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Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week
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CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Bill Hybels</i>	9
<i>Foreword by George Barna</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i>	15
1. THE GREAT KID-VENTURE	19
<i>The Journey to Build a Dynamic Children's Ministry</i>	
2. IMAGINE THE BEST HOUR	35
<i>A Compelling Vision Makes All the Difference</i>	
3. YOUR MISSION, SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT IT	47
<i>The Benefits of a Clear Starting Point</i>	
4. THE BIG SIX	63
<i>Core Ministry Values to Reach Today's Kids</i>	
5. LARGE GROUP, SMALL GROUPS, BIG PEOPLE	85
<i>So What Does Sunday Morning Look Like?</i>	
6. SHARING THE DREAM	101
<i>Get Wild about Volunteer Recruiting</i>	

7. LESSONS LEARNED	117
<i>How to Treat Volunteers</i>	
8. FIT FOR THE ADVENTURE	133
<i>Thriving in Ministry — Not Just Surviving in Ministry</i>	
9. SUNDAY MORNING HEROES	145
<i>Real People Making Real Differences</i>	
<i>A Final Word</i>	157
<i>Personal Exercises and Team Experiences</i>	159
<i>Appendix A: Mission Statements Based on the Great Commission; Indicators of Spiritual Maturity — The Five Gs</i>	181
<i>Appendix B: The Ten Core Values of Willow Creek Community Church; Six Core Ministry Values.</i>	183
<i>Appendix C: A Typical Hour in Promiseland; Spiritual Gifts</i>	187
<i>Appendix D: Promiseland Curriculum</i>	191
<i>Notes</i>	193
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	197

Chapter 1

THE GREAT KID-VENTURE

THE JOURNEY TO BUILD A DYNAMIC CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

An Adventure That Can Happen in Any Church

Children's ministry is an adventure, and I sure love adventure stories. There's just nothing like the quest to solve a complex problem, discover a lost treasure, or find a new cure. And the best part is watching the characters—how they're stretched and tested under impossible circumstances or unbeatable odds. It's fun to join them as they bravely face earthquakes, shipwrecks, or battles against stronger opponents. These stories require people's best, and then some.

And these tales have another universal trait—their creation. At some point, somewhere, someone pulled out a blank sheet of paper and began to write. Okay, maybe today they'd click to open a new document. The point is that someone deliberately decides to tell a tale that's never been told.

Including the stories that God authors. Rewind the ark story and we see Noah erase his current lifestyle, turning his new blank sheet into blueprints for a boat that will earn him mockery from the neighbors. Abraham was promised a new chapter in life that required a move, and expectantly looked at an empty



page until he turned one hundred—a story that was also good for a few laughs. Before Moses' fiery encounters with Pharaoh, we read about his new beginning that started with a famous bush. Even Joseph's life story was deleted and started anew when he landed at the bottom of the well. And what a legend *that* story became.

This book is also about an exciting adventure. Let's call it the Great Kid-Venture. And this story can take place inside any local church of any size and in any country—because it's about leading and building a dynamic children's ministry. The kind of ministry that prevails over time, and that does so much more than simply survive week to week. One with a plot that involves leaders who wrestle with how to teach the Bible relevantly to children, brainstorm ways to care for adult volunteers, and concoct cutting-edge recruiting strategies. And one that includes other scenes like intense budget and facility negotiations, safety and security precautions, and new kids arriving every week (especially in the infant area!).

Sound familiar? With all the action required to serve kids well these days, no one in children's ministry is bored, that's for sure! But the best part of the story is that God unfolds this drama for more than pure entertainment. He has placed each of us in a ministry with the potential to change lives. And sifting through ideas about how to maximize this potential keeps every children's ministry leader awake at night. Or at least it should.

It requires a modern-day leap of faith for someone in a local church to dare pull out a blank sheet of paper and change the way ministry is done.

In Hebrews 11 we see that the common thread of many great Bible characters is their faith-filled lives. Noah believed God had a reason behind the boat construction, so starting over was okay. Abraham remained steadfast in his faith, even when his wife did the chuckling. Moses took a little convincing, but

eventually had faith to believe he was on a God-directed mission. And had Joseph given in or given up, which seemed much easier than remaining true to his faith in God, he would have become just another Joe.



Today's children's ministries share common ground with these biblical patriarchs—it requires a modern-day leap of faith for someone in a local church to dare pull out a blank sheet of paper and change the way ministry is done. In many settings, there are years or even decades of tradition standing guard against change. Or maybe there's apprehension to do anything outside of the denomination's program. It can seem ludicrous to start a ministry over or even to seriously rethink whether it really works—to whatever degree. Let's be real—children's ministry must happen every weekend, leaving little time for pondering change.

But maybe there's something just a little exciting at the thought of a new adventure in children's ministry. Maybe it can be a place that kids love so much that they actually *want* to attend each weekend. Maybe it's an experience they enjoy enough to invite their friends. This thought—this dream—quicken the pulse of many children's leaders and can become the heartbeat of an entire ministry. And the good news is that this isn't a fairy tale. Every year more kids' ministries throughout this country and around the world decide to try something new—and report the awakening of a new, exciting day.

Often these adventurous days come filled with very real challenges. Throughout my tenure in children's ministry, I've known what it's like to survive the lows and then hang on for the highs. I have felt overwhelmed with panic from a shortage of volunteers on weekends. But I've also seen God convince a man to change his schedule so he can build into a group of fifth-grade boys. I have labored under the weight of a commitment that Sundays will never bore kids. Yet I've also watched God inspire creative gospel messages that help usher kids across the line of faith. I have tasted the loneliness that sets in following church leadership's resistance toward change. And I've also received leaders' support to expand our budget and space, support that can only be attributed to God.

Across years of meeting with and challenging leaders to begin a new adventure within their children's ministries, many have asked me to tell the Promiseland story. Most are surprised and encouraged to discover that our



blank-sheet-of-paper experiences happen over and over again—and that we remain a work in progress. The rest of this chapter describes our ministry’s early journey and provides five faith-promises from God to hold on to when considering or experiencing change. Then chapter 2 focuses on a personal epiphany that landed me in Promiseland. The remainder of the book provides detailed guidance that, when adopted, will help you start your own Great Kid-Venture.

The Story of How Promiseland Began

As you read the next few pages, you will see that our story offers at least one scene that will strike familiarity with nearly any ministry. Look for one or more that relate closest to your situation. You will also see that Promiseland hasn’t always been so promising. But it will become clear how God can use ordinary people in extraordinary ways and give them the adventure of a lifetime. And he can do the same in your ministry.

In the Beginning, There Was Nothing

The Promiseland story begins with the genesis of Willow Creek Community Church. A twenty-year-old college student named Bill Hybels attended a New Testament course taught by Dr. Gilbert Bilezekian. During this class, Dr. Bilezekian often spoke about the amazing church described in Acts 2. This was a church completely devoted to Jesus Christ—one in which people actively loved and cared for each other, shared all they had with those in need, took care of the poor, and met in homes where they enjoyed deep community. *“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:47). What a picture! Dr. Bilezekian loved to cast the vision for this type of church, and always concluded with a longing to see it happen again.

Sitting on the edge of his classroom seat was Bill Hybels, who loved to catch this vision. God placed a passion in Bill’s heart so strong that he often went to his professor’s office to talk more about what this modern-day church could be. Dr. Bilezekian recalls a conversation on his patio in May



1975, when Bill announced that he and his team were going to start a church.

“I nearly fell off my lawn chair,” Dr. Bilezekian says, “but I discovered Bill was serious. We prayed, we thought, we strategized. And it was there, in my backyard, that Willow Creek was born.”¹

So Bill and a few of his friends decided to launch an Acts 2 church in Chicago's northwest suburbs. Each of them held tight to a conviction that God was calling them to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ. Because of their passion for that mission, they invested all they had to turn this dream into reality. But they still fell short of enough rent money for the movie theater they planned to meet in each Sunday morning. So they sold tomatoes door-to-door, squeezing out enough profit to enable the new church to open its doors on October 12, 1975. This core group believed that God could make anything happen, so they began with no permanent facility, no salaries, no long-term strategy, and no seminary degrees.

Interestingly, their leap of faith also started with no children's ministry. But that would soon change.

Faith and Nothing Else

The brand-new Willow Creek Community Church had an obvious problem. Families did not want to attend a church that had no kids' program. To fill this ever-widening gap, Bill Hybels called Jo Kelly, a nineteen-year-old Trinity College student, and asked her to consider helping in the Sunday school area. Jo agreed to show up and lend a hand. She arrived to discover that “helping” meant she was in charge, because there were no other adults in the Sunday school area. A quick inventory also revealed that there were no toys, no curriculum, no volunteers, and no budget. Not even a blank sheet of paper. Not exactly an ideal time to accept a leadership role.

But Jo Kelly believed God had called her to this position, and that he was larger than all the challenges. So she uttered six frightening but faith-filled



She uttered six frightening but faith-filled words: “God, you lead and I’ll follow.”

words: “God, you lead and I’ll follow.” Jo describes her experience as Promiseland’s first official volunteer and ministry leader:

“Each week varied widely—sometimes we’d have five kids, and I also

remember hitting a high of nearly fifty. We broke up into two groups—‘readers’ and ‘nonreaders’ is the best way to describe them. We were so limited by space and volunteers, and there was no way to provide care for babies, because the lobby of the theater was just too dirty and uncontrolled.

“I had lots of easy-to-teach lessons, short memory verses, songs, and simple crafts. We kept the message simple. I regularly had to clean up the floor of the lobby because it was full of leftover trash and popcorn from the night before. Eventually the stage crew made me room dividers that we set up in the corners to try to section off as rooms. I brought blankets to serve as a clean area for the kids to sit on and snuggle up in, because the lobby was so cold.

“Probably the hardest part was volunteers. By being involved with kids, they would not be able to attend the service. As we grew, I depended on a small group of willing adults whom I had to pull out of the service when we had really good numbers.

“Mine was not a glamorous ministry. But I knew the Lord wanted me there, so I was content.”

Park on that thought for a moment. Despite floors littered with stale popcorn and Milk Duds, shivering kids, and no one to help, Jo was content.



Consider for a moment—do you ever stand still instead of stepping out in faith, because you don’t feel qualified for the calling God is giving you? I do. Are you afraid

