

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY — ON — PURPOSE

A **PURPOSE DRIVEN** APPROACH
TO LEAD KIDS TOWARD
SPIRITUAL HEALTH

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FOREWORD BY RICK WARREN

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CHAPTER 1

Making the Most of Your Opportunity

So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.

EPHESIANS 5:15–16 NLT

I'll never forget a vacation my family went on when I was eight years old. I grew up as a PK—a pastor's kid—in a church of around 130 people. Every Sunday, I was at church, sitting in the service. My dad was a good preacher, but I was a normal kid, often bored and distracted.

One weekend when my family went out of town, we ended up visiting another church. As soon as we stepped inside the front doors, I knew that this place was different. Our parents went to the adult service, and we were checked in to the kids' church, a place designed specifically for us!

We sang songs. We played games. The teacher grabbed and kept my attention. But as wonderful as all of this was, the one thing that fascinated me more than anything was the story time with the puppets. Looking back, I'm not sure why I loved the puppets, but from that moment forward, I knew I had found my calling in life. I would be the “puppet guy.”

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On our drive home that day, I couldn't get my ideas out fast enough. I was truly inspired, awash in creative thoughts, and I asked my dad if we could host a children's church at our church. He smiled and told me he would think about it. Several days later, I brought up the idea again and begged my dad to commission me as the puppet guy for our church. My father made a deal with me: If I earned enough money to purchase the puppets, he would build me a puppet stand and recruit an adult volunteer to help launch our own version of children's church.

I was ecstatic!

More determined than ever, I mowed lawn after lawn and earned \$38. Taking my hard-earned savings to the local Christian bookstore, I bought my first puppet. My dad kept his end of the bargain. He built a first-rate puppet stand, recruited an adult volunteer, and we officially launched our first children's church. Before long, I was leading children's church—as an eight-year-old kid! I ordered the necessary materials, taught the lessons, and every Sunday I would set up the room. Years passed and I found myself in high school, yet I continued to serve in children's church. It didn't hurt that I was able to serve alongside my high school sweetheart, Stephanie, who later became my wife.

The Defining Moments in Life

That morning visiting the church was more than a fun family vacation for me. It was a defining moment in my life, one that sparked a turning point and set a trajectory for me. I share this with you because we all have defining moments. At the time, we may not recognize any one of them as a defining moment. But

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these significant occasions, experienced in the different seasons of life, have the potential to transform us, to launch us into a whole new realm of existence.

I've heard it said that it's not what happens in life, but how we respond to what happens that defines who we are. Or, to say it another way, it's not the circumstances, but the choices we make that determine the direction of our life. When I think about that statement, I'm reminded of other defining moments and how people responded, often in ways that would forever change the lives of generations to come. Consider Adam and Eve. Their choice altered world history forever! They chose to listen to the serpent and bite into the forbidden fruit. Or consider David and how his choice to trust God and confront Goliath changed the course of a nation. He slayed the giant with a slingshot and small stone. Or think of the impact on the course of world evangelism when Jesus appeared to Saul as he traveled on the road to Damascus. Saul became the apostle Paul and the trajectory of his life was changed forever.

Think of these life-changing moments in United States history. When John F. Kennedy declared that the United States would put a man on the moon. When Rosa Parks sat in the front of the bus rather than in the back. These moments changed our lives and we still live with the effects today. Defining moments can seem insignificant when they happen, but their effects are lasting.

Take a few moments to think about where you are today and the events or moments that brought you here. What are the defining moments in your life? Are there any that have affected your decision to be involved in children's ministry?

Defining Moments Create Opportunities

Each one of our defining moments creates a set of circumstances called an opportunity. Opportunities are gifts waiting to be unwrapped. They are the wet clay that is waiting to be shaped and molded. But the clay doesn't stay wet and moldable forever. To make the most of the opportunities we have, we must take decisive action.

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30 is a great example of this principle. It has always stood out to me because it shows what happens when we choose to act on an opportunity given to us—and what happens when we do not. In this parable, a wealthy man is preparing to leave town, and he gathers three of his servants to share with them a special assignment. He entrusts each servant with a specific sum of money to invest while he is away. To the first servant he entrusts five bags of silver, to the second he entrusts two bags of silver, and to the third he entrusts one bag of silver. The parable tells us that both the servant with five bags of silver and the servant with the two bags of silver immediately set out to invest the silver entrusted to them. The servant entrusted with one bag of silver simply dug a hole in the ground and buried the money.

When the master returned, he was pleased to discover that the first two servants, who had invested the silver, had earned double the amount of silver. But when the master learned that the third servant had done nothing with the silver given to him, he immediately took his one bag of silver and turned it over to the first servant, saying, “To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away” (Matt. 25:29 NLT).

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What was the defining moment in this parable? It came when the wealthy man gave his three servants an opportunity to build on his investments. He gave them resources to do this and encouraged them to use their creativity to take risks and grow what he had given to them. We can learn valuable lessons from this story about the opportunities God has given to us. Here are just a few to consider:

“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.”

MATTHEW 25:14–15 NLT

First, we see that everyone is given unique opportunities. The first lesson we learn here is that wherever you are, and no matter what capacity you serve in children’s ministry, you have an opportunity. These amounts weren’t determined randomly or by the draw out of a hat. They were given as an intentional assessment of each servant’s ability. This means that God specifically and strategically designed and gifted each of us to accomplish the assignment he has entrusted to us. Here’s the awesome part: God knows what we can and can’t handle. He is our Creator! He knows our limits and equips us to be who he created us to be.

Yes, the master could have divided up the bags of silver equally among the three servants. But as we see in Matthew 25:15, the master knew the ability of each of his servants, and he distributed the money accordingly. Knowing what each servant

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could handle, he intentionally placed each servant in the best possible scenario to succeed. He gave each servant a purpose and an opportunity. Then it was up to each servant to choose what to do.

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12 NLT

The Bible tells us that each of us is a part of the body of Christ. It takes every part, working together, for the body to function as it was designed and to truly thrive. In the same way that the wealthy man had knowledge of his servants' abilities and distributed each talent (or bag of silver) intentionally, God, in his ultimate wisdom, distributes abilities and opportunities with deliberate purpose to see us—the church body—fulfill his will. It's like what Paul said to the Corinthians: "But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it" (1 Cor. 12:18 NLT). Did you catch the second half of that verse I just quoted? "And God has put each part just where he wants it." In moments when I'm tempted to think God failed in bringing the "right" opportunities my way, I must remind myself that God is a God of intentionality. He has fashioned each of us with purpose and placed us exactly where he wants us.

Consider what Isaiah tells us in Isaiah 45:9: "What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator. Does a clay pot argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying, "Stop, you're doing it wrong!" Does the pot exclaim, "How clumsy can you be?" How terrible it would be if a newborn baby said to its father, "Why was I born?" or if it said to its mother,

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“Why did you make me this way?”” (NLT). Isaiah reminds us that God is the potter, and we are the clay. God is a beautiful, gifted, and creative artist, and he knows what he’s doing. He has placed us exactly where he wants us to be.

Still, even though I know God formed me and breathed fresh life into my body, there are moments when I, the clay, like to argue with the potter. In those moments I fail to remember that since God created me, he knows me better than I know myself. I need to remember that God knows what I can handle. He created me fully knowing and understanding my gifting, my passions, and my potential.

This doesn’t mean that life will be easy or that we never need to work or change. Far from it! We will constantly seek to improve, grow, change, mature, and learn new things. But we won’t be as gifted in some ways as others are. There are gifts and talents I greatly admire that I don’t have. There have been times when I resented the fact that I didn’t have certain gifts. But I’m discovering that true joy, contentment, and fulfillment come only when I strive to be the person God destined me to be. I need to work hard to make the most of the talents God entrusted to me. Only then will I be entrusted with more.

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.

1 PETER 4:10 NLT

Second, an opportunity lasts for only a limited time. What we learn from this story is that the master was gone for a long time. His return marked the “expiration date” for the opportunity he had given each servant. Earlier I said an opportunity is

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like wet clay waiting to be shaped and molded. Clay does not stay soft and moldable forever. Each servant had their chance, and the master wanted to know what each had done with the opportunity he gave them.

After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money.

MATTHEW 25:19 NLT

The first two servants seized the opportunity and took action, while the third servant was paralyzed by fear and missed the opportunity. Notice the language to describe their responses:

- Servant 1—“began immediately” (TLB)
- Servant 2—“also went right to work” (TLB)
- Servant 3—“dug a hole” (TLB)

They each were working with something, and each took an action step when the master left. But only the first two took steps forward. The third stepped backward. While a defining moment will present an opportunity, you and I must take decisive action, or we will miss or squander the opportunity.

So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.

EPHESIANS 5:15–16 NLT

Third, this parable shows us that we must see the opportunity in order to seize it. Before you can do anything with what God has given to you, you must first see it. What do I mean?

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“It’s right in front of you.” That’s what my wife, Stephanie, says when I stand at the pantry in our kitchen and ask, for what seems like the millionth time, “Where is the peanut butter?” More times than I care to admit, the peanut butter is right where she says it is, right in front of my eyes. How does that happen? Throughout my years of both seized and missed opportunities, I’ve discovered that the thing that most often causes me to miss an opportunity is simply a lack of awareness.

It’s all too easy to miss the things that are right in front of us. It’s like the farmer who wanted to sell his farm and discover diamonds in Africa. After hearing tales about other farmers doing just that, he decided to join the action. He sold his farm and set out to find diamonds for himself. And you know what? He never found a single diamond. Not one. In fact, he exhausted all of his resources. Finally, desperate and discouraged, he walked into a river and drowned.

I hear you—thanks for that depressing story, Steve. What does that have to do with defining moments, opportunities, and decisive action? Well, the story didn’t end there. The man who bought the farmer’s land discovered something that had been right in front of the farmer the whole time. The new land owner was walking along the creek one day and noticed something glimmering in the water. Reaching down, he picked up what he thought was a cool-looking rock. He took it home and placed it on his mantel as a decoration. One day a visitor noticed the rock on the mantel and exclaimed, “Do you have any idea what this is?” The new owner replied, “No, I have no idea, but my creek is full of rocks just like that one.” The visitor, holding up the rock, said, “This is the largest diamond I have ever seen.” The very thing the farmer longed for and went searching for was right in

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front of him all along. He already owned it! He just didn't see it. He couldn't recognize what he was looking at, and he missed it.

When I talk about the opportunity God gives us all who work in children's ministry, I call it the opportunity to "change the landscape of eternity." Picture this: You are standing in heaven looking out across the landscape. You see face after face of individuals God allowed you to influence. These people are standing there either because of the direct or indirect influence you had on their spiritual development and their decision to follow Christ. That is the landscape of eternity—a sea of individuals whose lives were touched and changed forever by Christ at work in your life.

Decisive action determines divine impact. When we make use of what we have been given, we can literally change those around us, wherever we are, forever.

To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away.

MATTHEW 25:29 NLT

The final lesson from the parable of the talents is about faithfulness. Blessings come to those who are faithful and respond to opportunities. Did you notice that while the first two servants were given different amounts of silver to invest, they both reaped the same reward? He blessed them both with more when he discovered that they both had invested what they had been given. The master was more interested in the fact that his servants had taken decisive action with their talents, rather than the specific amount of money each made. They had done something with what they had been given.

My Calling: Another Defining Moment

That vacation visit to another church was not the only defining moment in my life. In college, I had another of those moments, one that changed the trajectory of my life yet again. In college, I did what I had always done—volunteered in my local church’s children’s ministry. Very soon, I was dubbed the “whatever guy.” Whatever needed to be done, I did it. I cleaned classrooms, set up chairs, taught lessons, shared stories with puppets, and filled in for teachers in every age group, including the nursery! I simply showed up, received my assignment, and went to work serving kids. And I loved every second of it!

One day my senior pastor approached me with a game-changing request: “Hey, Steve, our children’s pastor is no longer with us. Could you step in and fill the gap temporarily while we search for a new children’s pastor? You’ve been serving in almost every capacity of our children’s ministry, and we feel you are the right person to hold down the fort during this transition.”

Without missing a beat I responded, “Sure! No problem. I’d be glad to take care of the children’s ministry while you find another leader.” Famous last words, right? I have a sneaking suspicion that perhaps some of you reading this may have found your way into children’s ministry the same way I did . . . you were tricked into holding down the fort for “just a little while”!

Honestly, I was genuinely excited to help out during the transition. I was in my senior year of college, had recently married my high school sweetheart, and was juggling several part-time jobs. I didn’t have a ton of extra time to invest in this hold-down-the-fort project, but I was going to do what I could because I loved being a part of children’s ministry and wanted to support my church.

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In the months that followed, I sensed a pressure I hadn't felt before. I didn't know what I was going to do with my future. Because I had been involved in church ministry for most of my life, I naturally gravitated in that direction. I assumed I would do something in youth ministry, eventually becoming an associate pastor, maybe a senior pastor—a process I was very familiar with. Being a senior pastor seemed an acceptable career path to follow. Keep in mind that this was at a time when many churches didn't have children's pastors or dedicated staff to serve children. Before going to college, I had never even heard of a "children's pastor," so that wasn't something I'd seriously considered. I struggled, wondering if children's ministry was something I could continue doing as a volunteer.

As I approached graduation, I was terrified that I would end my college career still not knowing what my next step in life should be. Each morning, I rose early to walk and talk with God. I walked all over my community and repeatedly asked God the same question, begging to discover what my next step was. I knew there was a calling on my life to lead in the local church, I just didn't know what I should lead or in what capacity. I truly wanted God's will to be done in my life. I was prepared to accept whatever he had destined for me. I remember praying this specific prayer that, in turn, resulted in another defining moment in my life.

"God, I'll do whatever you want me to do, it doesn't matter if it's full-time, part-time, or as a volunteer. I just want to know my efforts made a difference. God, how can I make the biggest difference for the kingdom?"

Over and over, morning after morning, I prayed that same prayer. More than anything, I wanted to know how I could make the biggest difference for his kingdom. I was afraid God was

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getting annoyed at my constant repetition. But I didn't know what else to pray. That was a large part of the reason why I said yes to lead the children's ministry as a volunteer while they searched for a new children's pastor.

One Sunday morning, as I was about to teach the lesson to the kids, God in his compassion and grace, revealed to me in dramatic fashion the answer to the question I had pestered him with for the last two months. As I began to teach, every young face in the audience grew blurry. In my mind, I heard God's voice saying these words to me: "You want to make a difference for my kingdom, then here it is." Then the blurry vision faded and the kids' faces in front of me became clear and bright.

I knew in that moment that God had created me and called me to invest my life in children's ministry. For the first time, I sensed alignment between my heart and my mind about the direction of my life and ministry. Tears filled my eyes and joy filled my heart.

That's when I realized that the kids were looking at me as if I had lost my mind.

I said nothing to my senior pastor or to any of the other volunteers. But I did share my experience with my wife, Stephanie. After several weeks, my senior pastor approached me at church one day and said, "Steve, we would like you to come on staff part-time as the interim children's pastor while we continue our search." I happily agreed, but I said nothing about the calling God had placed on my heart. After a few months in the part-time position, my senior pastor offered me the full-time role. It was just a few weeks before my college graduation. Stephanie and I prayed through the offer, and a few days later I accepted the position. And, as they say, the rest is history.

I share this with you because I think there is something very

important about the question I repeatedly asked God in those years: "How can I make the biggest impact for your kingdom?" I wasn't asking God to tell me where he wanted me to go. What I wanted to know was how can I make the biggest impact for him and for his glory. And that one question launched my thoughts in a different direction. It changed my prayers and created a different level of focus for my search, guiding my heart and mind. That one question helped me discover my part in God's mission to change the landscape of eternity.

How I Make the Most of My Opportunity

Fast-forward to my sixth year in full-time children's ministry. I was serving as the children's pastor in a different church in the Midwest. I was loving my job, yet there were times when I felt as if I was going crazy. Deep down I knew something was missing. I just couldn't pinpoint what it was. I could clearly see the opportunity God had given us to influence the spiritual development of the kids in our children's ministry, but I wasn't confident that what we were doing was truly effective—at least not as effective as we could be.

That unsettled feeling led me on a quest to find out what was missing in my ministry. It turned into a third defining moment in my life—reading Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Church*. Initially, when I was first handed the book, I wasn't all that interested. At that time (and similar to what we find today), new church-growth fads were surfacing every year or two. I had stopped counting the number of books I'd read that claimed to contain the way to do ministry. But the words in the title—"purpose driven"—intrigued me, and I was willing to take a peek.

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I knew there had to be a more effective way to do ministry than what I was doing. I loved the kids and families in my church, and without hesitation I can tell you that my wife and I were fully committed to making a difference in their lives. The ministry was in constant motion with one event after another. We were running from one program to the next. I felt the constant pressure to increase numbers. Parent satisfaction was always a top priority.

I found myself struggling to meet everyone's expectations. I was at the point where I was willing to try anything to be able to be more effective doing what I loved doing. I opened the book, and from the first page to the last, the concept of purpose driven made complete sense to me. In fact, only a few chapters into the book, I knew that my approach to ministry had to change immediately.

What changed for me? Well, before reading *The Purpose Driven Church*, I had not given serious consideration to *why* my ministry existed. I always thought that I knew why—until I tried to write it down. With the pencil hovering over the blank page, I suddenly realized it was not clear in my mind. I also became painfully aware that while my ministry was in motion and headed somewhere, I didn't know *where* it was going. I could not give a clear answer to our destination. There was a similar lack of clarity when it came to identifying our target audience. We had not established *who* we were trying to reach and, as a result, we were not being very effective in reaching anyone.

As if this was not enough, one of the biggest adjustments in my ministry came in realizing that while good things were happening, those good things were not connected to a strategy. Services, programs, and events existed in isolation and did not

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work together toward a specific objective. I did not have a written strategy for addressing *how* we would reach and disciple kids.

I learned that there are essential structural components that need to be in place if we are going to be successful in our mission. Knowing *what* structural components are necessary to support the ministry and then implementing those components made the difference. Now, many years later, I share this third defining moment in my life with you because I'm hoping to lead you through a similar journey of discovery. You'll have the benefit of learning from my mistakes and from the experience of others who have attempted this journey before you.

I'm not telling you how to do children's ministry. I'm providing you with an opportunity to discover for yourself the possibilities God has for your children's ministry, some of which may not have crossed your mind. I'm so confident in this process because it has worked for many people. It connects your experience, talents, and your unique opportunities to God's own leading and guidance for your children's ministry. This is an opportunity that should never be taken lightly, because it is a divine moment where kingdom possibility intersects with your own unique life purpose and gifting.

This May Be a Defining Moment for You

Think about the opportunity in front of you right now and ask yourself this question: Am I making the most of this opportunity? If not, what can I do to make the most of it? This may be a moment that changes your perspective or gets you asking different questions, empowering questions, about your future and the future of your ministry.

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This might be a defining moment for you—not because you are reading this book, but because you are accepting that you have an opportunity to change the landscape of eternity right where you are. Or perhaps you recognize and embrace the fact that you are gifted by God. Or you recognize that just taking one small step, making one adjustment, can make a significant difference in your ministry to children.

Earlier, I mentioned that I often think of the spiritual development of children like forming shapes with soft clay. This time in a child's life is unique. What are you doing with the clay God has given you? What are you doing with your opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children? In the next chapter, we will begin to answer some of these questions as we explore the concept of moving kids toward spiritual health. We will also detail the essential elements for creating a ministry environment that makes the most of the opportunities in front of you.

Be sure to visit www.childrensministryonpurpose.com to download the free discussion guide. For Chapter 1 you'll spend time thinking about the defining moments of your life, the opportunities that those moments have created, and the decisive actions you must take to make the most of those opportunities.