



## MINISTERING TO NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILIES (An Interview With Amy Dolan)

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by Wayne D. Stocks

09/05/2011



A few weeks ago, I was lucky enough to interview Amy Dolan on Kidmin Volunteer Radio. The topic for the night was ministering to non-traditional families. This area is a passion of Amy's and overlaps significantly with our mission here at Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, so it was exciting to get this chance to pick her brain on the topic.

Kidmin Volunteer Radio is a bi-weekly radio program focusing primarily on issues related to volunteers and volunteering in children's ministry. It is hosted by the writers and contributors at [Kidmin1124.com](http://Kidmin1124.com). It is part of the CMConnect Radio Network and is on every other Thursday night from 9:00-10:00 PM EST.

The following are some of the questions we covered including Amy's responses and my commentary (*shown in italics*) where I thought it was appropriate. Some of my commentary is from the original program, and some I have added for purposes of clarity. Some of the questions and answers do not pertain directly to the issue of ministering to children of divorce. I have excluded some of those questions from this summary, but I would encourage you to listen to the whole interview at:

<http://www.blogtalkradio.com/cmconnect/2011/08/12/kidmin-volunteer--amy-dolan-on-non-traditional-families>.

Some of Amy's responses are word-for-word. I have also taken the liberty of editing some of the responses. This is an important conversation that you will want to hear. So, let's get to some of the questions covered during the show.

1. Please tell our listeners about you. Where are you from? How did you come to be involved in children's ministry? What are you doing now?

*My name is Amy Dolan. I have been in children's ministry for a long time. I originally planned on becoming an elementary school teacher, but felt God calling me into children's ministry during my time studying at Moody Bible Institute. I have held several positions in children's ministry including being a curriculum writer for Willow Creek Church and Children's Director at The Chapel in Illinois. More recently, I started Lemon Lime Kids - a consulting company for children's ministers. I live in Chicago, IL with my husband Kelly.*





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2. Tell us a little bit about your blog LemonLimeKids.com.

[LemonLimeKids.com](http://LemonLimeKids.com) is my blog and reflects the name of my consulting company. The blog includes all kinds of articles written primarily from a leadership perspective to encourage other children's ministry leaders.

3. Before we get started talking about ministering to non-traditional families, I suppose it makes sense to define the term "non-traditional" families.

"Non-traditional families" is a term that I coined to express what I was hearing at conferences, in churches and seeing in small groups. Non-traditional is defined as anything other than a one-mom plus one-dad married couple who are parenting their children. It would include single parents, divorced parents, grandparents, widowed and gay and lesbian parents.

*While Amy's definition of non-traditional families includes more than just children of divorce, our own mission statement defines children of divorce to include children whose parents were separated but never married as well as children of an actual divorce. Accordingly, there is a significant amount of overlap between the issues Amy is dealing with and those that we are passionate about here at Divorce Ministry 4 Kids.*

4. Where does your interest in non-traditional families stem from?

I come from a very traditional family. I am the oldest of five kids who all grew up in the church. My mom and dad are still married, and all of my siblings are Christians married to other Christians. I went to Bible College and married a Christian guy from a Christian family. However, I have had a lot of friends who come from, or who are currently part of, non-traditional families. My experience is that I have seen my friends consistently excluded from the church. Most of these friends are spiritual and would consider themselves Christians. For them to be excluded from the church has been eye-opening and disheartening.

A few years ago, I had a conversation with a gay Christian friend who told me that despite leaving the church he still had a very strong spiritual faith and wished he could grow spiritually in a church community. He wasn't able to find a place to encourage his growth. That was eye-opening to me because I hadn't seen my other friends have that experience. I became very passionate about changing the way that we approach people at the church so that church could become a place for all kinds of people to raise great families.





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5. When I talk to people about Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, one of the things I always tell them is that “a big part of our mission is just to get the conversation started.” Please talk about the importance of starting the conversation when it comes to non-traditional families and some of the things that hinder that conversation.

There are a couple of things that hinder our conversations. However, it is important for the sake of the children that we have the conversation whether we agree or disagree with one another. The children are at stake when we don't consider them in these conversations, and it is the children who are losing out when these conversations don't happen. It is important for us to get together and just to have the conversation. A lot of these non-traditional families represent “hot topics” in the church right now, so it can be hard to get together and talk about it.

My experience has been that many times when church leaders come together and want to discuss these topics, they feel like they have to size up where one another stands on the issue before they can have a good conversation. In all of that sizing up, we have a tendency to never get past that part of the conversation. It's important that we agree to disagree, if need be, and move the discussion forward to discuss how we can serve these families and take care of these kids.

*A lot of times the conversation stalls as we try to figure out people's beliefs, and the kids suffer because we never get further than that point in the conversation. Beliefs are not unimportant, but we need to get past them or set them aside sometimes to get the chance to talk about how to serve the kids from these families. We have certainly seen this with children of divorce where churches are so concerned about the issue of whether or not divorce is a sin (not an unimportant issue) that they alienate divorced families and lose out on a chance to minister to those kids.*

6. In one of your articles, you shared three different “types” of churches when it comes to non-traditional families. Can you recap those and explain what each might look like in practical terms?

That article was written after a conversation with an openly gay pastor who is leading the church and parenting a child. The categories are probably most relevant to gay families, but we could probably apply them to all non-traditional families:

- Open and affirming in both believe and practice. (Would encourage membership and volunteering for non-traditional families. Full participation.)





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- Inclusive in belief, but not in practice (Beliefs would indicate that non-traditional families are welcome in their community, and they would hope that non-traditional families would come to their church, but when it comes to practices like full participation they draw the line there.)
- Non-inclusive both in belief and practice (Believe that non-traditional adults are leading non-Biblical lives and won't allow full participation.)

Most churches are on a journey trying to figure out where they are and how they will handle certain situations. Many will move along this spectrum as they sort everything out.

7. Specifically when it comes to the middle group above, what changes does the church need to make in order to be more welcoming to non-traditional families?

They need to get to know the needs of the families in the church. It is easy to stereotype different types of families. The best thing we can do is get to know the specific families in the church and figure out how to best serve them, and care for them and love them. In getting to know families, asking their needs, and responding as best we can it helps us to know those families.

8. Many churches will not think about ministering to non-traditional families until faced with a situation or dilemma that they didn't see coming. What types of situations might a church face that will force them to address this issue if they are not pro-active about it?

I think this is why this conversation is important to children's leaders. Many times children's leaders need to address issues with non-traditional families before the rest of the church does. If a child comes to the ministry and shares a story about his home life that is different than the rest of the group, hopefully the small group leader is trained in how to listen to that, encourage it and manage that situation. That can happen before the parents of that child ever sit in a small group or announce to the church their home situation.

That's also why it's important to figure out the demographics of the families in your own neighborhood. Once you understand those demographics, you can start to think about how you would handle certain situations in your children's ministry.

*If you know that information, you can give it some forethought to it. When it comes to children of divorce, those of us who work in children's ministry should be prepared to talk to kids who tell us their parents are splitting up, comfort a child who is having trouble adjusting to the divorce of their parents, answer questions*





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*about whether parents are sinning by getting a divorce, adjust our plans to accommodate children who are only there once every other weekend, and so much more. We will not be prepared for these situations if we do not intentionally think about them ahead of time.*

9. What can children's ministries do to reach out to these kids from non-traditional families?

My approach might be different than others, but my approach is to reach out to the parents of the community. The parents are the key "customer" or "client" we are serving as children's ministry leaders. If we really believe parents are the spiritual leaders of their kids, then everything we do to reach out to kids should be honoring and respectful to the parents. Make sure the parents feel served and honored by what we're doing for their kids.

*One of the things we can do is to not define those kids by the families they come from.*

10. I think many times we are guilty of pigeon holing people based on a group they belong to. Do you find that we are also guilty of doing the same thing with children of non-traditional families? Are there subtle ways that we do this?

We are probably all guilty of pigeon holing all kinds of people. It's good as leaders to be aware of when we're doing that and make sure we're not treating people poorly because of the categories we are putting them in. It's about treating people with great love and care regardless of their circumstances.

*It's about being aware of a child's situation so you can minister to them but not defining them by that situation.*

11. Let's talk about specific types of non-traditional families starting with divorced and single-parent families. As you know, this is an area that I am passionate about, and I'd like to get your thoughts. First, why has the church largely failed in ministering to this segment of their congregations?

I think it goes back to consistently having our starting point as the traditional family. It is the lens through which the church has consistently looked in planning programs and events. We use language and create programs, seminars, take-home tools, etc. that are geared towards those traditional families. In today's world, that approach is reaching a small and smaller portion of families in the church. We assume the traditional parent as our goal and shape everything around that sometimes without even thinking about it.





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We haven't tweaked our perspective to think about non-traditional families. We lean towards that traditional family as a starting point.

*Amy asked me what I thought about this issue, so I shared my thoughts as well. First of all, I think that it is a very cultural thing because the Bible includes a ton of stories involving non-traditional families (especially in the Old Testament). Even our Lord's earthly family would be considered non-traditional by Amy's definition.*

*There is also an element of denial here. A lot of church leaders don't recognize or don't want to recognize how prevalent divorced families and single-parent families are in their congregations. A lot of churches are afraid to minister to that segment of their congregations because they fear that, in doing so, they will be seen as condoning the act of divorce which they don't want to do. I think in that situation, you have to step back and remember that we're supposed to minister to all people. My heart really breaks for the kids in this situation because they didn't instigate the divorce, and they find themselves in a position where the church largely fails them because it doesn't want to address the issue head on. Finally, there is a cultural issue. I think over time the church has largely ignored the issue of divorce for fear of alienating parts of their congregations.*

12. In one of your articles, you wrote, "I'll hear church leaders say during a parenting seminar, 'the greatest gift we can give our children is a strong marriage.' by making this simple statement, we immediately eliminate a majority of parents in our churches from the conversation." I do believe that statement to be true that, if possible, one of the most important things we can give our kids is a strong marriage. So, how do we go about making that point for the married couples who are in the room (a point I think they need to hear) without alienating or offending unmarried parents? If we just eliminate the phrase, aren't we doing just as much a disservice to married parents as we would be doing to single parents if we do include it?

I'll often hear "THE greatest gift we can give our kids is a strong marriage." Sure! Do we wish everyone could give that? Absolutely! You said "one of the greatest gifts we can give" which is a good way to tweak the language. The point is we need to be mindful of how we can include the whole room. You can say the phrase, but how are you going to address the remainder of the people in the room? One alternative would be, "A really great gift we can give our kids is a great parent or great parents."

*Frankly, the greatest gift we can give our kids as parents is our own great relationship with God. This issue comes back to being very intentional about thinking about things, including our language, ahead of time so that we don't alienate people.*





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13. I know that you do children's ministry consulting. If a client came to you and asked how their children's ministry could more effectively minister to children of divorce, what would your answer be?

I would encourage them to consider how they are caring for both the parents and the kids. To do that, we need to determine the needs of each family. We can't assume they all want to be treated the same way. Caring for divorced families is a journey and a process. Obviously when the initial divorce happens, there is a lot of emotion and grief, and it's good to remember that the divorced family is going through a journey and a process. We need to consider our care throughout the whole journey and process. Don't make assumptions, stay connected, and show grace just like anyone else going through a tough time or season.

*Once again, Amy asked for my thoughts on this question. Here is what I added. When you minister to children of divorce, you have to start from a position of love and grace. The issue of whether or not something is a sin or against the Bible, that is all important, but when it comes to ministering to the individual, you have to start from a position of love. And, you have to be prepared. You have to give it some thought and make sure you are prepared for the conversation and that your people are prepared.*

14. Let's talk about training for a minute. What can/should a children's pastor do in terms of training volunteers to prepare and equip them for dealing with these families?

I think it goes back to really creating a culture for your volunteers that encourages them to get to know each child and family, and regardless of the child's family situation, to uphold certain values for all kids. Train volunteers to get to know children and interact with them in a way that is loving, open, interested, and engaging. We also need to encourage volunteers to be honest with the kids when they don't know the answers.

*And, sometimes there is no answer. Not everything is black and white. There are grey areas in life, and it's important for children to learn how to navigate those grey areas.*

15. What advice would you have for a children's pastor or children's ministry volunteer who wants to implement changes to make their ministry more inclusive for non-traditional families but who is facing resistance from their senior pastor or elders or congregation?





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The first thing a children's leader should do is to be crystal clear with the senior pastor about what exactly the church believes and what its practices are. Sometimes there is a certain amount of assuming that goes on. I would encourage the children's leader to give very specific examples to their senior pastor. From there, if a children's leader is facing resistance, it's good for the children's leader to respect their senior pastor and follow their leadership.

If you really disagree with the senior pastor's beliefs and practices, it might be a good time to step back and think about what you're doing at that church and if it's the right place to be – it may be - it might not.

16. Part of our role in children's ministry is to equip parents to spiritually lead their kids. What does/should that look like when it comes to non-traditional families?

All parents want great things for their kids, and Christian parents specifically want to raise their kids in a Christian way and be connected to the church and the bible. The important thing is approaching non-traditional parents the same way you would traditional parents. Sometimes we make an assumption that non-traditional parents either aren't Christian parents or don't want their children to grow spiritually. We get stuck on the adult decisions and situations, and we need to remember that they likely want Christian things for their children.

