

USING THE 'WE ARE FAMILY' COASTERS AS A RESOURCE

Introduction

This resource offers ways for churches to engage with the nature of family life in the 21st century, providing opportunity to explore the kinds of families we meet, and know of, in our neighbourhoods and communities. Families come in many different shapes, forms and sizes. The 'We Are Family' research report, published by The Methodist Church and Children's Ministry Network, noted that:

"Churches must recognise... that the nuclear family is just one of a range of family types found in most communities and church cultures. This means our structures and services must adapt to reflect people's lived experience." (2015: 10)



This resource has been developed to aid the Church in considering this further. It uses the coaster set that was produced alongside the research report (available here: www.methodistpublishing.org.uk/books/dc001-dm-16/drinks-coasters-set-of-12) as the basis for conversations. There are suggestions for action, prayer and further information as ways of following up.

This resource recognises the importance of finding ways to offer all families a genuine welcome, support when needed and, ultimately, a place of belonging.

Why does developing a better understanding of families and households matter?

Our mission and ministry needs to be rooted in the settings and contexts in which our churches are located. This means we can:

- grow our ability to relate meaningfully with people local to our churches and beyond
- meet the needs of those on our doorstep, as this thinking aids our missional planning
- speak of faith and share our own stories in ways that connect well with people
- extend a genuine, inclusive welcome to families of all kinds, some of whom may have experienced obstacles to participating fully in the past.

Encountering families in the Bible

Through our reading of scripture we discover how families were formed in a variety of settings, facing the joys and challenges of being family together. From the deep sibling rivalry of Cain and Abel, through Abraham and Sarah's experience of childlessness and Naomi and Ruth's grief and mutual commitment, to Jesus' relationships with his own family and the 'gathered extended family of faith' in the book of Acts; we encounter a wealth of diverse experiences. Families or households created in different contexts and in wider kinship groups, each working out their responsibilities and relationships.

Our encounters with families in the Bible may reflect complexities we can relate to today. There is an ongoing story of hope that, through our differing circumstances, family continues to be greatly valued, seeking to build upon its strengths and bonds.

How to approach these conversations...

It's vital that everyone enters into these conversations in a spirit of respect and mutual support, being present to listen and learn from each other. It is important to have an open mind regarding what is shared, and empathy and understanding for the range of experiences, backgrounds and perspectives there will be in the room. This recognises that no single viewpoint is, in itself, correct and ideal. We are therefore welcoming of the wealth of ideas and reflections shared and we engage in honest, open and humble dialogue that builds one another up.

There needs to be a willingness to follow up with anyone who shares information that is particularly personal or difficult. This all takes place against the backdrop of safeguarding guidance, being mindful of those participating, especially if younger people and those who are vulnerable are present.

What should we be alert to when having conversations about different families and households?

- We all have our own story to tell – depending on our own experiences some stories may be more sensitive or more difficult to share than others.
- Some people may be experiencing difficulties in their own family, making it awkward or hard to engage at that moment in time.
- Family is a deeply personal topic – our own experiences and background can strongly influence our views and understanding.
- Our own assumptions may cloud our ability to be attentive or listen carefully to the thoughts of others.

What is found in the coaster set?

A set of 12 drinks mats that each feature a different graphic that represents a form of family, with a relevant question on the reverse.

How to use the coasters for conversation

There are a number of ways in which the coaster set can be used as a prompt for people to talk about family and household life today. Here are ten ways that they could be used in different settings, such as church meetings, small groups as well as gathered worship times together.

Spread the cards out in the centre of the group, with the graphic of the family facing upwards.

1. Families we know

Invite people to choose any card and spend a moment looking at the family shown. Can they think of a family they know who is like that? Describe them (ie who the members are, how they know them, how long for). Share with a partner.

2. Belonging here

Look carefully at the cards. Ask the questions: 'Which families might find it easy to find a place of belonging in our church? Why might that be?' Then ask the questions: 'Which families might feel there are barriers to belonging here? Why might that be?' Be prepared for different suggestions to be made. Groups of two or three could then take the card for one of these families and generate ideas to address some of those barriers.

3. A place of welcome

Choose one of the cards and talk about what that family might need or appreciate when visiting the church for the first time. Using flipchart paper or post-its, jot down possible ideas. Have a conversation about which one of the suggestions it could be easy to address or make a change.

4. By yourself

Choose one of the coasters and take a look at the question on the back. Spend a few moments reflecting on it quietly by yourself. What comes to mind as your response?

5. Around and about

Thinking about the neighbourhood where your church is, pick the cards from the set that indicate the different kinds of families who live locally. Record these on a sheet of flipchart paper. Put the cards all back together. Now pick the cards from the set that show the families that are part of your church in some way. That might be in midweek groups, Sunday services, Messy Church or other activities. Record these on another sheet of flipchart paper. Do the two sheets show the same kinds of families? Have a conversation about why you think this is the case.

6. Meeting the need

Look through the cards and reflect on the kinds of activities and groups your church offers, jot these down on a piece of flipchart paper. Place the coasters next to the ones that families participate in. Are all the coasters allocated? Are any missing? Do you notice any gaps? What ways might you be able to support or reach out to those families not involved? How important do you think that is?

7. Family focus

Choose one of the family types. Does anyone identify with that kind of household or wish to share a helpful or encouraging story that comes to mind?

8. On the margins

Looking at the various kinds of families, choose one that you believe may find themselves on the margins of society or the church. Why do you think that is? Create a continuum line from 'included' at one end through to 'excluded' at the other. Place the coasters on the continuum and discuss why a particular kind of family may feel more included or excluded than another. How does this make us feel? How might they feel? What helpful or sensitive ways could you find out more about this?

9. Comfort zone

As you look through the coasters, which families do you recognise or have a sense of ease about? Share your reasons for thinking this. Now choose one that you feel less comfortable about. With care, consider why that might be and share your thoughts as you best feel able.

10. Doing it for the kids?

Notice that some of the families have children and some don't. In your church's ministry with families, what might special considerations might you need for those without children? What assumptions might be made about younger couples? What aspects of your welcome or language might need to change so they feel at home?

Space to pray

All families, at different times and for different reasons, experience challenges and struggles in their lives as well as moments when they are thankful or celebrating together. The prayer ideas that follow may work well in conjunction with one of the previous conversations.

Here are some suggestions of ways to use the coasters prayerfully:

- Choose one type of family that you know. Consider their circumstances and what you know they need right now. Intercede for them.
- Spend time reflecting on your own family need at this time. Share this and ask God for help.
- Choose one of the coasters representing a family on the margins. Invite God to reveal to you ways to offer a genuine welcome and help them to feel included.
- Think of a family you know that is celebrating a particular milestone or achievement, whatever that might be. Give thanks for them and this occasion in their lives.
- Consider those in your church who are single people, pray that they will have a real sense of belonging to the wider church family, and ask God to show you ways to care for them.
- Focus on the families in your church and beyond who are at different stages of life. Do you know one in particular that is struggling to transition into a new season of family life together? Pray for them as they adjust.
- Recalling the families who you had a sense of discomfort about, invite God to nurture greater understanding and empathy in you.
- Give thanks for the wonderful variety of ways family is created and that, for so many, these ties matter deeply. Ask God to help everyone develop strong relationships with the members of their family as far as this is possible.
- Family experiences can often cause anxiety, sadness and grief. Spend time praying for those who find themselves in places of lament, mourning, loss or a sense of isolation.

Ways to respond

Following these conversations, it's likely that a variety of questions have arisen. It may prompt your church to consider how it interacts with families, adopting new ways to welcome and support them. It would be useful to gather a few key people from your church for a time to debrief together. We suggest making time to follow up these conversations reflecting on some of the following questions:

- What have we learnt? Consider what new information or ideas have been noticed or discovered.
- If a particular issue has been raised, how might your church respond to that in helpful and supportive ways?



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- Bearing in mind the families in your neighbourhood, when and how do they mostly participate in the life of your church?
- What might need to change in the life of your church so that families on the margins are able to be better included?
- Has there been anything, through the course of the conversations, that has caused discomfort? Why might that be?
- Spend time looking through your church communications (leaflets, newsletters, posters etc) considering what these say (or don't say) about your church's understanding or expectations of families. What could you do differently that helps families feel more welcome and at ease?
- If your church has little engagement with families, reflect on where they are found in your community and neighbourhood. How might you join them there?

It's recommended that your church chooses to focus on one particular area to respond to. Invest further time and energy in planning out the steps you can take to address it. It could be useful to take a look at the Mission Planning Toolkit here: www.methodist.org.uk/missionplanning

If you would like to develop your knowledge, ministry and practice around offering support and working with families, then we recommend reading *The Essential Guide to Family Ministry* by Gail Adcock. This book explores in greater detail how you can develop inclusive approaches, offering seven habits for highly effective ministry. It's available from the Bible Reading Fellowship here: www.brffonline.org.uk/products/the-essential-guide-to-family-ministry-a-practical-guide-for-church-based-family-workers