

FAMILY CLUSTER COALITIONS: “Families for Wholeness”

The family as a small group is one of the basic units of “Community”. As the main agent of socialisation, human nurture and economic consumption and production, it is one of the most vital types of small groups. It is as these entities are strengthened and made into healing communities that the same can happen to the local community and congregation. Families can work together to strengthen one another. It is through such a system of clusters that the saying can be fulfilled – “It takes a village to raise a child”. The principles and practical suggestions in the preceding chapter on small groups should be applied to understanding and managing family clusters. Nevertheless, certain additional and peculiar aspects of running such clusters are shared below.

A. AIM

Family cluster coalition is a concept suggested for families whose wish it is to give priority to the assessment and enrichment of their family lives.¹

This assessment and enrichment could be in the context of the wholistic health of family members and more importantly of *the family as a whole*.

B. COMPOSITION

A family cluster could comprise of between four (4) and six (6) family units or households who agree to meet together for a specified, usually prolonged, period of time with the aim of sharing their learning experiences.

It could be helpful to seek to attain an equilibrium between the *types* of family units including a) two parent families, b) single parent or guardian families, c) single persons, d) sibling groups, e) other household arrangements. Also there should be a consideration with regard to the age-related peership for children in the groups.

C. PURPOSES

Family clusters could be used to accommodate the following purposes in a whole person context:

1. a *support and family healing network* in which values, insights practical and prayer assistance between families and generations may be imparted;

¹ Thanks to Dr. Mahan Siler, Jr. of North Carolina Baptist Hospital, Hawthorne Road, Winston-Salem, NC 27103, USA for written suggestions

2. *opportunities for skills training*, especially in the areas of communication and problem solving;
3. assistance in the setting up and maintenance of *meaningful family rituals*;
4. assistance and opportunity for *Christian education* within the family;
5. chances to *assess family strengths* and to elucidate *family goals*;
6. providing the opportunities for *modeling across generations and families* as well as for cross-generational and cross-family modeling, *mentoring* and *friendships*;
7. encouragement of opportunities for *peer support, recreation* and the *total whole person development* of children;
8. *aid the wider congregation or congregations of family units* in ministering to youth and the families themselves.
9. involvement in *outreach* to persons and communities with special needs.

D. EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Concentration on educational experiences could emerge from the needs and interests of the particular cluster or group. The experiences chosen could be so designed to encourage all members to participate based on their own level of experience and maturity. Examples of such concentrations could be in issues such as:

- communication patterns within the family
- recreation
- family's stories and identity
- conflict resolution
- decision making
- holiday celebrations
- deaths
- beliefs and values
- power within the family
- sexuality
- family worship
- poverty
- community needs

At the outset, nine (9) months of participation could be arranged. Families may withdraw if they find the experiences not helpful enough after having participated for a reasonable period. It must be stressed, however, the importance of full participation for the entire duration. This should be expressed to the interested families during their interviews.

E. PRACTICAL MANAGEMENT

A team evaluation is best carried out after the initial period, at which time the cluster will decide whether or not to continue and on what time basis (either limited or open-ended). If the latter, then new families would be able to be added in the event that others withdraw.

Agreement among the families in a cluster could include:

1. A monthly *three (3) hour meeting* of the cluster, with an *all day (8 hour) meeting* every four (4) months.
2. *Once weekly meetings for each family unit* which could be used for recreation, personal sharing and/or problem solving or worship, or other suggestions can be made.
3. *Parents* in the family clusters would agree to:
 - a) meet once or twice monthly with the Family Cluster leaders. These meetings would be useful for:
 - dealing with family issues
 - parental training
 - marriage enrichment, personal growth and spirituality buildinghere the parents would be able to shape the agenda themselves.
 - b) participate in a minimum of two enrichment events during the entire nine month period such as :-
 - Marriage Enrichment retreats
 - Parental training
 - Personal Growth events
 - Couples Communication programmes
 - other types of support groups

The family cluster would seek to provide a system of support for the decisions of growth-oriented change made during the more short-term events.

4. Parents could also *meet periodically as gender groups* for support on gender related issues such as parenting and marriage.
5. On a more long term basis, parents could accommodate *co-operative arrangements* such as:
 - allowing each other time off by taking care of children and house
 - car pooling
 - helping children with their studies
 - wholesale purchasing of groceries

- helping with special cases such as illness and disability.

Costs - should be shared by the family units, single parents may pay less. Payment may be made anytime during the nine months of the program.

The family cluster experience may be adapted to suit the needs of the group, and would clearly involve a serious commitment from all family members.

After the programme idea is adopted by a local church or other organization, it could be advertised among membership and to persons outside, if desired.

Those who have a general interest in this program could be asked to call or write someone from a team of persons designated by a congregation, or other organization or neighbourhood, or who have a particular concern about bringing together family units from various similar entities.

As families of various types stay together the congregation and it's surrounding community will stay together.