

– Mr. Whistle –
The History and Importance of Child Evangelism
in the WELS

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Behind the Making of Mr. Whistle

As the WELS considered more ways to reach out to the unchurched in our congregations' communities it became apparent that more needed to be done with our Lutheran elementary schools. There were many unchurched families that could be reached, but what was the best way to reach them? The WELS began to take some initiatives in reaching out to and through children in the late eighties. This was prompted by our Lutheran elementary schools being criticized for the lack of outreach. The great debate over whether or not our schools should be used for outreach is still raging. By their very makeup our Lutheran elementary schools are designed for the nurture of the children of our members, but in the past couple of decades it has become apparent that there is a great opportunity for outreach through unchurched children that may attend our schools.

The WELS has seen a need for child evangelism, but has been slow in pursuing the opportunities. Jerry Kastens, in a reply to my question as to when the WELS first took an active role in child evangelism, said,

In the 1980s, national and district workshops were conducted with the Commission on Evangelism and Parish Schools. A children's evangelism resource FOR Lutheran Elementary Schools grew out of the workshops. In my opinion the criticism is still valid. Very few of our schools are truly outreach, though the shrinking pool of kids and the decline in growth in our synod is causing a bit of a panic. Who knows? The Lord may get us to do outreach through our schools?¹

When the Board for Parish Services reorganized in 1990 and 1991 and developed the Commission on Youth Discipleship and Jerry Kastens arrived as the administrator, he brought with that commission a passion for reaching out to the lost. He says,

It is my feeling that today in the WELS there are three classes of youth: 1) The Privileged – the LES kids who get way too much attention; 2) The Ignored – Sunday school kids who are typically relegated to the status of second class citizens attending a Sunday school that way too many people don't want to

¹ From correspondence with Mr. Jerry Kastens, former administrator for Commission on Youth Discipleship, April 2001

succeed; 3) The Forgotten – the unchurched about whom we give lip-service to caring about them, but fail to ‘walk the talk’ because we are afraid of what might happen if people who are different than us actually show up in church.²

The Commission on Youth Discipleship set as a top priority the equipping of congregations to develop tools and resources to improve “GO” strategies in the area of children’s ministry. Jerry Kastens and Pastor Bob Hartmann began to meet and plan how they would do such *equipping* of the congregations early in 1992. One of the first things Jerry Kastens did was copy the success of the Commission on Evangelism’s School of Outreach by attaching an “Outreach Through Sunday School” initiative to it. In 1993, the Early Childhood Initiative was developed and implemented by the Commission on Youth Discipleship. The Commission on Youth Discipleship commissioned the study paper to determine the value of preschools for outreach. This was later transferred to the Commission on Parish Services for further review and implementation.³

All of this was done in an effort to reach out to and through children. But what are good ways to reach out to children? The Commission on Youth Discipleship and the Commission on Evangelism recognized a need for child-based videos which could serve as excellent tools to reach out to and through children. As Pastor Hartmann says, “A void in the market place for a Bible based, live action, children’s video became evident. We have always emphasized outreach to families with children because of our WELS educational system.”⁴

The problem as Mr. Kastens has identified is that not enough is being done for and through our Sunday schools to reach out. There are too many children being left neglected by our current system of Christian education. As Kastens says, “The CYD wants congregations to look at the ‘Big Picture’ to see how valuable of a tool Sunday school is for outreach. This is

² From correspondence with Mr. Jerry Kastens, April 2001

³ From correspondence with Mr. Jerry Kastens, April 2001

⁴ From correspondence with Pastor Robert Hartmann, April 2001

what was at the heart of the Strengthening Sunday school initiative that the CYD began in 1995.”⁵

Our child evangelism initiative began to take off when the CYD consulted with the COE and conducted several informal focus group sessions around the country with congregation leaders and Sunday school teachers. As a result a great need for encouragement, resources, and strategies for evangelism came to light. There were many congregations, pastors and teachers who felt that they didn’t have enough resources, enough good ideas or enough manpower to reach out to and through children. What could they do? The answer in part lies with men such as John Barber and Steve Zambo. These men had a vision that outreach to and through children could be done by the use of videos. Mr. Barber consulted with the CYD and coordinated the project. The *Mr. Whistle* videos are the first result of such efforts.

Mr. Barber recalls how *Mr. Whistle* first began,

I became aware of Tony Schultz’s unique talent sometime in the early eighties. As I was packing up my audio/visual materials in the narthex of the church in Wolf Creek, I began to hear gales of laughter from the sanctuary. I climbed the stairs to the choir loft in order to get a good look at the source of the laughter. It was then I first set eyes upon the Rev. Anthony Schultz. His use of children’s stuffed animals and toys to illustrate Bible stories caught my immediate attention. In the months and years that followed, we developed a mutual respect and appreciation of each other’s gifts and looked forward to the day when we could take advantage of the growing acceptance of video as a viable communications tool in the synod and, thus, produce law/gospel videos specifically for children.

Extensive market research at that time did not reveal any solid Bible based product for children. Realizing that witness started early tends to build a solid faith foundation, we set upon developing a video script. It was from that first script that the title for the series and its theme song came about. Tony had incorporated a thistle, or sticker bush, as he put it, as being synonymous with sin. That was enough to start my creative juices resulting in the title “Mr. Whistle’s Thistle” and a theme song for the program.⁶

⁵ From correspondence with Mr. Jerry Kastens, April 2001

⁶ From correspondence with John Barber, former WELS Mass Media producer, April 2001

Pastor Schultz mentioned in our video interview⁷ that he and John Barber first got the idea of *Mr. Whistle* when they were sitting at a restaurant near Morton Grove, IL while attending a synod evangelism meeting in the late eighties. Mr. Barber mentioned that it would be nice to produce a television program on Bible stories for children. Mr. Barber and Pastor Schultz were involved in outreach in synod and mentioned it to the synod to start a program for kids. About that time they started *The Kid's Connection* and that really took off. The Lord blessed their efforts, which ultimately led to the first production of *Mr. Whistle's Thistle – The Wondrous Story of Creation* in 1997.

Mr. Whistle is the synod's first venture into the children's video market. It is designed to be contemporary and flexible in use. Again Jerry Kastens agreed that it can be used on cable, VBS, church libraries, family ministry, etc. We were careful to leave the WELS logo off. That way Mr. Whistle could be marketed among other church bodies and children could view and hear scripturally sound material. I have used them for one day VBS programs (outreach only), parenting programs (outreach activities), as take home videos for families who are searching, and on cable access.⁸ Pastor Bob Hartmann also mentioned, "The *Mr. Whistle* videos would be good for Sunday Schools, Lutheran elementary schools, vacation Bible schools, the home, Christian bookstores, church libraries, and children's events like Christmas for kids."⁹

Kenneth Kremer, editor for *Lutheran Parent* wrote in reply to Mr. Barber,

A few days ago, when you asked me to review the *Mr. Whistle* series I didn't know what to expect. My wife and I sat down with a critical eye to watch, and what we saw was a very worthy piece of work – something badly needed. *Lutheran Parent* has long recognized a vacuum in the ministry area that *Mr. Whistle* obviously fills quite well. We were especially pleased to note that it speaks so simply and honestly to a very young audience without compromising Bible truth in any way. I am proud to endorse this wonderful new series among Christian parents...Once again, thank you for the opportunity to review this new

⁷ Video interview with Pastor Schultz, Saturday, March 31st, 2001

⁸ From correspondence with Jerry Kastens, April 2001

⁹ From correspondence with Pastor Bob Hartmann, April 2001

series. Please pass my congratulations on to Pastor Tony Schultz for his fine work in the series.¹⁰

Mr. Whistle and Pastor Tony Schultz

Pastor Schultz graduated from Northwestern College in 1975 and then from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1979. He served his vicar year at Trinity Lutheran church in Waukesha, WI. After finishing his senior year at the Seminary he received a call into the public ministry to serve at Peace Lutheran church in Loves Park, IL for four years. Then he took a call to serve at Trinity Lutheran church in Dundee, WI for nine years and now has been serving at St. Luke's Lutheran in Watertown, WI since 1991. Pastor Schultz said that he first got interested in child evangelism while he was at Trinity in Dundee. They started doing children's devotions on Sundays and that was when he first began to really enjoy working with children and "seeing the twinkle in their eye when they understood the message about Jesus."¹¹

In a previous interview of Pastor Schultz¹², he had mentioned that the whole premise behind making a video such as *Mr. Whistle* was to "take the complex truths of God's Word and teach them to a child." In our second interview¹³, he described some of the implications of that statement,

There's very solid Biblical foundation and precedent for that. Moses and the burning bush, Ezekiel...the Lord Jesus on a grassy hill side, I can't imagine that he said consider the sparrows and there weren't some sparrows there...the sower and the seed...the fishers of men. Just again and again, the concrete to explain law and gospel.

Likewise he mentioned that it is important to keep the message in mind when making children's videos so that the gospel message is not hindered in any way. This is what he said was important to remember when considering what was important for *Mr. Whistle*, "Concrete law and gospel,

¹⁰ A letter from Ken Kremer, editor for *Lutheran Parent* to John Barber, Sep. 14, 1999.

¹¹ Video interview with Pastor Schultz, Saturday, March 31st, 2001

¹² Oral interview with Pastor Schultz, Friday, February 16th, 2001

¹³ Video interview with Pastor Schultz, Saturday, March 31st, 2001

rightly divided...law and gospel in that order. And always very solid Scriptural foundation to make sure that what you share is God's word." This was important because the target audience for *Mr. Whistle* consists of children age 3 to 10 years of age. Their abilities to think abstractly (especially in the younger ages) are not even close to being fully developed. They need concrete and visual stories to be able to fully grasp and remember *for life* the truths of God's word. Even adults better remember and better apply God's word to their lives when they can visualize what the Lord is saying in his Word.

Mr. Whistle videos are designed to teach the truths of God's word in a visual way. When a person views these videos he will see the amount of footage that was taped on location in Israel to show where Jesus lived and died and rose victoriously. On location footage is always better than mere pictures. It shows the historical reality of what Jesus did. It appeals to more of the senses. For example Pastor Schultz spoke of the sights and sounds and smells of Israel, he used that method particularly well in describing Jesus as our Good Shepherd and we as smelly, not very smart sheep in *Mr. Whistle's Lamb*. In this way, children would *remember* what they learned from these *Mr. Whistle* videos.

Again Pastor Schultz emphasizes, "For a long time, children have grown up in a television world, where the numbers and colors come bing, bing, bing. God made people to be visual and concrete. To smell things to see things...to taste things. God wants us to share his Word through those ways." *Mr. Whistle* used story telling, sharing concrete things, and especially going to specific locations in the Bible lands to get its point across. Mr. John Barber points this out when he said concerning the production of *Mr. Whistle*,

All elements of the program were focused to communicate to children 4 to 10 years of age, and initial field-testing served to validate its effectiveness. It became clear as we went on to develop additional scripts that authentic footage for Bible settings would be most desirable. Television is, after all, a moving

visual idiom and the reality of location footage is obviously far superior to still photos and/or proverbial talking head.¹⁴

These videos are not designed to be merely entertainment as are some other children's videos on the market, for example *Little People* made by Fisher Price and *Veggie Tales* made by Big Idea Productions. *Veggie Tales* for example often leans too much toward the entertainment side of things that it distorts the Bible stories it's trying to teach. And often *Veggie Tale* videos are in danger of moralizing and not using the gospel to motivate young children to do what is right in God's sight. Pastor Schultz says, "I think again just the Bible foundation that this isn't meant just to be entertaining or cute or clever...this is to share God's Word. God would have to bless it for it to work that way...the Bible promises his Word doesn't return to him empty...the results are always left up to the Holy Spirit."

In the outlining of *Mr. Whistle's Thistle* Pastor Schultz made it his goal to share law and gospel, to show the wonder of God's creation, to show the grace of God in creation and then the terrible fall, and then the promise of the Savior, which naturally led to the next three videos: *Mr. Whistle's Lamb – Jesus, God's Promise Kept*, *Mr. Whistle Cooks Out – Jesus, God's Promise Fulfilled*, *Mr. Whistle Bakes Bread – Jesus, Good News Forever*. All three of these focused on the life and work of Jesus. They are focused on vividly sharing the message of sin and grace so that children learn about their Savior, but not only will they learn, they will be equipped to share that message with others.

So far *Mr. Whistle* has been received very favorably! I conducted a phone survey with a number of people to see what the general reaction to *Mr. Whistle* is. These are some of their comments to my questions:

1) What prompted you to purchase the *Mr. Whistle* video(s)?

¹⁴ From correspondence with John Barber, April 2001

Mr. Edward Scott from Denver, Colorado said, "I read about them in the Forward/NL and I purchased them for my grandson for his birthday. He loves them!" Pastor Schmeling from Monroe, Michigan said, "I purchased them primarily for family use and use in the church. They are good videos – not too much entertainment, but just the right amount of law and gospel." Others purchased the videos for their church libraries as well and gave favorable reviews.

2) What do you see as the most important element of Mr. Whistle?

Mrs. Schmeling said, "They are good teaching videos." Pastor Schmeling said, "Rightly dividing law and gospel so that children can understand. Not just for fun, but for learning about Jesus." Mrs. Schmidt from Watertown, WI said, "It's a wonderful way to bring Jesus to a child's level. It's teaching about Jesus." Mrs. Parmlee from San Antonio, TX said, "They are Scriptural, which made all the difference for me to include them in our church library."

3) Does Mr. Whistle vividly and clearly convey the truth of our need for Jesus and what he has done for us in ways that children can understand?

Mrs. Schmeling replied, "My daughter wanted to see it again and again. It's one tape that I don't have to explain what's right and wrong." Pastor Westra from Bend, Oregon says, "Tony conveys the truth in a vivid yet not just an entertaining way. He gets the point across and lets the message do the work." Mrs. Hintz from Campbellsport, WI says, "Very important that Pastor Schultz teaches in ways that the children can understand. The children just love it!"¹⁵

As the WELS has been slow to discover, child evangelism is very important! Little children sing little songs about Jesus all the time no matter what. Their innocence and their absolute trust in God shows in the way they sing about Jesus, the way they talk about Jesus. They say their prayers all the time no matter whose around. They are so filled with joy and trust and faith. They aren't sad at a death of a loved one, because they know it's going to be okay.

¹⁵ Phone interview conducted during the week of April 16th to April 21st.

Jesus lives and so shall we. They believe what Jesus says and trust in him completely. That's the beauty of a childlike faith! That's the point Pastor Schultz makes in this documentary about *Mr. Whistle*. We can only hope and pray that many more children come to know their Savior through these videos and that the Lord opens many more opportunities for development of more videos for the edification of our children.