The Ecological Context of Family Ministry: 
The Cambridge Model Revisited

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**ABSTRACT:** Family ministry in the local church occurs in an ecological context characterized by a diversity of family types. A viable ministry to families must be able to address this diversity at different levels within the social system: the types of nuclear and extended families within the congregation; the type of congregation itself considered as a family; and the minister's own family type. A comprehensive family typology is needed to conceptualize this notion. The Cambridge model of closed, open, and random families, created by David Kantor and William Lehr, is summarized and then applied to an understanding of the ecology of family ministry.

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. . . . God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body." (1 Cor. 12: 12, 18-20, NIV)

In this oft-quoted passage, Paul judiciously answers the Corinthian church's query regarding spiritual gifts by emphasizing instead the importance of unity in diversity. All gifts are of the same spirit, from the same God, for the sake of edifying the church. Whereas it appears that the matter of spiritual gifts was a potentially divisive issue, Paul defuses the situation by placing the matter in its proper context: the dynamic and interdependent web of relationships that comprises the body of Christ.

The apostle has given us the metaphor by which we understand the nature of the church: the body is comprised of diverse parts, each with its own gifts, contributing to the unity of the whole. Within any

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given congregation, however, a single facet of this diversity may be cause for division. This is particularly true when diversity characterizes areas which are more central to a church's life and work. There are, for example, core doctrines which are non-negotiable for the faith, and concerning which diversity of opinion is not tolerated. Other, more peripheral doctrinal matters are not so highly charged, and thus some degree of variation is permitted.

Those who seek to serve families, whether as counseling professionals or in pastoral ministry, must come to grips with a diversity of ideals regarding family life. This diversity occurs at a minimum of two levels. At the socio-demographic level, one is confronted with the glaring reality of the prevalence of alternative family forms which challenge the stereotype of the intact nuclear family. The church, in many quarters, is only now beginning to grapple with ministry to the divorced and remarried. In addition, the recently published Handbook of Marriage and the Family documents, among others, such trends as the following: (1) an increase in those who have never been married and intend to remain single, (2) a trend toward recognizing childlessness as a voluntary and viable lifestyle, (3) the social and economic confusion of growing numbers of dual-career families, and (4) dramatic increases in the prevalence of single-parent households, the fastest growing lifestyle in America. Such trends should alert the thoughtful professional to the need to assess one's own value assumptions about the nature of family, in order to meet such growing diversity in an appropriate manner.

A more subtle level of family diversity, however, is reflected not in demographic profiles, but in a family's systemic organization. The patterning of relationships between family members, and between the family and its social environment, reveal a diversity of family identities and core values. In order to grasp this level of diversity, a different kind of typology is needed, one based not on social structures (e.g. presence or absence of children, spouses, etc.), but on these core values and purposes which are revealed through patterning and structure.

The search for useful and experimentally valid family typologies has long been a concern of family therapists and researchers. Twenty-five years ago, Jay Haley wrote that the answers to important questions regarding "normal" vs. pathogenic families will come only with the development of a descriptive system which will rigorously classify families and differentiate one type from another.