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BEGINNING A KIDS' OUTREACH MINISTRY

by Rachael Groll



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To Aiden.

At the moment we met, I knew God had something special in store for you.

You are a constant prayer in my heart. It's because of you
that the Kingdom has been changed.

1. ALL IN

“You need a truck. We need to get you a truck.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. I was sitting in my pastor’s office, describing to him some of the children I had met the previous night. I had seen at least 50, but there were many more attached to those 50, if you considered siblings and friends.

“You mean a bus,” I responded, thinking he just hadn’t had enough coffee yet.

“No. I mean a bread truck,” he said, as he immediately sat down and started to Google truck images.

Still confused, I watched as he pulled up pictures of a bread truck and described how we could cut the side out of it and make it into a stage that pulls down. Once we had a truck, we could “DO” church outside on the sidewalk.

Immediately, the wheels in my brain started turning...

• • •

I almost hadn’t gone. I was preparing for an event, a Fall Harvest Party, and I had some leftover flyers from Sunday morning. The event was Thursday, so I was just going to throw them out. Our church secretary, Louise, suggested I take them down to a particular neighborhood in our community. To be honest, my first thought was, “NO WAY.” That place was scary. There were drugs there. And lots of crime. And police. “And children,” the Lord added. Ouch. I couldn’t argue with that.

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“I’ll go with you,” Louise said. I thought maybe she could just take them for me. I had my young daughter with me. Surely I shouldn’t be doing this.

“GO.” The Lord very clearly, and very loudly, spoke into my heart. “Just go.”

Taking a deep breath, I made plans with Louise to meet after work to take the flyers down into the low-income housing project. Truth be told, I avoided the place. I literally drove right past the entrance to it every single day. It was on the outskirts of town, as most of the housing projects were, so you didn’t have to look at them if you didn’t want to. And I didn’t want to. My limited exposure to that area left me with a mixture of fear and disdain. I’m ashamed to say that I avoided the area because it reminded me too much of things I had tried so hard to forget—things I had buried deep down inside that I was unwilling to expose. Of course, God knew this, yet He still told me to go. So, out of obedience, I went. I put my emotions aside, and I walked, one step at a time, into what I would later realize was my greatest calling in life.

A couple months prior, I had traveled to Kenya on a mission trip and spent time with some incredible kids. The trip was life changing, and it opened my eyes to the need in our world. I came home with a renewed passion for the gospel and a burning desire to return to Africa. As I walked along the sidewalk in the housing project and was surrounded by children, I quickly realized I had missed the fact that we had a mission field literally a couple of miles from my house. Why hadn’t I recognized this before? How could I have missed these kids? Why didn’t they ever come to church? Why weren’t there churches or ministries reaching out to them? SO many questions flooded my mind, and I quickly became conscious that God was up to something. They, like any other kids, were desperate for love and attention, and the Jesus in me was telling me that He had work for me to do here.

One little boy, Ty, was about two years old, and he followed me everywhere I went. Where were his parents? Where did he live? Why wasn't anyone looking for him? As I looked around, I quickly realized that many of these kids were largely unsupervised and desperate for love and attention. I was giving out small flyers, inviting them to an event we were having at the church. The flyer was colorful and bright, and many of the kids were simply excited to be given something free that they could keep. A piece of paper. I had nothing else to give them.

Little did I realize at that moment that I DID have something else to give them. God was opening my eyes and revealing that He had a plan and a purpose for this neighborhood—that these kids belonged to Him, and He was going to use me to reach them. I didn't know how. I didn't know why. All I knew was that He was working and moving and that I needed to figure out how to be a part of it.

Ty, jumping up and down very excitedly, said to me, "You never came here before! No one ever comes here! Can you stay? Can you come back?" His words pierced my heart. "*No one ever comes here.*" I knew I had to come back. I would find a way to reach this area.

Many of the kids were excited to be invited to the party but had no transportation. The next day, I poured out my heart to our senior pastor, Ray. "We can start with a bus. Get a bus down there for Sunday morning. We can rent one, but we have to do more than that. We need to send something down there to where they live."

As my pastor started to describe his plan to get a truck, I started to realize he had the same things laid on his heart that I had on mine. So we committed to praying for these kids and started to figure out a way to reach them.

The first Sunday we sent a bus down, we got one lone rider, and it wasn't even a kid. She was a crazy cat lady who had been praying for a ride to church, and she was so excited that we came to get her.

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I was heartbroken. Not about the cat lady, I was glad she was coming to church. She definitely needed Jesus. But where were all the kids? I had gone down to the neighborhood during the week and invited tons of them. I honestly expected that we would need two buses. I thought we were going to fill up the first bus so quickly that we would need to send a Greyhound the second week. Not so much. I was so disappointed that I went to the bathroom and cried. As I sat there, doubting if I was even on the right track, I heard the Lord whisper to my heart, “Keep going.” In that moment, I realized God had a plan bigger than that empty bus.

What’s Your Empty Bus?

Maybe you have tried an outreach event before, and it wasn’t well attended. Maybe you did some door-to-door evangelism only to find more doors slammed in your face than opened. Maybe you shared your heart, only to have it pierced. My physical eyes could not yet see it, but God had a plan and a purpose for the kids in that neighborhood, and it was going to take some resolve.

So many times, I think we look at a situation, and we start something—we step into a new calling—and we expect immediate results. Why? Because we live in a fast food, instant message culture that places the expectation of immediate gratification on the same shelf as hard won results. Perseverance and determination are no longer the standard formula for results in much of our society. Instead, we are trained to look for “likes” and “followers” and to consider our measure of success in terms of how quickly we can get others to respond. The empty bus was a moment God used to teach me that this ministry was going to take time. It would take time to break down walls that had been built, and I was going to have to do it one brick at a time.

The following week, I visited the kids again. I found my little buddy, Ty, and took him a Tootsie Roll. I watched some girls as they showed

me how they could jump rope. I helped a little boy when he lost his grip on the monkey bars. I applauded a pop a wheelie, and I tied some shoes. That's all. The next Sunday we had 25 kids. I quickly realized my half hour in the neighborhood was the most valuable thing I had done all week. Connecting to kids in the form of meeting real needs was going to open the door for me to help them with their spiritual need. Being where they are. Staying close to the need so it could touch me, both physically and emotionally. Instead of insulating myself inside the four walls of the church, I was going to have to get out into the trenches and meet the needs where they were.

Throughout the winter, we ran a bus—sometimes two—down to the neighborhood on Sundays. We typically were getting anywhere from 15-40 kids. I was even prepared to send a third bus down because I knew close to 100 kids actually lived there. They just weren't coming on Sundays. Soon, the need became clear. We needed to take the church to them.

I had been waiting on a truck, but the reality was we were having a hard time finding one. Even if we found one for a good price, it would take a lot of work and time before we could get it fitted for a stage. So, after praying about how to start, we decided to just go. We picked a day and time, we got some helpers, and we started to plan what we were going to do. I had a really nice soundboard and speakers that were not being used at the church, which was a big blessing because I wouldn't have to spend any money for this necessary equipment. I made a playlist of songs kids loved. I made a candy wall of bubble gum, Airheads, and lollipops. I made some posters to keep track of points for some games we would play. I was ready. Armed with a popup tent, hula hoops, and some bubbles, we headed into the neighborhood. I didn't know what to expect, but I felt prepared with a fun program I thought the kids would like. We didn't even know if any kids would come. We didn't know if we were going to get kicked out. We also

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didn't know what we were doing or how it was going to work. But we did know Jesus, and we knew the kids needed to know Him too.

As we pulled into the neighborhood, we were met by a dozen or so kids, who were excitedly anticipating our arrival. They helped me unload my minivan and set up tarps on the ground. They rode their bikes around the block, yelling for their friends to "come to church." By the time we were set up and ready to go, we had at least 30 kids. I knew there were many more in the area, but this was a great start. My plan was to start amping up the speakers with some fun music to draw a crowd. Kids were excited. Our team was excited. We were doing it.... We were doing Sunday school on the sidewalk!

And then it happened. It started to rain. I'm not talking about a light summer shower. I'm talking monsoon. We don't ordinarily have monsoons in Meadville, Pennsylvania. The weather had not been calling for rain, but at the exact moment we were starting our program, the skies opened up and released a flood. The guys on our team quickly packed up all the electronic equipment. As I gathered the kids under the tent, I realized the rain had ruined my lesson and all my props. We couldn't play the games. The candy wall was soaked and thrown back into the van. The balloons were deflated on the ground. Everything I had planned for the day was suddenly out the window. I had none of the things I usually use on a Sunday morning.

Yet, I had everything I needed. I started to talk about how God's love was like that rain. He wanted them to be soaked in it, just like their clothes were. Every single child who was there that day in the rain under a leaky tent, clothes soaked through, gave their heart to Jesus. I had the privilege of praying with them as they laid down their rejection and insecurities and traded them for the hope of the gospel. We didn't need everything we thought we did. The reality was, all we needed was Jesus. He saw. He knew. And He moved. We sent the kids home for their own safety, and we packed up with promises

to return the following week. I was overwhelmed with what had happened. I had planned and prayed. I gathered a team. I memorized songs. I made playlists. In the end, we used none of it. A verse came to mind:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6:12 (NIV)

The enemy had done a good job of convincing people that neighborhood was hopeless. And in a sense, it was. It had no hope. That's why it needed Jesus. What happened that first day, very clearly, was a battle for the hearts of those kids.

I wish I could say the following week was better. The weather was better, for sure. We actually got to use our speakers and sound system. We played some fun games and had about 45 kids. However, as we were at the point of leading kids in prayer, right as we were teaching about salvation, we heard the brakes of a car coming to a screeching halt, a scream, and then silence. Within a few seconds, a little boy on a bike rode down to where we were and told us a child from across the street was coming to Sidewalk and was hit by a car. The driver wasn't paying attention, the child wasn't paying attention, and the parents were nowhere in sight.

As this child was splayed across the cement and we waited for an ambulance to arrive, I started to tear up. "What is going on, Lord?" I cried. I was heartbroken for this child.

As I looked at these small faces staring at me, I heard Him whisper again, "Keep going."

Taking a deep breath, I led the children in two prayers: one for our little friend who was badly injured and another for the kids who wanted to give their hearts to the Lord. They very easily saw that life was fragile. We didn't know what was going to happen that day or if

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our friend would live or die, but that terrible moment the enemy had purposed for tragedy became a moment God used to deliver hope. We had 15 more kids lay their lives in the hands of Jesus.

The truth was, things like car accidents happened in that neighborhood all the time. The kids weren't as shaken up as I was because they were desensitized to the reality of their harsh world. The enemy had a firm grip on this area, and we were tempted to just run away. But I have to believe that Christ's plan for redemption extends far beyond the four safe walls of a church. I have to believe that as followers of Christ we are called to take the light INTO the darkness, not to run away from it. We continued to go back at the same time every week and started to build real relationships with the families there. We visited on other days during the week and watched as the kids were not just coming one day a week to "church" as they called it, but were asking for Bibles and praying for their families.

About a month into our ministry, I felt led to teach a lesson on the Holy Spirit. We were starting with foundational concepts because many of the kids had never been to church and knew very little. We started with God and creation, then the Bible, then Jesus. So naturally, the Holy Spirit was next. I decided to teach them that the Holy Spirit was like an invisible super hero. They couldn't see Him, but He was there to help them. I did a simple activity to help them make it personal. I had them say hello to the Holy Spirit, and then had them say out loud, "Holy Spirit, You are welcome here." As they did, there was a noticeable change in the spiritual climate in that neighborhood. You could literally feel that God was moving in the hearts of those there.

From that day on, something had broken. I'm not even sure how to put it into words, but the resistance we had in the beginning was transformed into open hearts and doors. We still had challenges—don't get me wrong. An entire chapter of this book will describe some

huge obstacles we had to overcome. But in the spiritual sense, we could see freedom—families being healed, addictions being broken, hearts being mended. Transformation. And it was just the beginning. God had, and has, a plan and a purpose in that neighborhood. And do you know what? He does in your community too. There is an area in your community that God is ready to move in; He just needs you to go with Him.

The Need Is the Call

If I am honest, I have to admit that when God called me to walk into the midst of unfamiliar territory, I didn't go because I felt called. I went because I was surrendered and obedient to the one who loved me the most. I would not have chosen that neighborhood had I been given the choice. But...GOD. God knew what He was doing when He placed me in that area. He knew the need I saw there would trigger something in me. It would remind me what it felt like to be abandoned. Rejected. Lonely. Scared. And those feelings would move me to a heart of compassion for kids going through the same thing. Someone who hadn't lived in that world, pitched a tent in the camp of rejection, and experienced those feelings might not understand how Jesus is the ONLY solution. See, I knew this about Him. He literally picked me up, turned me around, and set my feet on solid ground. He was my Savior, and I knew He could rescue them too. I saw the need, and I quickly realized the need IS the call. We can complicate that, but the reality is, there are kids in your town, your community, your neighborhood, who need Jesus. They don't need just a weeklong summer VBS program or a bus that comes through once a week to pick them up if they get up on time. They NEED Jesus. They need a personal encounter with the one who created them, who can speak into the dark parts of their hearts and exchange darkness for light. They need Him, and they need YOU to introduce them to Him. I know this

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type of outreach is hard. I know all about logistics and budgets, time constraints and red tape. *I know*. But I also know we have a God who pursues us, despite all the things that we put in His way. He pursues us in a way that overwhelms us when we realize how incredibly much we are loved. And how can we keep that good news away from those who are desperate for Him?

My hope is that you will take this book and use it as a guide to get moving in your own community. Throughout the book, I will be posing some questions for you to think about and reflect on. It might be beneficial to discuss these questions with your team. Then act on them. Even if you don't know what to do, still act. A lot of the groundwork in this type of ministry happens through trial and error. You keep what works, and you throw out what doesn't. We are now running multiple sites in our community. Each site is different, and we handle each site as a unique opportunity to minister to the needs of those who live there. There is no difference between my community and yours. Start praying about where to go, and be expectant that God WILL show you an area to start in. And then, just go.

Something to Think About:

Where do you see need in your community? Identify three key places that demonstrate need. These can be apartment complexes, housing developments, trailer parks, low-income neighborhoods, playgrounds, etc. Pray for God to reveal to you an area to begin praying for. If you are unaware of needy areas in your community, several resources are available that provide this information. You can start by calling your local county assistance office or other local community agencies listed in the phone book. Once you identify an area, start praying for the families that live there. As you commit to pray, God will give you a unique desire to start loving and ministering in that community. Prayer is what will maintain and sustain.



Sometimes Kids' Ministry requires you to get a little dirt on your shoes.

Children's pastors and others with a heart for kids' ministry want nothing more than to share the love of Jesus with kids. But what can you do when the kids don't, can't, or won't come to church? You take church to them!

Children's pastor Rachael Groll has launched an outreach ministry—a Sidewalk Sunday school—that takes the gospel to kids in housing projects, low-income neighborhoods, and wherever God directs her. Taking an honest look at the challenges and the triumphs, she compels us to get outside the four walls of a church and take the light into the darkness. By starting an outreach ministry in our own communities, we can impact a lost and dying generation for Christ.

Appealing to seasoned volunteers as well as new recruits, this book provides practical tools and personal examples to equip us to accept the call of the Great Commission as it relates to children's ministry.



Rachael Groll is a Children's and Outreach Pastor at Living Waters Church in Meadville, Pa. The outreach program she runs received national attention when the Christian law group, Alliance Defending Freedom, stood behind the church when local governing agencies tried to shut the program down. ADF helped Living Waters regain the right to continue the outreach programs, and as a result, the ministry has grown, reaching even more areas of the community. Rachael has shared some of her

experiences on social media and her blog, RachaelGroll.org. Networking with many children's pastors across the nation, she has helped others start Sidewalk Sunday schools and outreach ministries and has recently begun a new role in public speaking.

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