

INTEGRATING DISCIPLESHIP  
INTO THE FABRIC OF OUR  
EVERYDAY LIVES

# FAMILY ON MISSION

SECOND EDITION

BY MIKE AND  
SALLY BREEN



Family On Mission

Second Edition

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY FAMILY ON MISSION?

Over the years we have trained a lot of leaders in missional discipleship, and as we've done so, we started noticing something interesting happening. People often put the structure of discipleship and mission into place, but then come back to us scratching their heads, because it doesn't seem to be working. In other words, structure alone doesn't produce the kinds of results they expected.

What we began to realize is that they had been implementing the *structure* of discipleship, but weren't catching the *texture* of the process that truly mobilizes and empowers people to be on mission. They were technically correct, but they needed to learn how to nurture the atmosphere in which the structure can thrive.

So we began reflecting on what the texture of our disciple-making process was. What did we see Jesus doing in the Gospels that we were imitating and implementing in our own disciple-making? We began talking about it as a couple and with our team, and we started asking questions about the way we had been doing things, and how we learned to do them. Those conversations were where this book began.

What we are calling family on mission is the texture of discipleship that allows the structure to do its job. Family on mission is the music to the lyrics of

discipleship. Family on mission is how we stop thinking of discipleship as a task that we do and start living out discipleship as a way that we are. Family on Mission is how we stop doing discipleship as a class, program, or curriculum, and start living it as a way of life.

Here's the bottom line: discipleship and mission never really work unless we are able to create the texture of family on mission. Without the "soft tissue" of a family on mission, this discipleship stuff will be just another program we'll forget about in a few months, and mission will be just another activity we need to fit into our already busy schedule. If we're going to make disciples and move out in mission, we need to go from managing boundaries between the compartments of our lives to integrating family and mission into one life, a cohesive framework and fabric that empowers a culture of discipleship and mission, not just occasional events and periodic programs.

We need to learn how to live out the texture as we implement the structure. That's what this book is intended to help you move toward.

In this second edition, we build on the principles of family on mission found in the first edition. We've added key thoughts on what to do during the crisis times when we focus on family as our mission, and we have also added three key triangles on spiritual parenting, predictable patterns, and missional purpose that further explain what family on mission looks like in real life.

So imagine yourself sitting down around the kitchen table with a nice cup of tea, and let's begin the conversation of being a family on mission.



# 1

## OUR JOURNEY TO FAMILY ON MISSION

Don't Ever, Ever Date This Guy

I was sixteen. He entered through the door of our battered, smelly youth hall in suburban Manchester late one Saturday evening during the long, hot summer of 1974. He left his bike outside but brought his smile and long legs inside. I welcomed him and introduced him to another guy around his age: my boyfriend. We all became good friends and hung around as a group all summer, playing Pink Floyd records, drinking coffee, and talking passionately about how to reach and disciple the lost and the lonely. Oftentimes, late at night after work or youth group, he stopped on his walk home to feed the homeless and offer them hope. We would sit for hours and talk theology.

Mike ended up leading us that summer, and shaping us. In particular, he ended up shaping me. I was a hippie, barefoot, flowers-in-the-hair kind of girl. Lots of smiling, not much studying. Lots of laughter and singing, not much natural discipline. But a heart wide open for evangelism. The summer we met we were

young, passionate, and stupid. In one of the many conversations that went deep into the evening, I asked him a question, as we sat on the floor with a Beatles song playing in the background. It was a common question any sixteen-year-old would ask: “What are you going to be when you grow up?”

He didn't give it a second thought, didn't even pause for breath. “I'm going to be a missionary,” he said. Immediately two thoughts collided in my scattered brain. First: don't ever, ever date this guy! He is the kind who would drag you to foreign lands, carrying a large heavy black Bible, wearing unfashionable clothes. And second: he's really serious about this. He was going “all in” for God! The most obvious track to take for someone like that at the time was to become an ordained minister in the Church of England, and this was the track Mike was on.

Despite my vow to never date this guy, somewhere along the way, between the movies, the bike rides and the intense conversations, I forgot about it and did actually date him. Not only did I date him, but I also eventually married him. On an early rainy September morning in 1980, in front of our family and friends, in the church where we met, we began our life together. I was twenty-two years old, standing at the edge of an adventure.

## **FAMILY OR MISSION**

We started out living in an apartment in a place called Hackney, the worst public housing estate in the United Kingdom. We had no money, no car, no furniture, no friends, and definitely no cell phones. We didn't even have a working pay phone nearby.

As we began this new season of ordained ministry, we talked a lot about what we saw in other pastors' families. Many of them were simply a disaster. It was obvious they had put the church ahead of their families. Their children were frequently rebellious or alienated; the wives were sad, depressed or simply angry. There was lots of difficulty and dysfunction in their homes.



I had seen this up close when Mike was in seminary. Every Sunday he was assigned to visit a different church, and many times I went with him. After the morning service, we would have lunch at the pastor's house, and the lunch would be a completely different environment from the church service in the morning. More often than not, we ate lunch in a dull, depressing house with chaotic children and an overwhelmed wife who was trying to keep it all together. It was such a stark contrast to the beautiful, carefully presented worship service in the church. I had a deep sympathy for these people.

I knew I didn't want our lives to be like that, and neither did Mike. We didn't want Mike to run to his church work to avoid the people and problems in his own family. I didn't want to end up bitter and angry, or cold and passionless. But it seemed inevitable, based on everything we saw around us. You could have family or mission, but they didn't seem to work very well together.

Many of the people who led great ministries that brought revival and transformation to the church left their children behind so they could go to the mission field. Many spent very little time with their children or spouse, devoting most of their time to preaching sermons and writing books. It probably seemed heroic at the time, and God worked through their lives, but generally it was a disaster for the families. No one had ever trained these leaders to lead a ministry and lead a family. It was assumed they would just work it out. But it wasn't working.

It seemed like it was always one or the other; you could have a great ministry, or you could have a great family, but you couldn't have both. It was one or the other: family or mission. You had to sacrifice one if you wanted the other to thrive. And since being a pastor seemed like a godly calling, maybe having a terrible family life was just part of the package. Others we saw chose family over mission. They would abandon all their dreams of wider mission and ministry so they could have a functional family.

We desperately wanted to find out if there was another option.

## FAMILY AND MISSION

But this wasn't the solution either. It was not the way to live and behave over a long period of time. As we talked in the car on long journeys, over dinner, and at the kitchen sink while drying dishes. I kept coming back to this overwhelming sense that we needed to be "normal," which meant that I wanted us to be able to look, sound, and behave normally, without abandoning God's call on our lives. We weren't going to project some weird, fake version of ourselves; we were going to be normal.

We were going to try and do family and mission. We were not going to let mission make our family life miserable. We resolved somehow to find a way to do these two callings at the same time, running on parallel tracks, moving in the same direction. We would work out ways of building our life so it had good boundaries and plenty of margin. Our goal was to have a great family and a great ministry.

While we were newlyweds living in Hackney, I took a job as a real estate agent in London. Mike was an inner-city youth worker studying for his master's degree in theology. I worked 9 AM to 5 PM, and he worked 4 PM to midnight with the youth. When he got home at midnight, he stayed up until 2 AM studying and writing papers. Every day, we met for lunch in an old bakery and caught up with each other over tea and toast. I dragged an old beanbag into the study so I could sleep there to the steady tapping of the typewriter rather than be alone. It was challenging, but it worked. We juggled and stretched and made it work.

When I was in college, I was voted "Girl Least Likely to Ever Have Children." However, on the bright, sunny morning of June 6, 1984, overlooking the cornfields of the Cambridge countryside, I gave birth to our beautiful daughter Rebecca Jane. I loved her deeply. I completely and utterly loved being a mom. It took me by surprise, actually. I used to call my mom and tell her, in amazement, "I still like her!" and "I still like me, too!" Such a gift, a child. A child to take care of, to nurture, to disciple and to discipline. Raising a child is a complicated and confusing experience, and it takes us to the cross quicker and more often than

any other process I know. But of course we were going to do family and mission, so alongside this new role of being a mom and building a family, I still loved mission and all that meant for us in this season.

By now, we had moved to Cambridge, and Mike was in charge of youth ministry across the city. I still had a big heart for the lost and the lonely. It was just a bit more complicated to carry it out as I moved slowly carrying a six-month-old on my hip or pushing a stroller. But we were OK with that—we would simply add boundaries and margins and plan more! We were capable, intelligent people; we should be able to do both areas of our lives, family and mission, and do them well. All we needed was a plan and a whiteboard in the kitchen to organize it all. We had our mission life, and we had our family life. We wanted both to be great, and we worked toward both being great.

We had clear boundaries between ministerial life and family life, and we needed to manage those boundaries and make sure we had enough margin when things got difficult. We knew there would be times when things wouldn't function perfectly and ministry life could extend over into family life, so we needed to build in time and space. That way, even in times of stress, it wouldn't threaten our life or our ministry.

We had our mission life and our family life, and like pouring water into different containers, we managed the energy we put into each reality, attempting to move our family and our mission toward health and fruitfulness. We measured and poured our time and energy into each container, watching it closely, checking it against the other. Always asking questions: "Which one is getting more? Which one is suffering?" It was not OK for either one to fail. We developed clear rhythms, such as taking days off, going on vacations, managing the stress, managing the vision, and managing time all the time.

We functioned this way for about ten years. They were good years, but not great years, if I'm honest. Not particularly fulfilling to either of us. Our worlds were very often separate. We now had four children (three biological and one adopted teenage foster daughter), a new church, a large rundown house, and a larger

vision. During those ten years I went from carefree, passionate hippie to lawgiver and accountant. I watched the clock. I watched Mike. I watched if he was ten minutes late coming home for supper. I watched the amount of time he spent out in the evenings at meetings. I counted how many Saturdays he took the children swimming. I asked, “When is it going to be my turn to do something exciting? When do I get a day off?”

Don’t get me wrong—I loved raising the children. They brought me an immense amount of fulfillment and joy, but there were sometimes moments when I sat alone on the sofa, wondering whether Mike was running ahead of me spiritually, and whether I would ever catch up. On many occasions, I was simply too tired to really care about the “new strategy for mission” that Mike was talking about. And Mike was often too distracted to really hear me talk about my successes of the day: wiping noses, changing diapers, and separating arguing children.

So we were doing family and mission, looking confident and competent, not sacrificing one for the other, accomplishing both. It was fine for a while, not an absolute disaster or anything, and far better than doing family OR mission. But we were discovering that family AND mission is an utterly exhausting way to function. Trying to keep everything in its own container, managing the boundaries between ministry and family all the time, had become unsustainable for us.

And it wasn’t that we were bad at it! We were actually pretty good at managing our family and our mission. You get proficient at it after ten years. But it was so, so tiring. We found that we were expending so much energy managing boundaries that we weren’t able to do other important things, like making disciples, which was the call we had both received at the beginning of our adventure together!

We had just finished a call to an inner-city church in the poorest community in England, a place called Brixton Hill, and what’s interesting is that we did a lot of great, innovative ministry there. But today, there’s hardly anything left, no evidence of an ongoing work of God that continued after we left. The reason was that we were managing our ministry well, but we weren’t making disciples

who were making disciples. We were beginning to realize that you can't make disciples if you're constantly managing boundaries.

The result? Basically I crashed and burned. At the end of this time in Brixton, I reached the end of myself trying to manage everything including another baby, a teenage foster daughter, an expanding team of leaders, and a growing church. I encountered lots and lots of spiritual battles, and as a result I came to the point where I could no longer rely on my own capabilities. I broke.

## **FAMILY AS MISSION**

This was a kairos moment for me and for my family. We looked at our lives and at the early church. At this point, we got a job offer in Arkansas, and decided to move stateside. This move gave us the space to really reflect on what had happened, and to heal. I fully embraced the role of soccer mom and the Hobby Lobby lifestyle. For a while, I forgot mission—basically lived with Family as Mission for a time.

Sometimes you don't have a choice between family or mission. There are times when we must focus on family as our mission. These may be intense times like when we have a newborn at home and we're hardly sleeping or functioning. Or it may be crisis moments when someone is diagnosed with cancer or when you must spend inordinate amounts of time helping a parent who has an illness or Alzheimer's or something. We have experienced these seasons several times over the last 30 years.

In these times, family is our mission. We must batten down the hatches and survive the storm. The missional aspect of this is that these experiences can fuel our mission and our discipling in the future, even if we are not focusing externally at the moment. But we need permission to have these seasons when family is our mission, and when this happens we need to remember that these seasons are temporary and that they should lead us back to family and mission. The fault line comes if your family becomes an idol, and you never move out of the family as mission stage.

This is actually part of the rhythm of life. If you are familiar with the Semi-Circle Lifeshape, you know that it's like a pendulum between abiding and fruitfulness. Family on mission is a time of great fruitfulness. Family as mission often happens during a season of abiding. It is a choice to focus on healing yourself and your family so you can move back into fruitfulness in the future. You don't bar the doors of your family to others, but you do focus internally so that God can heal you and refill you before you move out on mission again.<sup>1</sup> During this season, as we reflected on this kairos moment during this time of abiding, we came to the conclusion that there has to be a better way to do this. So we left the season of family as mission with an entirely new approach.

## FAMILY ON MISSION

So we continued to talk and talk and talk, this time interrupted by the cries and chatter of little ones, disturbed by pressing phone calls and meetings. But somewhere between teatime and team meetings, we began to wonder, "What would happen if we invited more people into our lives?" Not inviting more people over to entertain them, but simply inviting them into what we were already doing to help us. At first it did seem a little counter-intuitive to invite more people into our already busy lives. We were already hard-pressed—wouldn't that create more stress?

But we had a hunch that it might just be the answer. So when our time of Family as Mission came to a close, we moved back to Sheffield, we tried a different way. We began inviting people into everything, into the mealtimes and into the mission. We included more people in our life, to help us in the little things and the big things, in our family and in our mission. We found some poor, unsuspecting young adults who were on the outer edges of our life, and invited them, "Come walk with us." We just included them when grocery shopping and folding laundry and praying for the sick. We asked them to babysit our kids, help them with their homework, do administrative tasks, run youth events, and

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<sup>1</sup> You can read more about this story, and how we changed things when we moved to Sheffield, in our book *Leading Kingdom Movements*.

more. Much to our amazement, what we found was that none of them were put off by the small, loud children who came as part of the package. They actually loved the normality and the noise of it all.

Some of the simple things of family life brought real joy to single men and women who were becoming part of the fabric of our lives, things like reading bedtime stories to the kids while I cleaned up supper to get ready for an evening meeting. Some of them gained healing and hope along the way. Some of them had real talent in different areas, and callings to lead. We had no money to pay them properly, so they just lived with us. It seemed that when we moved as a group, we were actually more effective in our family stuff and our mission! To top it all off, because people were now coming along with us in our normal everyday lives, we had ample time to actually disciple them.

Our previously neatly defined boundaries between family life and mission life began to blur like heavy rain on a windshield. We forgot to manage margins, and our boundaries were technically “broken,” but we were thriving in a way we hadn’t experienced before. I realized I no longer watched the clock or counted the hours. I no longer tried to make sure the “family” and the “mission” columns added up. I no longer felt like a bystander of the mission. And Mike felt like he had more time with the family, because he was around the family more—even as he worked on the missional part of life.

We were no longer managing boundaries and margins, because people were simply with us in all of life, helping us with the things we needed help with (which was a lot of things, by the way!). Our ministry and family life were thriving in new ways because there were simply more hands to do the work and more giftedness for the tasks at hand, and we were actually investing in people to develop them as disciples of Jesus. We had stumbled upon a new way of functioning.

As these people simply helped us do our life together, we shared whatever wisdom we had somehow gained in our journey, and we began to disciple them. We didn’t get them into an extensive program in church— we simply disciplined

them “along the way,” over meals, family prayers, laundry, carpooling, and bedtime stories. The remarkable thing is that they stayed around. They simply became part of our family, and they seemed to thrive in it! Our little nuclear family was becoming an extended family. We were learning what it looked like to be a family ON mission.

At the beginning, we had simply said, “Come walk with us. Sometimes we’ll be moving fast, so you may have to run at times, but you’re welcome to come with us.” No one seemed to mind when we had to run. We were moving as a pack, moving forward, gathering up others as we traveled toward what God had called us to do. Making disciples this way led us to discover the power of Family on Mission.

What it means is that when we move forward in mission, we do it together if at all possible. Together with our kids, together with those we are discipling, together with those whom we simply can’t seem to get rid of! We’re going to involve each other and our kids in anything and everything involving our life and mission. As much as possible, we involve everyone in everything.

After our time in Brixton, we had a brief sabbatical in Arkansas before we moved back to England, to work in a church in Sheffield called St. Thomas. What emerged from that wonderful time of rest and recreation was a more defined process that we now call being a Family on Mission.

Our children have been raised with this. They know no other way. They know only how to be in an extended family. They laugh about how the instinct in every situation is to always do it with others, to do it in community. When we need to go to the grocery store for a gallon of milk, we usually end up with a whole carload of people going, making it into an adventure. Our children did well in school by drawing on the combined skills and intelligence of those around them. They don’t see color or disabilities, because they have been around all kinds of people in an extended family. They have a wide knowledge of many cultures that they would never have seen if we had stayed simply within our nuclear family. The word family doesn’t mean those who have the same blood; it



means those who have the same values.

We told them very clearly that they didn't need to wait until they were adults to be part of what God had called us to do, that they were completely included and a vital part of now. And they thrived on that. They are actually still part of what we are called to do today. Each of them has actually worked with us at one time or another. We have failed many times in parenthood and ministry, so we consider it a huge blessing that, after all this, our children still like us and want to be part of our lives.

As Mike and I have travelled around the country teaching and answering hundreds of questions about family on Mission, we have realized that this is a very different way of viewing life, family and ministry. We know this is challenging but having an integrated life brings a level of peace that can not be experienced another way.

(1 Corinthians 12: 12-13 Message translation 12-13 You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.)

What About You?

It seems that one of the things the Holy Spirit is doing in the church and the world in our day is moving us...

Away from the destructive dichotomy of Family OR Mission, where we can do only one or the other.

Away from the Band-Aid fix of Family AND Mission, where we keep them separate and try to manage boundaries and margins.

Away from the crisis management of Family AS Mission, where we are in survival mode.

Toward the integrated life of Family ON Mission, where we wholeheartedly embrace being part of a covenant community, and with those people play our part in God's kingdom mission.

**Family OR Mission** depresses us, because we have to sacrifice one thing or the other, while both are necessary if we're going to live out the call of God.

**Family AND Mission** exhausts us, because we need to manage the boundaries between family and mission. Thus our family life never quite feels purposeful, and our mission life never quite feels natural.

**Family AS Mission** contains us, because we find it impossible to look outside our current situation to the missional and discipleship opportunities around us.

**Family ON Mission** empowers us, because we learn to live an integrated life, moving forward in mission as a pack, as a covenant family with a kingdom mission.

Discipleship and mission<sup>2</sup> never really work unless we are able to create the texture of family on mission. If we're going to make disciples and move out in mission, we first need to go from managing boundaries to integrating family and mission into one life, a cohesive framework and fabric that empowers a culture

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<sup>2</sup> If you would like to consider discipleship and mission in more detail, we encourage you to check out the latest edition of *Building a Discipling Culture*, which focuses on the structure and not the texture you'll find over the rest of this book.

of discipleship and mission, not just occasional events and periodic programs.

God has created us for this, and Jesus, our Brother and King, will show us how to do it. And to top it all off, the Holy Spirit is leading us to rediscover it right now, and will empower us to do it! Let's dive in.