



listening to parents and families in FTD

notice, listen, learn

Every church is different, and every family is different. As you have grown your awareness and conviction of your church being increasingly FTD-friendly, we encourage you to notice, to listen and to learn from the families, mothers, fathers and caregivers in your congregation. The journey of becoming FTD-friendly starts with seeing how things are now, before looking to what can and must change.

As a leader of your church, do you have a clear picture or understanding of how these families are doing, what their joys are and what their unique challenges are? Are you aware of the needs these mothers and fathers have? What is their lived reality within your specific context? What is their experience of your church community?

If you want to come around and support new families and those who are expecting, it is very important to stop and **notice, listen and learn**. Often much of what is happening in this season of life is overlooked and unseen. In some cases, those who are requiring the most love and support feel isolated, disconnected, shamed or too guilty to even come to church. So, in noticing, listening and learning from who is in your church community also ask the question: “who is not in this community?” What is preventing this group of people from being part of your church (think of teenage mothers, single mothers, and many more).

There are multiple layers to the different contexts that mothers, fathers and caregivers find themselves in. Each family is unique, and each community, city or town is also different. There are cultural practices, the health of the mother, work implications,

“It was my first Sunday at church after the birth of my son. I spent the service alone in the nursing mother’s room, soothing my squalling baby while trying to hear the sermon from a speaker in the corner”

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<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-encouraging-single-moms/>

access to services, relationship implications, financial implications and much, much more. It is easy to assume that your own experience of the FTD is similar to others, but, on further inspection, you will find that every family and every story is unique.

As a leadership team, the more you have a feel for what is happening in this space, in your church and surroundings, the better you will be able to play an active role in supporting and building the capacity of new parents. You will be able to refer and see what is truly needed to help these families flourish.

what parents are saying?

Here are some things that mothers, and fathers might be saying in your church:

- *It is just easier to stay at home than to go to church*
- *Since becoming a parent, it feels like I have gone from being knitted in the community to being sent to the mom's room and told to simply keep my child from distracting others*
- *Because I am a single parent, I feel shamed and guilty when in church*
- *As a dad, no one spoke to me about how to prepare for this new season*
- *Everyone asks about my baby, no one asks how I am doing*
- *It seems like unless you are already fully connected in this church community, when you have a child, no one notices or cares*
- *I have such a great community with my antenatal class – I feel seen and understood. I wish I had that kind of community in my church*
- *As a husband, I'm worried that I am being replaced*
- *I feel so down and cry all the time*
- *There is nothing more awkward than trying to breastfeed your child in church*
- *There's no way I'm inviting my friends from antenatal class to church during this season – it just isn't the environment where I can bring others in*
- *I feel so isolated. All I do is feed, sleep, and wash*
- *As a father, I want to support and roll up my sleeves, but I don't know if what I am doing is helpful*
- *This season of life is really impacting my marriage*
- *This season is so overwhelming, I am really struggling*

putting your finger on the pulse of FTD in your church

Can you answer:

1 Who is pregnant / expecting a child in my church?

2 How do they experience coming to my church?

Once you truly understand the stories of the mothers, fathers and caregivers in your community, then you can tailor the types of activities you as a church get involved in to support and build the capacity of these families.

Some important tips to notice, listen and learn well:

- Give your full attention when listening to the parents
- You don't need to respond to their questions with an answer
- Acknowledge their feedback and experience.
- Ask lots of thoughtful questions.
- Be open to whatever path the conversation takes.

The story of the parents in your context

Here are some topics and questions to consider when drawing a picture of the families who are in your community. In this exercise you are aiming to answer these bigger questions:

- What are the different parenting contexts within your community?
- What are expecting and new parents' experiences when attending your church?
- What support would be helpful/needed for these families to flourish in this season of life?

How would you describe the mothers, fathers or caregivers in your church community?

- What is the general age or life stage of mother and fathers?
- What is the marital status of the families? (Married, Single, teenager, etc.)
- Are the pregnancies planned or unexpected?
- How many children do the families have?
- Are they working? Is the household financially secure or are they financially struggling?
- Are they confident with their capacity and knowledge as a parent or are they feeling unprepared and unsure about how to parent well?
- Is there adequate community support for the family? Is there family, extended family, friends, or other groups that they can fit into to get sufficient support throughout this season?
- Is their adequate access to health care services for both mother and child?

- What are some of the struggles of new mothers, and fathers in your community? What stressors are they experiencing at the moment? What are they worried about?
- Are the parents struggling with maternal or paternal depression?
- Are the fathers actively engaged and involved in their children's lives?
- Are the fathers supportive of the mothers?
- Is there support and/or capacity development for mothers and fathers?
- If they are teenage mothers or single parents, how are they received by the church community? Is there shame, stigma, and guilt? Do they feel comfortable to attend church? Would they move toward the church to receive help?
- What are the culture-specific practices of families in your context – like child rearing practices, childbirth, discipline, weddings, courtship behaviour?

what have you heard?

Now that you have listened, learned, and noticed the context and experiences of parents in FTD in your church, what themes do you see? What stirs your heart? What could God be bringing to your attention?

As you may have concluded already, this season of life requires different pastoral care. At the time when children and families need the most support, love and nurturing care, it also happens to be the time when they can feel the most isolated, unseen and disconnected. Intentional care is needed to ensure parents and caregivers feel connected.