

The Extended Family in America - Its Changing Structure and the Christian Response

Gregory K. Moffatt, Ph.D., LPC

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Introduction: The phrase "extended family" has largely meant the same thing for generations. These were families where the family under a single roof commonly included grandparents, adult children, and other relatives or close family friends. But our evolving culture has changed the meaning of extended family. This change has come about due to economic difficulties, the advent of our digital and mobile culture, and the ever-changing multicultural environment where we find ourselves in 2013 as the once distinct lines of our past conceptualizations of family blend into a complex cultural melting pot we call these United States. These changes present critical implications to the Christian church as she attempts to minister to the people this emerging millennium.

A short history - Until the industrial revolution, nearly all families around the world included extended families. The transition from rural to urban culture and the mobility this brought with it began the conversion of U.S. culture from multi-generational family in a single dwelling to the nuclear family as the norm. In the past 50 years, especially as the divorce rate exploded from the 1970's and beyond, nuclear family has come to mean an ever smaller group, sometimes including only one parent and his/her children - sometimes married and sometimes divorced. We now find ourselves at a time when many nuclear families consist of adults who were never married at all. In fact, as of today, 41 percent of children born in the U.S. were born to unmarried mothers (Linn, Wilson, & Fako, 2012, p. 22).

Current trends - But the changes continue. With heavy immigration - both legal and illegal - economic troubles, and changes in the meaning of family, the number of people living under a single roof is once again growing. Statistics show a steady increase in U.S. families with extended family in the home since 1980.

Recent research has shown a growing trend for adult children in the U.S. to either remain in the home with parents or to return due to economic issues, but also because of convenience as well as the "joy of being with parents" (Donaldson, 2012). Grandparents are also moving in with their adult children in order to assist with child-care - once again, to cut costs during difficult financial times. Other relatives pooling their resources because of job loss, housing foreclosure, or other life challenges also inhabit a single dwelling. The extended family once again includes several generations.

Effects of a digital age - There is no doubt that our computerized digital age has drastically changed the family. One person recently equated the invention of the Internet with the development of fire and antibiotics. That may not be much of an overstatement when history looks back on how dramatically the digital age has changed the way we behave. Skype, smart phones, face-time, texting, Facebook, and other communication systems make it possible for families to stay in contact with each other, regardless of their place of residence on the planet. These ever-present communication avenues bring not only the support of extended families, but also potentially unwelcome intrusiveness that causes family stress that might otherwise only be seen in a family where the relative actually lives in the same home.

Immigration - Typically, immigrants arrive in the U.S. alone or with a small group. Once they have established a place to live and work, relatives are summoned a few at a time. In many immigrant homes, not only does the extended family eventually include various relatives, but often close friends and neighbors from the country of origin as they seek to establish a new life in the United States.

In the earliest days of our country, immigrants congregated in neighborhoods making it easy for them to maintain their own individual cultures in isolation from the host culture. Assimilation wasn't required. While this still exists today, especially in larger cities, signage, specialty stores catering to varied cultural groups, and churches that blend culture and language are not only commonplace, but often expected.

No longer can the church hide from the fact that our country is truly multicultural. Immigrants from around the world inhabit nearly every corner of the country, in cities large and small, and often in numbers that allow them to preserve their own cultural behaviors, language, and customs. The church has to embrace this truth.

Role of the extended family - The extended family has historically provided many benefits, especially to Latinos and African-Americans, both cultures in the U.S. that are far more apt to live with extended families. Churches have frequently either failed to adequately minister to these families or they have ignored them altogether. Non-white families either sought out religious bodies sensitive to their culture or they took on more "white" lifestyles. Otherwise, they would not stay involved in the church. This isn't a suggestion that the church as a whole has been uncaring. It simply addresses the fact that attempts to minister to nontraditional family structures have been the exception rather than the rule.

Ironically, any trend to become more "white" would potentially be harmful to these families who often rely heavily upon the extended family for financial stability, adaptive strategies as they learn a new culture, as well as social and emotional support, not to mention that these families often live in the inner city or other areas with limited resources and limited social support (Gerstel, 2011; Jarrett, Jefferson, and Kelly, 2010; Glick, 2000). Living with extended families provides other benefits as well. In an interesting study from 2009, researchers found that involvement of the extended family actually increased the likelihood of involvement with the nuclear family (and children) by nonresident fathers (Perry, 2009).

Living with extended family also has long-range benefit for wealth accumulation. Both Caucasian and minority families who live with extended family are more likely to "make the transition to home ownership" than nuclear families living in isolation (Hall and Crowder, 2011). This truth has immense impact on wealth because home-ownership is directly related to long-term wealth accumulation and stability.

Implications - If the church is to minister to the millennial family, it has to recognize that past norms no longer apply. Families have less money, less space, and more schedules to manage than ever before. They have to address stressors of multiple relationships among people residing under the same roof and all the complexities this brings with it. Extended family members will not get involved if the church doesn't meet their needs, and the nuclear family may not come if extended family members are not happy.

Five implications for church leadership - I propose five issues the church must address in the current age if she wants to minister to extended families. First of all, extended family, while not synonymous with multicultural family, very easily could be. Therefore, the church must consider potential language and cultural barriers in the development of programs, presentations, signage, sermons, classes, and activities.

Second, the church must be aware of the way the digital age has changed who we are. This isn't a suggestion about use of technology in the service so much as it involves an awareness of the expectations of the current age (live streaming of content, Twitter, Facebook, instant availability of information, and easy contact with staff) as well as the possibility that families where a relative is living in another state, town or country may be as involved with the family - with all its positives and negatives - just as if he/she lived in the home.

Third, counseling and family intervention services offered by the church must consider the needs of multiple generations. The traditional idea of family systems is radically different for the extended family than it is with the nuclear family.

Fourth, church leadership must consider the financial limitations that extended families face. Economic times are hard for all families, but resources are stretched especially thin for the extended family. One church recently advertised a "youth group ski trip" that cost each participant \$750. That amount of money is exorbitant by itself, but multiplied by two children, three cousins, and a nephew is astronomical.

Finally, just as financial resources are limited, so is time. Time constraints due to multiple schedules may make

it difficult or even impossible to stay as involved in church as families once were. Doctor's visits, meetings with school teachers, athletic practices, as well as social and family events stretch families to the limit. The church needs to be sensitive in programming - time, place, and expense - to the fact that the extended family faces unique demands upon its time.

Conclusion - Meeting the needs of the extended family is not insurmountable, but it requires cultural sensitivity, understanding, and awareness. With these tools in hand, the church can bring the gospel to those that might otherwise be left out.

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