

Children's Evangelists: a Dying Breed

In an age where the role of a children's evangelist has gone from a soul winning, bible teaching, encourager of the body, revivalist of sorts, to more of an entertainer that has a Christian theme. I have been forced to ask myself a few questions about the role of a Children's Evangelist in the post Christian America that we live in.

Let me start off by giving you a little bit of my background, and things I struggle with so you know where I am coming from.

I have been a children's pastor in a few different churches for a total of 8 years, a children's evangelist for 18 years, and have had a few volunteer positions during my over 22 years in ministry to children and youth. I have been blessed to see both sides of the fence which has helped me to be more understanding of the role of a Children's Pastor and local churches when I am ministering on the road. All of the churches I served at as a Children's Pastor, I could never afford to have children's evangelist in. Except for a few of my friends that I was not able to pay what they deserved, and one nationally known evangelist that came on love offering and travel because he was in the area. I always felt bad bringing someone in and not being able to bless them the way they should be.

In my early years as a Children's Evangelist I went through extreme poverty and hardships including getting my phone, electric, other necessities turned off, and my family going without all for the sake of the call.

I eventually had to make the decision, that if I was going to continue doing children's evangelism; I had to run the financial side of the ministry like a business. I was not ever going to put my family through this again.

I really struggle with having to charge churches what I do to have me come and minister. In bible college we were taught not to charge for ministry, but we should trust God for what we needed to come in during the offering. If I did this I would not be able to survive because churches and pastors really do not have any idea what it takes to run a ministry such as ours. When you take up an offering with children you get nickels and dimes and a few dollar bills. In my early days as a Children's Evangelist we always came on love offering and barley ever broke even on most events. I struggle to keep my prices down, however with all the equipment I tote around I have been forced to charge higher prices than most. When I was a Children's Pastor I could never have afforded to have my ministry come in. So, I understand what a lot of Children's Pastors are going through with low budgets.

I have struggled with the fact that I must offer a program that is a few steps above what most churches can offer their children. One time I had a church on the west coast call and want me to come to their church to minister. This was one of my first contacts from the west coast quite a few years ago. I asked if they could fly me out there. In the back of my head I was wondering if my transportation at the time would make the trip. Their response was that if I did not bring my equipment they did not want me. One of the secrets to my success is that I have been able to invest in awesome equipment that makes our program more spectacular. At the same time I wonder why we as the body cannot just see the call on a person's life instead of forcing a person to have a bigger than life persona with a rock star performance and all the bells and whistles. Don't get me wrong, I love all the stuff but it's truly all

about the ministry for me. Reaching the lost and touching lives is what it is all about. On the flip side when I was Children's Pastor the few times I had bigger name evangelist in, my workers came to me afterward and thought what we did in children's church was better than the program the nationally known speaker presented. After a while I did not have speakers come in that could not out top what we did, or offer something that I could not do myself, however I could not afford the speakers that was bigger and better.

I struggle with the promotional end of the ministry also, having to sell yourself to get a meeting, having to look bigger and better than the rest, and not looking too much like another ministry because they feel your trying to steal their corner of the market. God has given me a gift for promotion, and I have always been successful in promoting whatever I have been involved in whether it was business or ministry. I do not like the idea of being in competition with other Children's Evangelist. Hopefully, we are all in this for the same reason, winning souls and encouraging believers. There are too many children that are not born again and not enough people reaching them to be in any kind of competition. We try our best to reach out to other Children's Evangelist and be a blessing to them as much as possible no matter what church affiliation they are. Some we have been able to establish relationships with and others have not responded for various reasons.

Saying all this I have asked myself and a few others the following questions.

1. Why isn't there more Children's Evangelist? A lot of times we hear from churches we minister in that it is hard to find good quality Children's Evangelist.
2. Why doesn't more Children's Evangelist stay on the road very long? I have seen a lot of very talented, gifted, and anointed children's ministers try to break into traveling and do not last but a few years. Or they are on and off the road every few years.
3. Why do churches need Children's Evangelist?
4. Where is the role of a Children's Evangelist going in the next 10 years?
5. Is the concept of a kid's crusade becoming a thing of the past?
6. What is the most effective way to reach un reached children with the message of the gospel?

To answer the first and second questions it mostly comes to finances. I asked a few of my Children's Evangelist friends and Children's Ministry leaders that use to travel and on the top of everyone's list was lack of finances. As I said above when I first started out I went through extreme poverty and lack that I would not wish on my worst enemy. One time I had a pastor where I was ministering feel so sorry for me because of the cloths I was wearing that he went to his closet and brought me 2 shirts for me to wear. In the early days we looked like the rag muffin team that traveled in a hooptie van you would see down by the river with gypsies living in it. We sat in the front of the van and put all of our equipment in the back. Praise God we have come a long way! I thank God every time I get into my suburban and load my equipment into my trailer.

I see a lot of my Children's Evangelist friends going through extreme poverty now. Some of them are pioneers of what I am doing. They have given their entire lives to reaching children and now that they are older they have nothing, no insurance, no retirement, no home, nor finances. Some have sold their houses and traveled in motor homes that finally gave out because of all the miles they have put on them.

Now they are forgotten about by the church world and cannot seem to get enough meetings to live off of. Yet, they still have a heart for reaching children. No church will hire them despite of their years of experience because they are older now and churches want younger people for Children's Pastors.

I ask myself, how long I can keep my schedule full. How long can I keep this pace up? Will I end up like a lot of my predecessors, older, outdated, and forgotten about with no insurance or retirement?

Even though we charge what I am sure seems like a lot to a smaller and medium size churches we still struggle to make it sometimes. We get a few meetings a month from February through May, then we do back to back meetings from June through September or October, and then come home and have to be so tight financially that we cannot afford do anything except work and get ready for the next years tour. Our fuel cost alone in 2007 was over \$12,000, plus all the other cost in what we do. We have very few monthly supporters. Less than 5 people give \$25.00 per month to our ministry. Occasionally, we receive a larger one time gift from people. We try our best to work with churches to come on an amount they can afford if they cannot afford our suggested price, however with each year more and more churches ask for a discount which makes me wonder how tight it will be next winter. Then, the issue comes up that what I am offering has to be worth what I am charging, so we have to continue to get bigger and better which drives up the price more. I am not trying to cry a sob story by telling this information, just letting you know why more people do not do this.

The simple fact is that most churches do not have budgets for ministries such as ours, and if we scale down to where we can travel in a mini van no one will want us because we cannot do something that the local church cannot do themselves. I do not want to become an exclusive mega church ministry. We have and will continue to minister in mega churches, however the smaller churches are what really need our ministry the most.

The second reason there are not more Children's Evangelist or the reason they do not stay on the road very long is the toll on the family. It's a hard life that not many can handle. Having to live out of hotel rooms or motor homes, is more than most people can handle. Most people want more out of life which is understandable.

To answer the third question about why do churches need Children's Evangelist is a simple yet complex answer according to what church background you come from. To answer this question I will ask another question. Why do churches need adult evangelist? Like I said before according to your church affiliation the answer may vary.

I once asked a pastor where I was on staff if we could have more of a budget to have in a Children's Evangelist. His answer was, "Why do we need a Children's Evangelist when we have one of the best on staff as a Children's Pastor." My answer to his question was "Why do we need to have Adult Evangelist when we have one of the best ministers in the world as Pastor here?" To which he had no answer. There will always be events where we will need special speakers for children the same as there will always be events for adults where we will need a special speaker. Some of these events include outreaches into the community, kid's camps, and meetings where children can receive a fresh fire from God.

My goal as a Children's Evangelist is to...

1. See as many people (men, woman, boys, girls and teens) as possible make a legitimate decision to follow Jesus and be born again.
2. Stir up believers to be all they can be for God and to reach out to the world around them with the love of Jesus, not only through preaching the word, but through developing the character of Christ in their lives.
3. Encourage churches and leaders to take their Children's Ministry to the next level by showing them what can be done through technology and new methods.

To answer the 4th and 5th questions about where do I see the role of the Children's Evangelist going in the next 10 years? And is the concept of kid's crusades becoming a thing of the past? I am not sure where it is going right now. It has seemed to be heading toward a more entertainment based concert type events with very little or no ministry that attract new families in to have a good time and hope they come back to visit the church for a regular service. However, I have been getting more and more calls lately from churches that have been trying this approach for a few years now and want something with more substance. I am happy that the tides are finally turning back to a more ministry based outreach. There is some truth in the "become all things to all men and show people that church is a fun place for families approach" and not a place where they will get bible thumped or dragged through the pit of hell to try and get them to convert to Christianity. It is true that it is the goodness of God that brings man to repentance. We must make church a fun place, keep up do date on culture and the changing world, and how to reach them. However, if we water down the message so that it is not offensive we will produce a generation a fluffy Christians with no spiritual back bone. Certain things about the Gospel are offensive to the American culture, for example, the blood of Jesus and the story of the Cross. But without this we cannot even be born again. I am not saying that we scare kids with bloody details; however we cannot get away from the truth of what we are about.

I personally believe we can be entertaining yet not water down the message or anointing. I have had churches ask me how God shows up at our events without praise and worship. Believe me if any of us could sing even halfway, I would have praise and worship during our events. My answer to this is every thing we do uplifts the name of Jesus and magnifies his word. How could he not show up? Plus, I thought The Holy Spirit was already here, or does he only hang out when we sing a song?

A Children's Evangelist must offer programs that are relative to the culture they are ministering to and a message that is not the same programs that every other Children's Evangelist has been preaching for years. When I develop a new program it usually comes from time spent with God and a topic that has been stirring in my heart for quit some time that I feel is something God wants to emphasize in the body as a whole. The theme and message always come first them we develop everything else around that central theme to reinforce the bible message.

I do believe the concept of traditional kids' crusades is slowly becoming a thing of the past. I do think it is a better option than VBS if you are trying to reach the community? It is hard to compete with sports and other community activities in some communities. I have had churches have us in to minister and spend a lot of money on the event and have only a handful of children at the event because of

sports or something else going on in their community. It might come down to lack of good planning, advertising, or organization, however I remember a day when if you had a really cool event at a church you could pack it out with kids and families. I encourage churches to get away from the term "kids Crusade" in their advertisement of our events. The unchurched world today just do not understand what a kids crusade is. It sounds too much like the crusades of the dark ages for most unchurched people today. I encourage them to use terms like; Kids Blast, Back to School Blitz, Summer Slam, Winter Jam, and family or kids explosion. I encourage them to be creative and think out of the box. It's hard enough to get adults out to a week long revival or camp meeting these days much less have them drop off their kids and come back to pick them up for a children's event. It has to be sold to them as something they do not want to miss. Something that will not only be an awesome time but something that will change their lives. The days of doing a cute puppet skit and a few cool songs and object lessons are over. In order to get kids and families out for events it has to be something bigger and better. I am sad to say it, but most people will no show up out of hunger for more of God or his word any more.

I have often pondered the thought of doing large children's ministry events like "Acquire the Fire" on a children's ministry level where you have a central location where Children's Pastors and families bring their kids to a large event, however I am not sure it is possible without the proper adult supervision. I have done many large events with several thousand in attendance at churches with a lot of adult supervision that have almost been chaos. However, I have done other large meetings with several thousand in attendance in a church setting with the entire family sitting together where it went well. Another factor of crowd control was the amount of churched and unchurched children in attendance. The more unchurched children there are in a large event the louder it will be and the more movement around the auditorium. The more churched parents are in attendance with their children the less noise and movement. Saying this we do not want to exclude unchurched children and families just because they do not know how to act in a service. They are the ones that need it the most.

A lot of my fellow Children's Evangelist and Children's Ministry friends suggested that we are moving more toward family events where the entire family is ministered to at the same time. I have wanted to break into this type of meeting for years; however getting most senior pastors to buy into the idea has been quit a challenge. Most senior pastors are reluctant to turn their pulpit over to a Children's Evangelist. Some times for good reason because some Children's Evangelist are so childish in their approach that many adults in attendance feel spoken down to or out of place.

And the last question, about how to most effectively reach unchurched children with the message of the gospel. I personally believe the most effective way to reach the lost is to go where they are. Get involved in their lives and let them know you care. Then when the door is open share Jesus with them. Go into their communities and have services. Do not expect them to come to the church building. Most people that are not Christians will never come to church. Most unchurched children in America have never been to church and if they have, they thought it was dead religion and did not want anything to do with it.

When we go to their communities and show them we truly love them enough to get outside of our comfort zone of the church building, then we will reap the harvest that is ripe. Crops do not come to the barn by themselves. The farmer has to go out to

the fields and harvest the crops. Fish do not jump out of the lake and come running for the kitchen. You have to go catch them. The masses of people in this world that are not Christians will not come to church to receive Jesus. We must go where they are. Truly love on them and show them that we care. Then they might want what we have.

One person suggested that we train children to evangelize their peers. This is what they are doing at their church and it has been very successful. One young lady from her church saw several thousand of her peers born again before graduating high school.

We must also disciple these children and families that are born again during these outside the church outreach programs. Some of the ones that are reached will come to our church afterwards, however the most effective way to disciple them is by have a weekly meeting on their turf. Close to where they live. I know this concept is not much for church growth but we must be kingdom minded instead of church minded.

Some times I ask God why I couldn't have been an adult evangelist and fly in on an airplane with my bible and preach instead of driving over 40,000 miles a year and having to set up my equipment every three days. One time when I was complaining to the Lord I heard him say in my heart, "What you are doing is precious to me." I broke down in tears when I heard this. Children's ministry is precious to the Lord. Seeing children born again and seeing them grow up spiritually until they look like Christ is precious to Him! Everything we go through, all the hardships, all the ups and downs is worth it when we hear the father say that what we are doing is precious to him.

I pray that God rises up a new generation of Children's Evangelist to take our place some day. Young men and women that not only know how to wow a crowd with all the latest and greatest methods, but take a no compromise approach to ministry and go in the power of the Holy Spirit and the word of God. I pray for a new generation of men and women that their only goal is wining souls at any cost.

I pray this does not come across as Jerry's soap box. I just want to answer a few questions I hear often and have asked myself and to be a voice for all those that have given themselves for children's evangelism.

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