

KIDS PASTOR OR CIRCUS MASTER?

by
Marty
Martin

stop Being a RingLeader!

Take off your top hat
and let someone else tame
your ministry's time-sucking "lions"
so you can shepherd children.

When I graduated from Bible college more than 18 years ago, I was ready to make a difference for Jesus. I wasn't sure about the particulars yet and left those up to God.

My first full-time position was as a Christian education pastor, overseeing all Christian education from birth to the grave (except, of course, for teenagers). During this time, a burden for children grew in my heart.

So How Can We Keep the main thing— SHEPHERDING young hearts —the main thing?

By burden I mean a passion and deep care. I read up on children's ministry, talked to "kids pastors," and jumped in and tried to figure out how to serve little ones. I believed I could invest my life in no better or ripper field.

My wife and I began ministering to children wholeheartedly. Because we knew we couldn't do everything alone, we worked to equip the current teachers and build a bigger volunteer team. This only helped our ministry become more intentional and grow.

Early on, I noticed that children are very open to the gospel but that the church often puts ministering to them on the back burner. So I was determined to become personally involved in children's lives. I was going to be their pastor. Yes, I needed help from a team, but these kids needed someone to love them, understand them, go to bat for them, and teach them in ways they found interesting. I had a heart for this generation.

Through the years, subtle changes took place. As I served bigger churches and programs, meetings increased exponentially and paperwork swelled like a tsunami. Part of it was a cultural phenomenon, as insurance companies, lawyers, and accountants began to have more say in how churches operate.

In 15 years, the number of children I worked with grew from 75 to 300, and the number of adults working with me grew from 80 to more than 500. You read that right. Because of our schedule's rotational nature, we needed almost two people for every child. I was constantly on the phone or computer, updating weekly schedules and recruiting more volunteers.

Then I inherited a giant time-sucker: a week-day preschool with more than 100 children and

12 employees. I quickly appointed one employee to be the administrator, but the school was still ultimately under my authority. Like a millstone, a pile of paperwork was always on my desk. Never-ending reports, reviews, and budgets tried to steal my joy. As my umbrella of responsibilities at church kept expanding, I felt less like a pastor and more like the ringmaster of an underfunded circus.

I considered changing my title from children's pastor to a hybrid such as attorney/office manager/accountant/police officer/marital counselor/graphic artist/Web designer/first-aid trainer/trend watcher/meeting aficionado/conflict resolver/master planner/sound technician/computer engineer/communications director/all-around nice guy.

As dramatic as all this sounds, I'm far from alone. Every children's minister eventually faces similar issues. So how can we keep the main thing—shepherding young hearts—the main thing? Let me share some tips that have helped me keep children at the center of my children's ministry.

Focus on names. Although I'm pretty good with names, at a big church there are simply too many to remember. So I focus on learning children's names first, even before the parents' and volunteers' names. I want each child to feel as if I know him or her.

Our names are important to us, and we all feel better when people remember them. This is doubly true of children—who also lack the perspective to realize how many names we adults must juggle. Yes, sometimes I have to address a child as "kiddo" or "buddy," and twins are tricky (at one point, our children's ministry had seven sets!). But I always try my best.





Stay in touch with children. One simple, fun way I get to know upper-elementary kids better—and make them feel special—is by visiting them in school. At Christian schools, I'm invited to eat on special "Lunch With Your Pastor" days. As I eat and chat with "my kids," I real-

ize that some pastors don't know which children are from their church.

Public and home schools can be more challenging, but with some help from parents, visits are possible. And the impact is long-lasting.

Cut down on time-eating tasks. I love preparing lessons and teaching, but many times I use a prepared curriculum with only minor tweaks. Loads of free, high-quality materials can save tons of prep time for you and your staff. Any bit of time saved leaves more room in your schedule for the essentials of ministry.

Delegate. To maintain your passion for shepherding children, delegating is essential—on weekdays as well as weekends. When I needed more office help and accountability than volunteers could provide, I pleaded, begged, and cajoled to get a part-time administrative assistant.

Don't forget to seek volunteers who want to help with children's ministry but not work directly with the kids. One woman helped purchase and clean supplies. Another person made reminder calls to volunteers and helped find replacements for last-minute cancellations.

Say no. If children are why you got into children's ministry in the first place, you must say no sometimes, no matter how hard it is. For example, I occasionally turn down offers to preach during adult services so I can focus on what God has called me to do.

Awhile back, our liability-insurance company made ridiculous requests when our church wanted to increase coverage. One suggestion involved a five-person procedure for chil-



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dren's bathroom visits. Knowing that wasn't possible, I replied, "I'm sorry, but at this time we aren't able to comply."

Remember your priorities. Three years ago, during a packed children's church service, we experienced discipline issues, technical problems, late volunteers, frustrated parents, and more. My wife was leading the elementary-age kids in worship while I tried to put out fires. Suddenly, I spotted two longtime best friends

crying together. One girl was moving out of town, and this was her last Sunday at our church. My wife tried to comfort them while leading songs for everyone else.

Initially, I wondered why our other trained adults weren't helping out. Then it hit me: Why did I want to be a children's pastor in the first place? Wasn't my goal to make a difference in kids' lives? I asked a volunteer to tell everyone to do their best to fix the other

problems; I was going to pray with these girls. They hugged me, and we prayed and laughed. Then one girl's mom came over, and we all talked some more.

Lead with your heart.

That day, I realized how much we all need loving spiritual leaders. Children are no different from adults in this regard. Some children's ministry leaders thrive on schedules, forms, and budgets. If that describes you, then surround yourself with people who want to personally impact kids. Other leaders' hearts turn toward reaching children and developing those gifts. If that describes you, then resist letting ministry become merely a management game.

All programs need organization, administration, and policies, but ultimately, these are secondary. So if your ministry has started resembling an elaborate circus, step back and trade your top hat for a shepherd's staff. After all, the purpose of solid children's ministry isn't entertaining children but helping them know Jesus. **cm**



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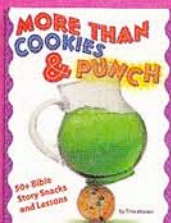
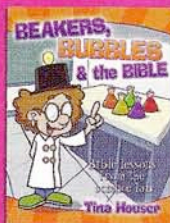
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Marty Martin ●

Veteran children's minister Marty Martin knows all too well what a crazy circus ministry—and life—can be. He even says that if he were actually called to work in a real circus, he could probably do it. "I'd work with the trained monkeys," he says, "because with five sons I feel like I'm living in a houseful of monkeys most of the time anyway! They climb all over, beg for treats, and screech, too."

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