, who appear to have problems with substance abuse? Jim Sells, professor of counseling education at Regent University, and Megan Cannedy, professor of counseling at Colorado Christian University, provide important information about substance abuse, the effects on family members, and how to avoid the traps that substance abuse can create in ministry.
- Do members of your church struggle with end-of-life issues and caregiving for an elderly family member? Terry Hargrave and Paul Flores, professors at Fuller Seminary, share ministry wisdom for couples and families facing the end of life and loss.

In these chapters, we explore a range of crises, the power of well-equipped ministry, and the significance of walking alongside families in crisis. Our mission is not to offer quick fixes or easy solutions but to stand as witnesses to the redemptive power of God's love. Pastoral leaders can nurture an environment where healing begins and hope is rekindled by grounding our approach in Christian principles.

## RESPONDING TO FAMILY STORMS

This chapter began by describing Rembrandt's painting *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Consider locating this painting online. Then, zoom in on your screen, look closely, and ponder how you have responded when faced with ministry storms. What character do you most resonate with? Rembrandt's work helps us move past our defenses to illuminate our emotional response to pain, suffering, struggle, and uncertainty. We all have ways of handling crises, and understanding our natural tendencies can help us respond more like Jesus when they arise. We might want to work too hard, passively give up, throw up, or anxiously demand Jesus rescue us. Instead, imagine that you come up next to Jesus on that boat. Ask him for what you need. Do you need him to take your hand in hard times? To smile and remind you that you are loved? To remind you that it is worth all the hardships for the ultimate reward in God's kingdom? We challenge you to ask God for what you need in the crises you will face.

As we embark on this exploration of ministering to families in crisis within the sacred context of the church, we can gather around the timeless truth that binds us—the unwavering hope found in the presence of Jesus. The irony in the story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee is that the God of the universe, who made the sea and everything in it, was sitting right there with them. The Lord over the storm was present in that very moment. Yet their faith was so small (Mt 8:26) that the disciples could hardly breathe. How comforting to know that we are not alone, whether avoiding the problem, trying desperately to solve it, pleading anxiously to God, or retching over the side of the boat. Storms are unnerving, but Jesus is King over the storm.

In difficult times, the church's job is to create a port of peace, joy, and goodness in contrast to the darkness of the world around us. In family ministry, the light and beauty of biblical family values and practices arise in stark contrast to the world around us. The world desperately needs a vision of a healthy church and home life, and Christian leaders can hold and model that vision.

## HARBORING IN THE SAFETY OF THE CHURCH

In times of crisis, the church should transform into a safe harbor, a refuge where broken hearts can find solace and shattered spirits can find

restoration. Just like in Rembrandt's painting, the presence of Jesus in the boat is always available to those in our congregation. We hope that your ministry can point people to the man in the boat and that they will take his hand and walk with him through their crisis. The church is a living, breathing community bound together by the shared experience of grace. Our role as ministers is to foster an environment where families feel embraced by the love of Christ, a place where the hurting can find healing and the lost can find direction.

At the core of ministry lies the recognition that we are vessels through which the divine healer, Jesus Christ, works. As we step into the lives of families in crisis, we carry the healing balm of the gospel, trusting that the Holy Spirit will guide our words and actions. Our responsibility is not to have all the answers but to point families toward the One who does.

#### **WEIGHING ANCHOR AS YOU CONTINUE THIS JOURNEY**

As we sail into the practical aspects of ministering to families in crisis, let us remember that our goal is not merely to manage the symptoms but to address the root causes of issues with the transformative power of God. As a church leader or pastor, you are already skilled in praying with parishioners, searching the Scriptures for guidance, and listening to the Holy Spirit for direction. Through Scripture, prayer, and communal support, ministers aim to facilitate a journey of healing that transcends the immediate crisis, paving the way for families to emerge stronger, more resilient, and more deeply rooted in their faith.

We hope these book chapters on relevant family issues strengthen your skill set when addressing various family problems with compassion and grace. Just like teaching pastors receive training on developing memorable messages and three-point sermons, these book chapters provide direction in navigating complex situations that affect families in your ministry context. You can think of this as a full integration of special revelation and general revelation to support your ministry. As you read these chapters and glean from the authors' wisdom, consider how you can address problems by incorporating their perspectives and proposed solutions.

In the upcoming chapters, we explore the biblical foundations of family, restoration, and the transformative power of grace. We sincerely hope this book serves as a compass, guiding you through the uncharted waters of ministering to families in crisis with wisdom, humility, and an unwavering reliance on the grace of our Lord. May the words on these pages inspire, encourage, and equip you as you answer the call to be Christ's heart, hands, and feet to families in need. Together, let us embark on this sacred voyage of ministering to families in crisis, confident that when we are with Christ, even the wind and waves will obey him.

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