



'We're losing them in the nursery'

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Talitha Koum Covenant Partner



We were four women who were more perplexed than demoralized. After 12 years of ministry in one deep pocket of multi-generational urban poverty, we'd attended more teenagers' funerals than high school graduations. It was running three to one – gravesides to grads. Six years earlier, our small ecumenical church had formed a youth group in the Kate Ross government-housing neighborhood of South Waco. The teenagers named themselves The Peacemakers but despite their chosen name, the teens in it regularly broke out in the violence they'd learned on the streets.

We simply knew that the Lord had not brought us here to watch these children become drug dealers or mothers by the age of 14, go to prison, and die young. A call was forming as God dreamed into us what could be.

Two seminal moments stand out in my memory. We asked a trusted Communities in Schools adviser what was the No. 1 problem of entering students at our local elementary school. Language skills? Deficits in relating to numbers and letters? What? As she shook her head no, no, a troubling look swept her face and concretized in her words, "The No. 1 problem is their mental health." We were stunned. In this pocket of poverty, a kindergartner's chief difficulty entering public education is mental health – a lack of it.

As we plowed forward with our research, a meeting with one of our city's gifted play therapists ended with a plea, "Open a therapeutic nursery!" We'd never even heard of such a thing. We did more research and read *Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence* by Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley, a powerful and persuasive book that led us through the most recent brain development research and told the

terrifying story of one child's descent from birth to death row.

Yes, we said, we are losing them in the nursery. Their brains are literally being organized around chaos and their adrenal systems are over-preparing for fight or flight on such a regular basis that stress hormones are disrupting the synaptic connections between brain cells. The biggest effects, claims the research, is an impairment of language and memory , i.e., the ability to encounter a pattern and remember it. And if it can't be remembered, how can good patterns be emulated and repeated?

It became all too clear why our children were mentally quitting school at 8, why they couldn't stand in line, what caused them to not comprehend that seven would always follow six. Added to the chaotic brain development was the chaos of an impoverished environment. Mothers of five children who were only 21 themselves lived in cramped government housing with not a single chest of drawers. Generations of neglect meant that there were no bedtimes. Children fell asleep wherever they were whenever they could no longer hold their eyes open. And night to night it could be in a different home, not just a different bed. Their parents were understandably depressed, some addicted, some with manifested mental diseases and deficiencies.

A thought crossed my mind in my time of silence one morning, "I had no choice into which home I would be born. What if I had been born into this kind of poverty, chaos and hopelessness?" The very thought of it was terrifying. How could we leave these littlest ones unaided in such circumstances? What was to be done? Could we do it? Did we have the fortitude and patience – the will – to see through this dream of God?

Fast-forward two years. After painstaking development and fundraising, we opened our therapeutic nursery January 2003 in a former Boys and Girls Club, just blocks away from our other ministries, those of CrossTies Ecumenical

Church. This church of six members is helped by hundreds of volunteers, members of other churches who come alongside.

Talitha Koum Nurture Center is a mental health therapeutic nursery for newborns through the age of 6. "Talitha koum," Jesus spoke over Jairus' daughter who was presumed dead. The Aramaic words meant, "My child, get up!" And she did. Then Jesus ordered a lovely thing: "Get her something to eat." How practical. He brought her back to life to be among the living in a most normal way. It was our mission, too, to keep children from descending to the brink of death – and worse – to help them, instead, to rise up.

Having been in this neighborhood for 15 years, we thought we knew. But we knew so little about the depth of pain a 3-year-old could hold or the rage that could develop in one so precious. The torment that assailed our toddlers in their sleep was shattering to us. A very low teacher-to-child ratio is required, and some say we are shooting into hell with a water pistol, considering there are only 24 children in our care. My response is that I'd rather shoot into hell than to see one more child go to hell! Consider Bitsy.

Bitsy (*not her real name*) had been abducted by a mother she'd never known who bore her in prison and, on release, snatched her in the night from a beloved grandmother. Dumped back on her grandmother's doorstep months later and deemed too much trouble, Bitsy then saw her mother stab her father. The following day, Bitsy was brought to Talitha Koum in terror-stricken shambles. Here was a true test of our call! Would Talitha Koum be a mental health therapeutic nursery . . . for those who desperately need it?

On her arrival, we'd been open just two months. She wailed incessantly for three weeks, taking time only to gasp breaths between sobs. We survived those three weeks and so did Bitsy who is now a successful first-grader after four years at Talitha Koum in weekly play therapy and in the haven of rest she found in our Nurture

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Center's loving and patient care.

In between those times, Bitsy lost to death her care-giving grandmother, then her grandfather, was foisted between family homes, and was sexually molested. How did Bitsy survive it all? The love of God compelled us to be there for her and all the others whose stories are so similar. And we are still with Bitsy, sending her to school with a trusted Talitha Koum mentor and continuing to see her at weekly parenting meetings where her mentor participates and brings her to see us.

The details of what we do five days a week with these children is interesting but hardly the point. If you've pictured me there, day and night, don't. I own a marketing firm. Talitha Koum's very existence is a testament to what God can do when a few are willing to get off the boat and come to follow Jesus



Jennifer Berry, an infant room teacher at Talitha Koum, has a psychology degree and typifies the quality of teacher the center employs.

wherever he leads – and to be faithful in that following, even when the way is hard and the path is lit only by a candle of hope.

Children of Promise

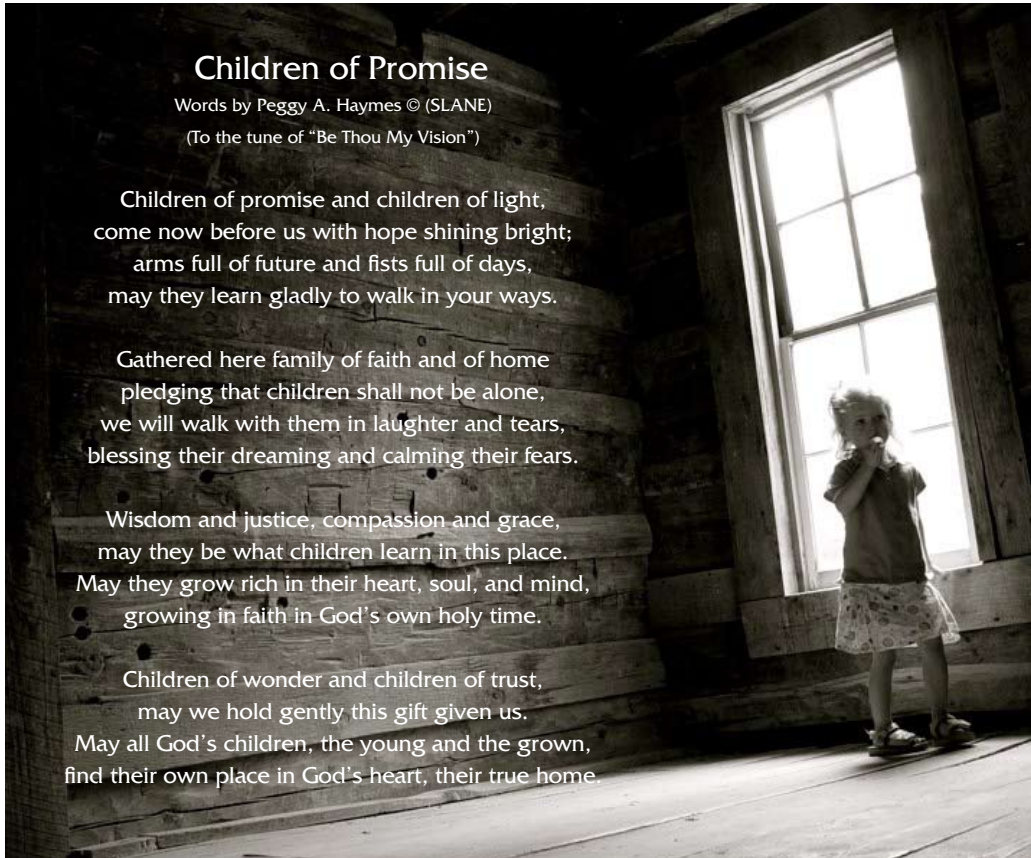
Words by Peggy A. Haymes © (SLANE)
(To the tune of "Be Thou My Vision")

Children of promise and children of light,
come now before us with hope shining bright;
arms full of future and fists full of days,
may they learn gladly to walk in your ways.

Gathered here family of faith and of home
pledging that children shall not be alone,
we will walk with them in laughter and tears,
blessing their dreaming and calming their fears.

Wisdom and justice, compassion and grace,
may they be what children learn in this place.
May they grow rich in their heart, soul, and mind,
growing in faith in God's own holy time.

Children of wonder and children of trust,
may we hold gently this gift given us.
May all God's children, the young and the grown,
find their own place in God's heart, their true home



Sterling Severns Photo