

# CHURCHES OFFER FAMILY LIFE CENTERS TO BUSY WORKING FAMILIES

**Basketball courts, divorce-recovery groups, after-school tutoring, daycare centers, Jazzercise, and debt-reduction counseling. These programs are a few of those offered by congregations that increasingly cater to busy working families. The activities generally take place in the church's family life center. What happens in these centers is the focus of a MARIAL scholar who is intrigued at the way organized religion has attempted to meet the needs of contemporary working families.**

"There really is very little study of these organizational forms," said Nancy Eiesland, a sociologist of religion and associate professor in Candler School of Theology. "I want to know what happens in family life centers. How are they different from the church school kind of ideal that went before them? And how do they respond to the particular challenges of the contemporary family?"

To answer these questions, Eiesland is looking at family life centers in three metro Atlanta suburbs: Lithia Springs, Stone Mountain, and Doraville. She has a particular interest in family life centers that cater to African Americans, because there is little scholarly research available about them. The black middle-class is growing, and African Americans are more willing to relocate because of job opportunities. This mobility results in familial ties being severed, as the distance grows between parents, children, and other relatives. Many blacks are drawn to churches that help them create "new kinds of families," Eiesland said.

"The notion of a nostalgic nuclear family never existed" for African Americans, she added, and many turn to organized religion for guidance. The number of African American megachurches is "going through the roof," Eiesland said, noting the popularity of such preachers as Bishop T. D. Jakes, who has 25,000 members in his nondenominational Dallas congregation and routinely draws hundreds of thousands to special appearances he makes around the country.

"The creation of family life, for the vast number of Americans, is a moral project, and that's what I think is the interesting thing for MARIAL," Eiesland said. "And the resources for doing those moral projects are congregations. So they go to their congregations to help them in times when their families are in crisis but also when they are forming families." This fact explains why so many people attend church for rituals that mark family life, such as marriage, baptism, and funeral services.

There are approximately 300,000 congregations in the United States, and the vast majority have either family life centers or specific programs developed for families. Despite the prevalence of family life centers, no exact figures exist regarding the number of such centers in the United States. They tend to have evangelical roots, but they are not exclusive to evangelical denominations.

Family life centers began to appear in the late 1970s, replacing the traditional church-school model. They emerged as a response to societal changes, including the perceived breakdown of the family, the increase in the number of women working outside the home, and the rebellion of teens who strayed from the church and its religious teachings. At that time, religious groups were concerned that they were not connecting with adolescents, so they began focusing more religious programming on youth.

Today, Eiesland said, the emphasis has turned to helping busy families that don't have a lot of time together. Churches address these time constraints through family life centers that offer almost everything under one roof. "Generally attached to local congregations, family life centers intend to support

the moral and spiritual well-being of families through classes, support groups, recreation, and community building rituals," Eiesland said. "They are a locus for both community building and community outreach." Family life centers are perceived as a "safe place" for parents to leave their children and a place



Nancy Eiesland

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where they will learn about positive values and practices.

Eiesland knows that she is looking at a sub-population, but it is sizable and worth studying, she said. "In the U.S., if you are talking about families and you don't talk about religion, then you've got a bit of a blind spot, because we are among the most believing people on earth, even if some families don't regularly participate in a congregation," she asserted. Since so many people attend church and so many families are taking advantage of programs developed specifically for them, "we ought to know some more about what's happening there," Eiesland said.

Eiesland's MARIAL research, in her estimation, is "going to tell us a lot about what families are doing in order to address the stresses of their lives." And it will "tell us more about these sort of hidden institutions that are extremely common and doing the work of supporting families as well as creating the ideals and practices of families and influencing their myths and rituals."