



CHILDREN IN MINISTRY?

Written by Kathy Creasy

Children in ministry? Why is it a question in our minds? Why is it an anomaly in our congregations? Perhaps because we have failed to fully embrace and act on this fundamental truth—GOD USES CHILDREN.

Yes, we know that God used children throughout Bible history. We know some of them—Samuel, David, Josiah, Joash, the slave girl, the children in the temple, and more. But does God use children today? Consider the testimony of Austin Gutwein, who was nine years old when he decided to respond to God's call.

"In the spring of 2004, I watched a video that showed children who had lost their parents to AIDS. After watching the video, I realized these kids weren't any different from me except they were suffering. I felt God calling me to do something to help them.

"I decided to shoot free throws and on World AIDS Day, 2004, I shot 2,057 free throws to represent the 2,057 kids who would be orphaned during my day at school. People sponsored me and we were able to raise almost \$3,000. That year, the money was used by World Vision to provide hope to 8 orphan children.

"From that year forward, thousands of people have joined me in a basketball shoot-a-thon called Hoops of Hope. By doing something as simple as shooting free throws, Hoops of Hope participants have raised over \$2 million. The children left behind by AIDS now have access to food, clothing, shelter, a new school and finally a medical clinic which we were told will save an entire generation. A second clinic is now under construction.

"I believe anyone, no matter what their age or skill, can make a difference."

Yes, God uses children today. And God uses children to do BIG things. David fought a giant and brought deliverance from Philistine oppression to the people of Israel. Josiah established righteous rule in Israel after fifty-seven years of idolatry. A Hebrew slave girl witnessed to the commander of the armies of Syria and from the day of his healing he offered sacrifices to no other god but the Lord.

Wess Stafford, director of Compassion International, tells the story of Compassion International staff members visiting a ministry sponsored by the organization at a local church in Ecuador. When staff members arrived, the pastor shared that the ministry would not be in session the next day. Two young brothers who participated in the ministry had been hit by a truck while crossing a very busy city street. The 6 year-old

had been killed and his brother seriously injured. The young boy's funeral would be the following day. In an effort to protect children from the sorrow of death, Ecuadorian children do not often attend funerals. However, when the Compassion International staff arrived at the funeral the next day, they were surprised to find 60 children in attendance. They began talking with the children, asking why they had been allowed to attend this funeral. One child explained, "He's the one who told me about Jesus." Another child said, "He is the one who prayed with me to receive Jesus Christ as my Savior." At the little boy's funeral the Compassion International staff learned that during the child's short lifetime he had led fifty people to Christ.

If God uses children and through God's work in their lives they do BIG things, what actions can we take to work with God as He works through children?

Embrace the value of children. Jesus' words and actions express God's value of children. He called them to him, he received their praises, he healed them, and he spoke of their importance in the kingdom of heaven. He warned his followers, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones" (Matthew 18:10). In spite of his words and actions, his disciples kept the children from him when the mothers brought them to be blessed. Like the disciples, the Church today still fails to fully grasp the value of children in the heavenly kingdom. Vision statements, strategies, budget allocations, ministry and leadership development usually focus on adults rather than children. Yet, "Satan has never underestimated the value of children. To him, each child is a fresh battleground where God's will can be thwarted."¹

Cultivate discernment of God's work. Jochabed saw that her baby was a beautiful child, a child of purpose. Because of this she defied the commandment of Pharaoh and saved her son from death. Perhaps the spirit of God within her understood that her son was birthed to deliver his people from slavery. Simeon, a man full of the Holy Spirit, discerned that the baby Jesus he held in his arms would grow to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32).

What is God doing in the world today to redeem individuals, families, generations, nations, and cultures to himself? Right now, all over the world, children are being conceived who are destined to work with God to bring about redemption. And we have an amazing opportunity to discern God's call on the life of each child, to proclaim it, and to work with God in preparing and releasing that child into ministry.

Equip children to do works of ministry. It isn't enough to teach our children Bible stories and Bible verses. It is our responsibility to prepare them to do works of service that God purposed for them to do. When we read Ephesians 4:12-16 our minds envision men and women being equipped for works of service, becoming mature, being joined together, each one doing his work. But that passage was written about all God's people. Saved children are God's people. Can we envision children being equipped for works of service? Can we envision children being built up? Can we envision children being joined together with other members of the body to accomplish ministry? Can we envision children doing the works God purposed for them to do?

Let's rethink ministry to children. The ministry gifts (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher) were given to prepare children as well as adults for works of service. Let's use these gifts to equip our children with Holy Spirit baptism, intimacy with the Father, the ability to hear and discern the voice of the Lord, a passion for the lost, an ability to share their faith, the development of leadership and ministry gifts, and more. Let's work with God to equip them for every good work (Ephesians 2:10).

Engage children in ministry. We often involve children in acts of service—visiting nursing homes, ushering in the congregation, assisting in the nursery. While those acts of service teach invaluable lessons and involve our children in the life of the congregation, we want our children to experience much more. We want to offer them opportunities to be intimately involved in what God is doing in the world today—missions, intercession, worship, witnessing, leadership and more. We want to move beyond involving them in one-time events or weekly programs. We want our children to develop a lifestyle of ministry to God and to others.

YES! God uses children in ministry. And he invites each of us to work with Him to bring value to children, to discern God's work in their lives, to equip them to do the works of ministry and to engage them in a lifestyle of serving God and others.