Family literacy as a church ministry

This article introduces readers to family literacy as an approach to strengthening families and building communities by teaching literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL). The model presented is adaptable for use by congregations and in nonsectarian settings. The four components of family literacy – adult education, childhood education, parenting education, and parent and child together time – are described using examples from an ESL program at a middle school in a predominantly Hispanic urban neighborhood. After defining family literacy ministry, the author describes keys to his team's success and provides guidelines for congregations desiring to implement such a ministry.

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In 2002, the state-of-the-art César Chávez Middle School opened its doors in a predominately Mexican American neighborhood in Waco, Texas. Hundreds of energetic children enrolled, but their parents seldom crossed the threshold. Notes, calls, and meetings from the teachers and administrators went unanswered and unattended. The school's Campus Decision-making Committee, composed of teachers, administrators, community residents, and business people, probed for answers. They discovered that approximately 70% of the parents of their students could not read, write, or speak English, a number that far exceeded earlier estimates.

To help the school bridge the language and related cultural differences, the committee turned to Dr. Randy Wood, professor of education at Baylor University in Waco who supervises School of Education interns at César Chávez. About this time, Dr. Wood and I were seeking a location to demonstrate a family-oriented approach to teaching literacy that we had developed. He made a presentation to the committee, and they invited us to test our model of teaching ESL to parents of the school's students.

Two months after launching Learning English Among Friends (LEAF) in September 2003, response from the community was so great that enrollment

Photos for this article were taken during a LEAF session at César Chávez Middle School in Waco, Texas.

in the program was opened to the public. By April 2005, LEAF had more than 150 adults enrolled with an average weekly attendance of 40 adults and 60 children from infancy through middle school. LEAF is now the collective effort of several organizational partners, college students, community volunteers, and the school's staff, all of whom work with the participants to create a stimulating learning environment. To emphasize the spirit of collaboration that is at the heart of LEAF, this article is written in first-person plural.[1]

Through experiences in LEAF, we have learned valuable insights about developing a family literacy program, collaborating with community organizations, and working with diverse populations. Our purpose in writing this article is to encourage congregations and religiously affiliated nonprofit organizations to consider using this model as a ministry to help strengthen families and build communities through teaching literacy and ESL. Although LEAF is based in a public school, the model is adaptable to church settings as a family literacy ministry program.

This article provides a brief review of the development of family literacy and some of the current issues in the field, followed by a description of the LEAF program and the four components of the model on which it is based. The next section discusses family literacy as a ministry of the church and includes suggestions about how to implement such a ministry. Particular attention is given to program location and cultural diversity among staff and participants. The article concludes by describing several keys to a successful family literacy program.

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OVERVIEW OF FAMILY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND ISSUES

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II) of The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 defines literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, speak in English, compute, and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society." In federal legislation that includes the Head Start Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Reading Excellence Act, and the Workforce Investment Act, the government's definition of "family literacy" is:

> Services that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family and that integrate all of the following activities: (1) interactive literacy activities between parents and their children; (2) training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children; (3) parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency; and (4) an age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences (State Library of Ohio, 2005).

Family literacy first gained prominence at the state level in the mid-1980s and expanded nationwide through the federally funded Even Start Family Literacy Program in 1988 and the founding of the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) the following year (King & McMaster, 2000). Even Start provides child care for small children and parent education and literacy skills for adults. It is the only federal governmental family literacy program that attempts to address issues of literacy. The development of both public and private family literacy programs during the past 15 years has been well documented in reviews and evaluations (Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002).

From their beginning, family literacy programs have focused primarily on preschool children and

[1]*I would also like to acknowledge the competent work of several social work graduate student interns from the Baylor School of Social Work who contributed both to the successful implementation of LEAF and to the contents of this article: Cini Bretzlaff, Christina Craddock, Natalie Foote, and Julia Howard.*

their parents (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 1991; Darling, 1988). In the past decade, however, we have witnessed the emergence of program models that include elementary (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Quint, 2001) and middle school children (Connors, 1994).

Family literacy is a broad term and an approach that focuses on helping the whole family, with "family" defined as a unit or social reality rather than as separate individuals living together. Although families are composed of individuals, family literacy recognizes that family members are significantly connected to and profoundly affected by each other.

Consequently, the foundation for most family literacy program models consists of three guiding principles rooted in empirical evidence. The foremost principle is that parents are the first and most important teachers of their children (Cordry & Wilson, 2004; Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002; Park, 2001). Second is that the educational achievement of children is related directly to their parents' literacy and education levels (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2000). The third principle is that every family possesses strengths that need to be recognized and built upon in programs of family literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Brown, 1998). We will expand on these themes throughout this article.

> … the educational achievement of children is related directly to their parents' literacy and education levels.

Currently in the evolution of family literacy concepts and practices, several issues are at the forefront of discussions among practitioners, academics, and policymakers. One such issue concerns the extent to which culture and ethnicity, including parenting practices and preferred learning styles, impact effective instruction (Boyd, Brock, & Rozendal, 2004; Brown, 1998; National Center for ESL Literacy in Education, 2002; Park, 2001). The sources cited here are a few among a growing body of research findings that demonstrate the positive effects of attending to the cultural dynamics of participants in literacy programs.

A second predominant issue stems from the rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the United States. Data from the Current Population Survey show that from 1994 to 2004, the Hispanic population in the United States grew from 26.6 million to 40.4 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). With ESL becoming an increasingly common element in family literacy programs, academics and practitioners are debating vigorously the relative merits of bilingual versus English-only instructional models (Boyd, Brock, & Rozendal, 2004; Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Proponents of bilingual education argue that this approach helps reduce the frustration of trying to learn a new language and values the students' native language as an essential aspect of their culture. Proponents of English-only instruction counter with evidence that students in their model learn English more quickly and efficiently (Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

Another major concern in literacy circles is the absence of fathers in the education of their children. Research has demonstrated consistently that children are more likely to perform and behave well in school when their fathers are involved (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). Consequently, academics and practitioners are focusing more attention on developing strategies to encourage and enable fathers to participate in learning with their children (Gadsden & Ray, 2003; Karther, 2002; Ortiz, Stile, & Brown, 1999).

There also is intense discussion within the field about the issues of program funding and location (Brown, 1998; Swick, 1994). The interplay of funding sources (governmental, philanthropic, and religious) and program location (schools, libraries, child care facilities, churches, and private residences) raises an array of philosophical and logistical concerns about who receives what services and how they are delivered. Not surprisingly, we have had to address each of the above issues in the LEAF program.

Finally, an array of program models exists that embraces the name family literacy. The most widely used family literacy model is the one endorsed by the National Center for Family Literacy and Even Start. This model consists of four components: (1) adult education, which includes literacy, GED, and life skills education; (2) child education, which

consists of literacy instruction for children of all ages; (3) parent and child together (PACT) time, in which parents and their children engage in reading and relationship-building activities; and (4) parent time, which includes parenting classes and other resource development activities (Hughes & Botkins, 2001; Logue, 2000; National Center for Family Literacy, 1997; Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002).

THE LEAF PROGRAM AS ONE MODEL

As described earlier, Learning English Among Friends (LEAF) was launched at César Chávez Middle School in response to an invitation by school and community representatives. LEAF meets weekly on Thursdays beginning at 5:30 p.m. When participants arrive, they sign in and pick up their nametags. Before going to the ESL or GED classes, the parents accompany their children to one of three places. Children from infancy to 3 attend enriched child care classes provided by AVANCE Waco, a parent education agency that serves Spanish-speaking individuals in Waco. Children between the ages of 4 and 6 attend LEAF Kids, a pre-reading class where they play, listen to stories, and engage in activities that expose them to hearing and speaking English. Children 6 and older participate in age-appropriate games, art, and craft activities in the gymnasium.

The ESL class is taught in small groups for 90 minutes, with one teacher for each five to seven students. Together they study workbooks with pictures and vocabulary focused on a theme such as rooms in a house, common tools, a trip to a grocery store, or playground equipment. Frequently, the teachers bring examples of the objects being studied or magazines with pictures the students cut out to make posters or collages. For example, for the unit on measurement, the groups use scales to weigh items and rulers and yardsticks to measure each other's height, the dimensions of the room, and pieces of furniture.

At 6:45 p.m., a staff member asks the entire group a question related to learning English, family life, or living in South Waco. Examples are, "What difference has learning English made in your life?" and "What do you like about living in Waco?" Each group discusses the question for a few minutes. Then one volunteer from each group stands and reports in English the highlights of their discussion. Everyone in the room is expectant as each person stands to speak. Although most of the participants struggle to express themselves, the group provides support. After each report, the speaker receives heartfelt applause.

At 7 p.m., the parents go to their children's rooms to pick them up and see their handiwork. They then go to the cafeteria for a family meal that is either purchased from a local vendor or provided by a local church. After dinner, some LEAF participants attend a computer literacy class taught in Spanish by a LEAF participant until 8:30 p.m. Participants in the GED class return to their studies until 9 p.m., and their children go to the gym for supervised recreation.

A few times during the year, the LEAF staff and participants jointly organize special events, such as Valentine's Day and Cinco de Mayo fiestas, and field trips to places such as the zoo, museum, or water park. Once one of Waco's state representatives arranged a trip to Austin for LEAF participants to tour the Capitol and meet with the Mexican American legislative delegation. These family-focused events provide valuable opportunities to develop leadership skills among the participants and to strengthen their sense of ownership of the program. Such experiences also empower parents by introducing them to new options for family activities in the community.

Developing partnerships and linkages with vari-

ous sectors – business, education, government, social service, and religion – has been a key component in the strategy for reaching these families. In order to achieve the larger goal of strengthening families and building community, LEAF had to be positioned as an integral part of the community. Professors and students from Baylor University's Schools of Education and Social Work serve as the staff for the LEAF program. Child care is provided by staff from AVANCE Waco and supervised recreation by staff from the YMCA. Nearby McLennan Community College provides the GED instructor, and GEAR UP Waco (a federal grant program that promotes postsecondary education in schools located in low socioeconomic areas) provides funding and an instructor for the computer literacy class. In addition, several private foundations, individuals, and organizations, including churches, provide funding or in-kind support for the LEAF program. Finding ways for others to contribute to LEAF and sharing recognition with them for the program's success has created a network of mutual support and pride that is vital to the stability and growth of the South Waco community.

A MODEL FOR FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS

Let us now examine more closely the components of the model for family literacy that can be implemented in a variety of ways and contexts. LEAF is one example of a family literacy program based on the framework described below. First, to be considered a family literacy program, it needs to include at least two of the following components: adult education, childhood education, parent education, and parent and child together time. A diagram of this model is provided on page 15.

Adult education. Adult education in family literacy programs can take many forms, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, beginning reading and writing, computer literacy, and adult basic education. Adult education simply means adults are learning skills that will help them function more efficiently in society, at work, and in relationships. In the LEAF program, most of the participants attend the ESL class, and some attend the GED and computer literacy classes. Each week, 35 to 45 LEAF participants come to the ESL class, which is taught in small groups of five to seven students. In a small group setting, students are able to discuss what they are learning, build genuine relationships with each other and their teachers, and feel more freedom to make mistakes and ask questions. They are eager to be there and remain on task during the entire session. Their laughter and smiles are evidence that they enjoy the process. Participants regularly tell us that the reason they keep coming back is because they enjoy learning in the small groups rather than the one-on-one tutoring or class-size instruction used in other ESL programs they have attended.

Enjoying the learning experience is necessary to keep adults engaged in any voluntary educational endeavor, but it also must be relevant. They invest the time and energy because they want to solve a problem, learn a skill, or be able to do something they presently cannot do. Those of us who provide educational programs are responsible for doing all we can to ensure that the participants achieve their learning goals. With LEAF, the participants want to learn English for a variety of reasons including helping their children succeed in school, getting a promotion at work, or finding a more rewarding job.

As professional educators administering LEAF, we thought measuring success would be a straightforward process – determine competence level in English when a participant begins and measure it every four to six months. We use the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) as a pre- and post-test assess-

ment to measure a participant's progress, and we have found both slight and substantial gains in skill levels over time. We also have realized in a more profound way, however, that success in learning English is more than becoming proficient in a language. We are learning to measure success from the participant's perspective, too.

Most of the LEAF participants are first-generation immigrants, many in the United States for only a few months. For them, enrolling in an educational program is a courageous step, especially in an English class where their lack of proficiency is readily apparent. Success for them is working two or more jobs and still finding the energy to dress their kids and attend this class as often as possible. Success is becoming familiar with new settings, seeing their children make new friends, and learning to interact more comfortably with Anglo professionals and college students whose backgrounds and lifestyles are so radically different from their own. Success is gaining confidence and feeling empowered to have a vision of a new life and then to pursue it. Regardless of the type of adult education being offered in a family literacy program, success is multidimensional and needs to be documented and celebrated through both standardized testing and the stories of changed lives.

Childhood education. In family literacy programs, childhood education is divided into early childhood and children and youth. Early childhood education refers to age-appropriate activities that prepare children for success in school and life experiences. For example, in the LEAF program, children between infancy and 3 are cared for by trained and experienced child care staff who interact with the children through play, looking at pictures, and reading. Because most of the children in LEAF between the ages of 4 and 6 do not yet speak English, they attend a class that is specially tailored for children learning English. The teachers engage the children in pre-reading activities including games, arts and crafts, storytelling through drama, and reading.

As noted earlier, children and youth, from first through eighth grade, participate in supervised age-appropriate recreational and arts and crafts activities. A week or so prior to special LEAF events, such as Cinco de Mayo, the children make banners, piñatas, and other decorations for the cafeteria, where the fiestas are held. Throughout these activities, the focus is on building relationships with the staff and among the participants. Many of the children in elementary and middle school do not speak English with confidence, so the staff members encourage English speaking through conversation, discussion groups, supportive chatter during athletic games, and other creative ways. Tutoring and homework help also are excellent activities through which to build relationships and let the students practice speaking English, although these are not part of the LEAF program.

It is vitally important for a family literacy program to encourage, emphasize, and seek to build the strengths and assets of children and youth, rather than to focus on their problems and needs. The 40 Developmental Assets, as identified by the Search Institute, are strengths that children and youth may possess. Research studies (Scales & Leffert, 1999) have demonstrated that the presence of these assets is significantly related to higher levels of quality of life and success in school and other dimensions of life. By building on the strengths children and youth already possess, as well as by stimulating the development of new assets, we believe these young people will feel encouraged, valued, and motivated to make positive and constructive decisions.

One way to accomplish this at LEAF is by developing leadership skills. As children help to facilitate games and other activities, we affirm them verbally and provide opportunities for them to assist the staff in a variety of program responsibilities. Sometimes, disruptive behavior on the part of a child is a signal that he or she needs a more challenging activity or role in the group. As a result, several of the older children and youth have specific roles and responsibilities that contribute to the success of the program. Feeling empowered and recognized, these children and youth are eager to learn new things and demonstrate their competence at school, church, and in other settings. They regularly share these experiences with us at LEAF.

Parent education. Like adult education, parent education encompasses a broad array of activities. In general, parent education means learning knowledge and skills for family living and community service. For example, parent education may consist of seminars for new parents, support groups for parents of adolescents, or sessions on how to handle family conflict. During the first year of the LEAF program, guest speakers made 10-minute presenta-

tions during the mealtime. The speakers included a city council representative and the Waco chief of police (both of whom are Hispanic), the mayor of Waco, healthcare professionals, and others who provided information about accessing community services such as the library, assistance with immigration issues, and affordable child care. Although beneficial, this practice was discontinued because having speakers during the meal diminished family time and prevented staff from interacting with the families. Subsequently, we have held brief sessions at the end of the ESL lesson on topics about easy-to-make toys for young children and how to engage children in play. Parent education is the one component of our program where staff and participants explore their needs and desires for relevant topics and ways to address them.

Parent and child time together. Perhaps most important, family literacy programs need to include parent and child together time (PACT). These activities provide opportunity for intentional communication between parents and their children, shared experiences that strengthen bonds, and chances for parents and children to be excited about learning together. PACT also reinforces parents' role of being the primary teacher in their children's lives. Some examples of PACT activities are reading books, eating a meal as a family, discussing what they are learning in the program or at school or work, and doing art and craft projects. At the LEAF program, we offer a family dinner each week as our PACT time. During this meal, children and parents have the opportunity to share what they have learned in the past hour. We also provide fun, family field trips, and fiestas.

FAMILY LITERACY: AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR CHURCH MINISTRY

The framework for family literacy described and used by LEAF is highly compatible with the mission and ministry of the church, perhaps especially for family ministry. In *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide*, Diana Garland describes family ministry as "including everything a church and its representatives do that has an impact on the founding, development, and ministry of families" (1999, p. 374). Family ministry includes attending to and meeting people's needs, whether they are spiritual, emotional, social, educational, or physical. In other words, family ministry is an umbrella for a diverse group of programs, including family literacy, that offers opportunities for empowerment.

In the context of church ministry, family literacy – or a family literacy ministry – becomes the means for practical expressions of the love and mercy of God. More specifically, family literacy ministry can be defined as the collaborative effort of the church to strengthen families by teaching literacy and relationship skills that enhance the family's ability to live more meaningful and productive lives. This definition communicates that family literacy ministry includes more than teaching isolated literacy skills; it is a holistic ministry.

There are several predominant ways that family literacy ministries strengthen the families that participate. First, it is the family-based approach to teaching literacy skills that is the essential prerequisite for adults who want to pursue additional education and more meaningful or better-paying jobs. Consequently, family literacy ministry can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Additionally, family literacy ministry facilitates parents as they become full partners in their children's education. Studies show that children whose parents are actively involved in their education are more likely to succeed in school. Being involved in their children's education means that the parents develop a positive relationship with their children's teachers, help their children with homework, encourage their children to study and do their best in school, and participate in school functions. Also, as children see the value their parents place on pursuing education, the children will be more likely to value and pursue learning themselves. Finally, family literacy enables and equips parents to be more effective teachers and role models in the lives of their children.

Family literacy ministry begins when a congregation assesses the needs of families in its community, both church members and nonmembers, and matches those needs with the church's mission. A congregation must value meeting the needs of families in its community as an essential component of its ministry; otherwise it will be difficult to begin or sustain a family literacy ministry program. When a church sponsors such a program, it is helping to meet, directly or indirectly, the educational, psychological, spiritual, social, and emotional needs of families. Family literacy ministry encompasses much more than simply inviting people into the

church to learn literacy skills. As congregants interact with each other and others in the community, they are reaching out with the eyes, ears, and hands of Jesus Christ to meet practical needs in people's lives.

DECIDING WHERE TO LOCATE THE PROGRAM

When thinking about how to organize and structure a family literacy program, it is important to examine carefully where the program should be located. Perhaps the most obvious site is in the physical facilities of the sponsoring church, but ask these questions before making that choice: (1) Where is your church located relative to the people you want to serve? (2) Is this population group currently involved in your church? (3) If not, are they likely to feel comfortable in your church?

For example, a church may be located in a poor, ethnically diverse neighborhood yet have a membership that is largely middle-class and Caucasian. When asked, community residents often will say they are intimidated about coming to the church building because they feel so different from the people they see entering the church on Sunday morning. If this is your church's situation, it does not mean your church should not host the program. It does point to the need, however, to build relationships with the community residents prior to inviting them to participate in any program at your church.

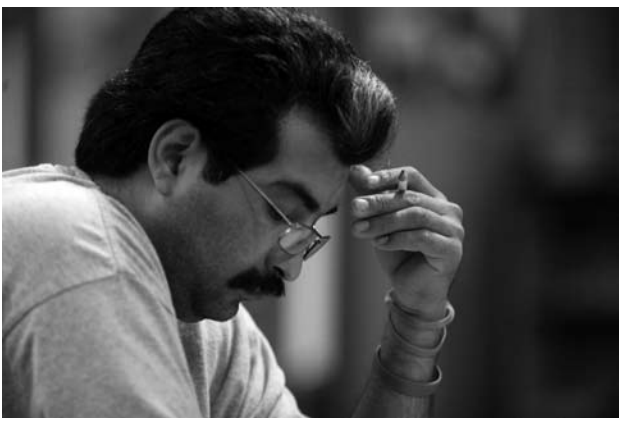
If a church decides to conduct the program in its facilities, begin by identifying components of the family literacy model that currently are part of the church's programming. For example, many churches have regular mid-week educational activities for adults, children, and youth, and some also provide a weekly meal. Outreach ministries to the community such as after-school tutoring, Mother's Day Out, or child care programs also are common. Almost any program or ministry can be integrated into one of the four components of a family literacy program – childhood education, adult education, parent education, and PACT.

If it is not feasible to begin this ministry with an existing church program, then start with only one of the family literacy ministry components. For example, offer an adult education class, such as beginning reading and writing, and later add child care, recreational, or educational activities for the participants' children. Think creatively about how to use church resources, such as a fellowship hall, children's classrooms, art supplies, and sports equipment. It also is important to identify church members' skills, interests, and areas of passion. For example, who enjoys working with children? Who is gifted and/or a professional teacher or who enjoys cooking and serving food? Churches are optimal places for a family literacy program and may have more resources than originally anticipated.

Most communities have other facilities where a church may offer a family literacy program. As with church locations, a key issue is the level of comfort for the population group that will be the beneficiaries of this ministry. Family-friendly public facilities, such as a school, community center, public library, YMCA, or YWCA, are widely available options. When exploring possible sites, consider any safe place where children or adults gather regularly. A new but discernable trend in some areas is for churches to rent former retail space in mini-malls. School buildings are natural places for family literacy programs, because they are centers for education and are recognized as familiar and safe places in the community. School districts vary in their policies for the use of school buildings by community groups, but many are eager to have their facilities seen as trustworthy, family-friendly places in the community. LEAF, for example, is held in a middle school where, initially, most of the participants were parents of the students at the school. Word about the program spread throughout

the community, however, and increasingly participants include community members who do not have children in the school. The school's principal commends LEAF for helping build bridges to non-English-speaking parents in the community and for the substantial increase in parental participation at school events.

Initiating a family literacy program outside of the church walls will require cooperation and collaboration with other entities. Developing effective partnerships is an arduous process, at best, requiring patience, flexibility, ongoing communication, and humility. LEAF began as a joint venture with the middle school and two professors from different university departments. One of our first actions was to meet with existing after-school program leaders to explore ways to collaborate. Next, we scanned the community for organizations and programs that address the needs of Hispanic adults and children. Through this effort, a community organization with a parent support program referred its participants to our LEAF program. A year later, we were able to provide child care during LEAF, which enabled even more parents with young children to attend. Our working relationship with this child care agency was a significant factor in our obtaining new funding from a local foundation. Sharing the resources, risks, and rewards of serving a community inevitably strengthens all of the partners, provides a role model for others, and can lead to unexpected and beneficial outcomes.



RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY

In addition to context, it also is essential to consider issues of diversity when planning and operating a family literacy program. Some participants will differ from program staff in their socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, or culture. These factors affect the way people learn, interact with each other and with staff, respond to the program's structure and activities, and ultimately the extent to which participants benefit from the program. Being aware of these characteristics and making adjustments is a tangible way of valuing participants as a cultural group, with its own stories, challenges, and talents.

For example, the majority of LEAF participants are from Mexico, but only a few of the staff are Hispanic. From the beginning of the LEAF program, we made a conscious effort to learn about the Mexican culture and worldview by reading, consulting with educators and other professionals who work with Mexicans, and by learning from the LEAF participants themselves. We have used this exchange of information to shape the program and to guide our interaction with the participants. For instance, Mexican culture values the needs of the group over the needs of the individual. It also values relationships over tasks. Consequently, the ESL classes are conducted in small groups, rather than in individual or classroom settings, because that better facilitates relationship building among teachers and participants. In the context of these supportive relationships, participants are more willing to ask questions, risk making mistakes, and offer to help others. Participants regularly express that the small groups make learning interesting and fun.

In addition to learning about the culture of the participants, those of us who administer, teach, or serve in other capacities at LEAF have worked to become more aware of our own cultural preferences and standards. Socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, and culture shape our worldview just as they do for program participants. When reading, consulting with other service providers, and talking with LEAF participants, we often inquire about aspects of the Anglo culture that differ from the Mexican culture. This is a regular topic at our staff meetings, especially when reviewing a new activ-

ity or an event that did not go as well as we had expected. We recognize that each of us has cultural biases and beliefs, whether overt or latent, that affect the ways we interact with one another. These differences are constantly surfacing and prompting us to reassess ourselves, our presence as a staff, and the program.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Learning English Among Friends (LEAF) is one example of a family literacy program. It is innovative in that it has activities in each of the four areas of the family literacy model, and it has programming for children of all ages, not just preschool. During our first two years of operation in 2003-2005, four core elements of success were identified and may be applicable for any family literacy program, whether it is co-sponsored by a public school, as in the case of LEAF, or by a church. These keys to success are: (1) teaching in small, relational groups; (2) ensuring quality programming for children; (3) engaging participants and developing leadership; and (4) responding to the whole person.

Though teaching ESL in small, relational groups is particularly applicable in Mexican culture, we think the benefits of a small group structure – including mutual support among participants and personal attention from the teacher without undue pressure – would enhance learning for other cultural groups as well. Second, the LEAF participants individually and collectively have expressed their appreciation for the quality of care their children receive. Parents feel welcomed and comfortable when they recognize that their children are valued and safe, and that age-appropriate activities are available. Also, when parents see their children enjoying themselves, it is an incentive for parents to continue in the program.

Our experiences in LEAF have reaffirmed that individuals benefit most from a program in which they have a sense of ownership. Being invited by the local middle school's Campus Decision-making Committee to implement LEAF gave the school and the community this sense of ownership from the outset. Furthermore, we intentionally engage adults and children in planning, implementing, or evaluating every aspect of the programming. With assistance from the staff, the adult participants selected the LEAF logo, formed committees to plan the fiestas, and chose books to read with their children. The children assist the staff with games and crafts, sign-in, and meal preparation. Consequently, leadership skills develop through valuing and empowering individual abilities. Other participants observe their peers modeling these skills. Many participants have told us they invite friends and family to come to "their" LEAF program. Equally as important, engaging the participants as co-owners in the program has fostered humility among the staff members as we learn from and with them.

Finally, we have learned that a successful program does not mean it attempts to meet all the needs of its participants. There will always be situations that a family literacy program is not equipped to address, and then we may suggest referrals. Sometimes our LEAF partners can provide the needed assistance, but more often we help connect the participants with government agencies, social services organizations, and church-sponsored programs offered in the wider community. The national 2-1-1 Social Services Hotline is available in many communities to help staff identify resources for domestic abuse, health care and nutrition, substance abuse, and transportation, among others.

What is important for a successful program is that staff members recognize and relate to participants holistically, as individuals with physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

CONCLUSION

The family literacy model described in this article goes beyond teaching essential literacy skills. It provides a framework for a variety of activities designed to strengthen families and build community among the staff and participants. By focusing on relationships, recognizing strengths, and developing leadership skills among adults and children alike, a family literacy program can help meet an individual's fundamental need to be accepted and valued in tangible ways. In this way, family literacy programs can serve as a vehicle for ministry through which the church expresses Christ's transforming love and acceptance.

Family Lliteracy Ministry Program Model			
Program Emphasis	Components		
	Literacy/ESL Instruction	**Parent Education** Learning knowledge & skills for family living and community service	**Interactive Parent/Child Activities** Learning knowledge & skills for family living and community service
Early Childhood (Birth-Preschool)		***Learning Examples*** Parent education seminars; support groups for parents of adolescents; family communication skills training ***Service Examples*** Teaching how to provide respite care for caregivers; developing adult mentors and friends for teens	Reading and play activities that emphasize parents as teachers of their children and learners with them
Children & Youth (Elementary - Middle School)			Writing and singing songs together; talking about TV programs and ads; planning and cooking meals together using recipes
Adults (High School Adults Senior Adults)			Tutoring siblings or children; discussing current events; sharing experiences from school or work

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$3 Worth of God

I would like to buy $3 worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy $3 worth of God, please.

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