

When People Bring Their Messy Lives to Church

Participant's Handout

Purpose:

To call Christians to respond with Christ-like compassion to wounded people whose lives have been damaged by others or by their own choices.

Objectives :

- To reflect biblically upon our current practices of ministering to people with messy lives;
- To begin the process of developing appropriate strategies of response to the needs of families and individuals who come to us with brokenness and lack resources.

Case Study #1 "Millie and Sam"



Millie was a single mom who began to attend a local church after participating in a community parenting class held at the church. Millie had a seven-year-old son named Sam. Sam's father was a drug addict who was in and out of their lives, mostly out. Millie and Sean, Sam's dad, were never married, and Millie was rearing Sam along with no outside support at all. Millie was drawn to the warmth and openness of the people at the church. She began attending a women's Bible study mostly made up of young moms. The women in the Bible Study had lives very different than Millie. Most had very stable marriages and home lives and had never known the struggles and life issues Millie struggled with on a daily basis. Though they had little in common with Millie, some of the ladies of the Bible Study began to ask her out for coffee. They began to include Millie and Sam in some of their family outings. Some occasionally invited Sam over for play dates with their children. When Millie needed to move, the families of the Bible study helped her and brought her meals to help her get settled. Millie had never experienced this kind of support and was so grateful for all that was done for her. Millie was beginning to feel comfortable in the Bible study and began to trust the ladies in the group. It was the group's custom to share prayer requests at the end of the session. One particular session Millie summoned the courage to present her prayer request. Seven-year-old Sam had been suspended from school for two days for inappropriately touching a little girl in his class. Millie was upset and frightened and didn't know what to do. Everyone prayed with Millie and the session ended. After that disclosure by Millie, the invitations to go out for coffee stopped. The invitations for play dates for Sam ended. Those who had shown friendship gradually distanced themselves from Millie and Sam. After a few weeks Millie and Sam quit attending the Bible study and left the church feeling isolated and disconnected.

What do you think of the response of church members to the "outsiders," Millie and Sam?

Were the women in the Bible Study justified in their behavior?

Which, if any, of the "fear-full" responses did you see at work in this case study?

How should the church respond when someone's "brokenness" is perceived as dangerous to others?

Case Study #2 “Angie and Molly”

Angie was a single mom who had been attending a local church for a couple of years. She and her 3 children had moved to the area to escape some difficult family drama including domestic violence issues. Angie and her children were embraced by the church and were a part of the fellowship since they arrived in their new place. They were enjoying a new beginning. Angie’s two older children were in public school. Angie had just gotten a much-needed job which required her to put Molly in preschool. In her Sunday School class on Sunday, Angie poured out her heart to the class. Molly had just been removed from her third preschool for difficult behavior and for acting out sexually. Angie was concerned about Molly. She also worried about the possibility of losing her job.

Jenna and Luke were sitting in the Sunday School class with Angie that Sunday and were moved by Angie’s anguish. Jenna and Luke had a five-year-old daughter Lily who attended Sunday School with Molly. Jenna and Luke spent some time in prayer and decided that they had a possible solution to Angie’s need. After much dialogue they offered to take care of Molly in their home. Jenna was a stay at home mom at the time and felt she could help Angie out.

Lily was in Kindergarten half of the day so Jenna had Molly alone in the mornings and then both of the girls in the afternoon. Jenna and Luke talked with Lily about setting boundaries with Molly and made sure she understood to talk about any behavior Molly displayed that might make her uncomfortable. Jenna closely supervised the girls while they played together.

Angie and Jenna became close friends. Jenna made time to support, pray and encourage Angie. Jenna urged Angie to find some counseling for Molly. It was soon discovered that Molly had been sexually abused and needed special care.

Jenna and Luke stayed engaged with Angie and her children often taking care of the older ones when Angie needed to take Molly for appointments, or when she needed a break. Jenna and Luke walked with Angie through some of her darkest days giving loving support, encouragement and assistance.

Case Study #3 “Jesse”

Jesse was thirteen-years-old. His family had been part of a local church for 15 years. Jesse’s father was a board member and his mother was very active in several of the ministries of the church. Jesse’s parents were members of a discipleship group that met every Friday evening in their home. One particular Friday evening the group decided to have a potluck and to include their families in the fellowship of that evening. Tracy, a single parent going through a difficult divorce, was a member of the discipleship group. That night Tracy brought her eight-year-old daughter, Tiffany, to the potluck. After the meal the parents had a short meeting while the children were allowed to play in different areas of the house. Tiffany and Jesse ended up in the TV room with Joey, a 12-year-old boy. They decided they were bored with the movie so Jesse had an idea. Jesse suggested that he and Joey show their private parts to Tiffany. Joey refused, but Jesse continued with the plan. When the evening was over and Tiffany was being tucked into bed, she told her mom about the activities of the evening. Tracy was angry and upset. She knew she should do something, but she was afraid because of who Jesse’s parents were.

The next morning after a sleepless night Tracy called the pastor and made an appointment. After talking with Tracy, the pastor called Jesse and his parents and made an appointment with them. Jesse confessed to the incident. While his parents were supportive of him, they were equally concerned about Tracy and Tiffany. Tracy met with the pastor, Jesse and his parents. Jesse was remorseful and apologized, as did his parents. Tracy was receptive but firm. She asked that Jesse apologize to Tiffany, and that Jesse be supervised for a while.

Jesse was not allowed to help in the Children's department, as was the custom for the teens. Jesse loved the pastor and agreed to be his accountability partner for the next several weeks. Jesse was having some issues at school and was already in counseling. Jesse and his counselor also worked through this issue together. Jesse complied with all that was required of him.

Tracy and Tiffany, Jesse and his parents remained in fellowship in the church together. Tiffany also had opportunity for counseling in connection with domestic issues. Both children are doing well.

What do you think of the response to the "insiders," Angie, Molly and Jesse, by the church?

What was the motivation behind the responses? Fear? Love?

How was the course of action pursued in each situation appropriate or inappropriate?

Thinking about Our Fellowship

Questions:

- What can we do as a church to prepare for ministering to people with "messy" lives?
- What strategies can we develop to better reflect the example of Jesus?

Compassionate Response Strategies

1. Pray
2. Dialog
3. Research available resources
4. Develop proactive policy proposals
5. Train
6. Assess

Strategies in Greater Detail

Pray

- ◆ For congregation and leaders to open their hearts
- ◆ For wisdom in planning for and dealing with difficult issues and the development of appropriate policies and practices
- ◆ For the broken people God will lead to our church in the months and years ahead
- ◆ For all of us to live out of the mind and heart of Christ

Dialog

Schedule a series of “town hall meetings” with the congregation to discuss questions and fears about launching into such ministries:

- ◆ How are we ministering to our community beyond our church building?
- ◆ What should be our mission/philosophy/purpose?
- ◆ What should be our focus?
- ◆ What resources do we need to pursue?

Research available resources

- ◆ Community assistance programs
- ◆ Area counseling services (Christian)
- ◆ Recovery programs
- ◆ Support groups
- ◆ Mental Health programs
- ◆ Best practices of larger area churches

Develop proactive policy proposals

Seek church board engagement and request appointment of a special committee to oversee process and bring recommendations for vote

- ◆ Review insurance liability requirements in current church policy for new programs that involve the community
- ◆ Recommend annual background checks on all children and youth workers

Train

Schedule seminars that will help our church members be better prepared to minister, such as:

- ◆ Dealing with and mentoring “at-risk” families
- ◆ What to do when abuse is disclosed
- ◆ How to keep appropriate boundaries

Assess

Schedule a time to assess our policies and practices within six months of implementation:

- ◆ Take the pulse of the congregation
- ◆ How have we done?
- ◆ What can we do better?