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## What Church Families Want

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**M**inistering to families has always held challenges. Congregation leaders from every denomination ask themselves, “Are we reaching families? What does our congregation need? How can we help? Where do we start?”

Diana Garland, dean of Baylor University’s School of Social Work, working with Dr. Pam Yankeelov, professor at the University of Louisville, has developed a tool to help churches answer those questions. In 1993, the Montgomery (AL) Baptist Association asked Garland to help it find a way to learn about specific needs within its churches. The association wanted a way to measure strengths and weaknesses individually, recognizing that these would vary from congregation to congregation.

Garland and Yankeelov developed a survey, which after years of revision and refinement based on feedback from church leaders nationwide, became the Church Census. In the 12 years the census has been administered, more than 150 congregations have used it. It is still available through the Center for Family and Community Ministries in the Baylor School of Social Work.

The census is a tool that helps congregation leaders understand who their families are, the stresses they experience, how they view their strengths, how they practice their faith and what they want from their congregations. It is not prescriptive, but provides invaluable information for leaders as they consider ways to meet members’ needs, Garland said.

“The first thing we wanted to discover is who families are,” she said. “And that ‘who’ is very important.”

Most pastors, she points out, come from and are in “traditional” family roles. They most often are males in their first marriage and are living with their biological children. They are less likely to be single or divorced adults, or part of a stepfamily. And, although pastors and other church leaders are

### CHURCH CENSUS

Find out more at [www.baylor.edu/social\\_work/cfcm/index.php?id=35492](http://www.baylor.edu/social_work/cfcm/index.php?id=35492)

aware of non-traditional families, it can be more difficult to understand the needs of families unlike their own.

The Church Census defines families as those who act like a family to one another, whether or not those roles match up with the traditional, nuclear family, Garland said.

To begin the process, the church's attendees fill out an eight-page questionnaire. Everyone, not just church members or a random sample, is asked to complete the survey because the term "member" has different meanings in different churches, Garland said. This allows everyone who is active in the congregation to participate.

Because the surveys are completely anonymous and no one from the congregation sees them, people are more likely to respond with an accurate picture of what's happening in their families, Garland said.

"So often, people put on a smile and their nicest clothes to come to church," she said. "They hide their problems behind that exterior, and the only time we find out is when it gets out of control."

This was reflected by a respondent who wrote about existing programs in her church: "I find the church's help to be much too general to do my family or me any

good. Like many others, our problems are hidden behind a veneer of 'OK-ness,' and breaking that veneer just doesn't happen."

Breaking the veneer is just what the Church Census hopes to do as a beginning step toward more responsive dialogue. Nor is this facade a phenomenon of any single age group within the church, as these responses show:

- "Now that my husband has died, and my children are grown and moved away, I have a big need for friendship and help with loneliness," writes an older woman, who said she was considering changing churches.

- "I struggle with connecting with my 14-year-old son," one father writes.

- "I think that the time the youth have to stand around and talk should be shortened because not everyone has someone to talk to," says a teenager.

- "We have been here two years and know few families well," one person says. "We have few people we could or would call for prayer if we had a crisis."

Churches have used what they learn from the census in many ways, Garland said. One church discovered that it had a serious problem with conflict management and family violence.

"The pastor got tears in his eyes and said, 'No wonder I have so much conflict with the deacons,'" Garland said.

The pastor began addressing the issue with a sermon series on dealing with conflict and anger. It also became the topic of Sunday School classes for all ages.

Several churches learned that their families wanted to serve together as well as worship together. These churches responded by developing family mission projects, Garland said.

"We know that children who grow up serving

next to adults are more likely to attend church as young adults," she said. "It makes it more meaningful."

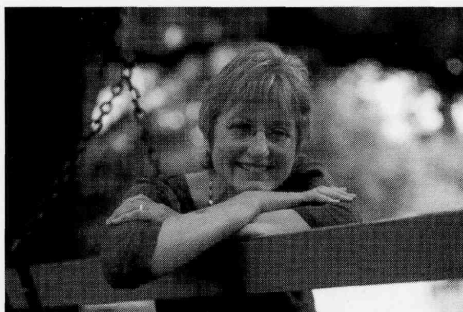
Discovering how consistently churchgoers expressed a desire to serve was one of the major surprises in the Church Census findings for Garland. Among all denominations and all

socioeconomic and age groups, the most common answer to "how can the church help," was "give us ways to serve others outside our family."

"We didn't expect that," Garland said. "Even families who are struggling themselves want to serve others. The opportunity to help others was the single-most requested thing of churches, across the board. They want help living their faith."

That's a need Garland hopes all churches can take to heart – even those who haven't completed a census.

"These families are telling us that the focus of church needs to be centered on ways families can minister to the world," she said. "We've tended to see service as an add-on to worship, with worship being the main focus. Families are saying we need to turn that around."



DIANA GARLAND

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