

INTRODUCTION

VOLUME 1: WHO IS GOD?

The human family constitutes the primary and essential element of human society... peace in society will be a direct result of peace in the family. —St. John Chrysostom

We live in a fast-paced world that seems to advance technologically by the moment. With a click of a remote control or a mouse, we can access scads of information in very little time. While we have become quite skilled at gathering facts and figures through various forms of media, how much of what we find actually relates to the well-being of our families and, ultimately, our relationship to God?

As Orthodox Christians, our understanding of the world should be rooted in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and His Church. Unfortunately, the message of the Gospel can be easily lost in the constant barrage of data that inundates us daily. *The Parish Family Night* was created by the Center for Family Care to give families the opportunity to learn more about the Orthodox Church, while spending quality time with one another and other members of the parish. The fervent hope of this ministry is for participants to bring home what they have learned and implement the teachings in their lives. This is in keeping with the concept of “Family as Church,” which encourages practice of the faith outside of the church’s four walls (which is where many of us spend the majority of our lives). Enclosed is the first volume of this program, which includes sessions, targeted at broadening our Orthodox knowledge and deepening our faith.

Something that should be considered very early in preparation for the family night is the composition of the parish. Keep in mind that everyone who attends is not going to resemble the proverbial “nuclear family.” It is important to encourage everyone in the parish to participate—be it the college freshman new in town or the 75-year-old widow with no children. People in every stage of life are welcome. While biological families comprise a sizable portion of an individual community, it is the total congregation that generates a collective parish family. We are all brothers and sisters united in Christ, and all are invited.

GETTING STARTED

This program strives to provide you with all the information you will need to host a successful gathering. Each session includes whole-group lessons that introduce and conclude each family night, as well as age-specific break-out sessions. We want to stress that each parish is different, so the curriculum should be adapted to best fit your specific needs. While it might be hard to run each break-out session depending on the makeup of the group, remember that the goal is to provide age-appropriate activities and discussions for everyone.

The entire parish should be involved with the planning. As with all church events, the clergy should have an integral role in the development of *The Parish Family Night*. The clergy will provide the necessary spiritual guidance and connect this ministry to the mission of the church as a whole. Seek out the assistance of other parish organizations (Parish Council, Philoptochos, young adult ministry, church school, youth groups, etc.), as they are all ministries of the parish family. The more people committed to planning and executing the event the better, as greater numbers will increase the likelihood of a successful ministry.

If possible, try to assign small tasks so that several individuals and families can contribute, though it is important that everyone clearly understands their specific role in the project. Volunteer “burnout” will take place if the responsibilities fall upon one or two people, so

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frequent rotation of volunteers in roles that correspond best to their talents is suggested. Also, it is important that every volunteer is still able to participate and receive spiritual benefit from the program.

In *Appendix B*, there is a brief planning guide to assist your preparation. Again, adapt it to best fit the needs of the parish. Naturally, adequate time spent in the planning process will ensure a smoothly-run evening. Please keep in mind that this ministry is a big undertaking that requires considerable effort and support for its success. Try to assemble a dependable team of volunteers that are committed to a common goal. Overall, a good way to prepare for *The Parish Family Night* at your church may be to go through a quick mental rehearsal during one of the organizational meetings. This is a good way to envision what the evening should look like from start to finish.

Promotion of the event is imperative for a successful evening. Use church bulletins, parish web sites, phone calls, and e-mails to advertise. When appropriate, have the clergy promote the event in their post-liturgical announcements. Also, consider setting up a table at coffee hour to distribute information concerning the program. Even with modern technology, word of mouth is still one of the most effective methods to publicize an event. Make sure to welcome everyone who attends, whether lifelong residents of the community or new members, and especially those without family members.

THE SESSIONS

Enclosed we have provided a detailed curriculum to conduct a family night each month. It is important that participants depart at the close of each session with the tools to continue learning at home. For this reason, there is a two-page family resource handout included to distribute for the home. It summarizes the session's theme through scripture verses and activities, as well as provides references for further information on the topic.

Those individuals leading sessions should remember that people learn more effectively when they are active participants. Lecturing should be kept to a minimum and interactive discussion should be emphasized. When unsure of how to answer challenging questions, leaders should assure the participants that a correct answer will be found from an authoritative source in a timely matter.

Most sessions begin and end with a family time activity. This interaction is the most critical part of the family night—we are teaching family how to learn and grow in the faith together. Special consideration needs to be given to smaller families, couples without children, or single people who come to the family night. If there are several single parent families, perhaps they would want to work together or likewise with the couples without children. Another possibility can be setting up a host family for the single people that come. This can be a great benefit to both the family and the single person. There will be no one answer for every situation but the key is to give it some consideration prior to the event and consider talking with the people involved to find out what makes them feel comfortable. Work to build relationships and create Christian bonds that will benefit every one of all ages in your parish.

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PRAYER

It goes without saying that prayer is an essential component of life for Orthodox Christians. Therefore, worshipping as a parish family should be a priority in any family activity. It is important that the evening begin and end with prayer through a short Vespers, Compline, Paraklesis, or other service. Active participation in prayer should be the goal. The priest or lead facilitator should briefly explain the prayers and services for the evening to participants. It is strongly recommended to have enough copies of the prayers and services for everyone. Oftentimes, having written words before us enhances concentration and helps to fight distraction—hopefully, encouraging more thoughtful and meaningful prayer.

A short Compline service to begin or end *The Parish Family Night* is provided in *Appendix A*. Confirm everything with the parish priest, as he may have another option for worship or prefer a certain time for the prayer service. For example, if the evening begins with a worship service, make sure to conclude the night with the theme-based prayer (included in each session). Conversely, if the evening begins with the theme-based prayer, conclude the session with the worship service.

FOOD

Evenings can be a hectic time for families and individuals. Having a fellowship dinner prior to the session may help facilitate better attendance. The meal will promote camaraderie among the participants and provide opportunities for socializing that may not be available otherwise. Sharing the responsibility should be the objective, such as a potluck dinner or collecting a nominal fee to cover the cost of a pizza. The key is to keep it simple and not allow the planning and financial burden for the meal to fall upon a few people. When planning any fellowship dinner, be mindful of any fasting considerations.

THE GOAL

As initially stated, the world we live in moves quickly. Unfortunately, we are often inundated with useless information and frivolous entertainment that clouds the spiritual well-being of our families. The mission of *The Parish Family Night* is for a church community to take a little time from the hectic schedule of modern-day life, gathering monthly to grow in the faith in an informative and fun manner. In a contemporary society that is always vying for our attention in a number of unwholesome ways, we need to seek the opportunities for spiritual nourishment as often as possible. This curriculum not only promotes spiritual unity within biological families, but a feeling of togetherness for the parish family as a whole.

*The Center for Family Care prays that this resource will assist you in your ministry to the families of your parish. If there is any further assistance or information needed, please do not hesitate to give us a call.
May God bless you and grant you many years of service to Him!*