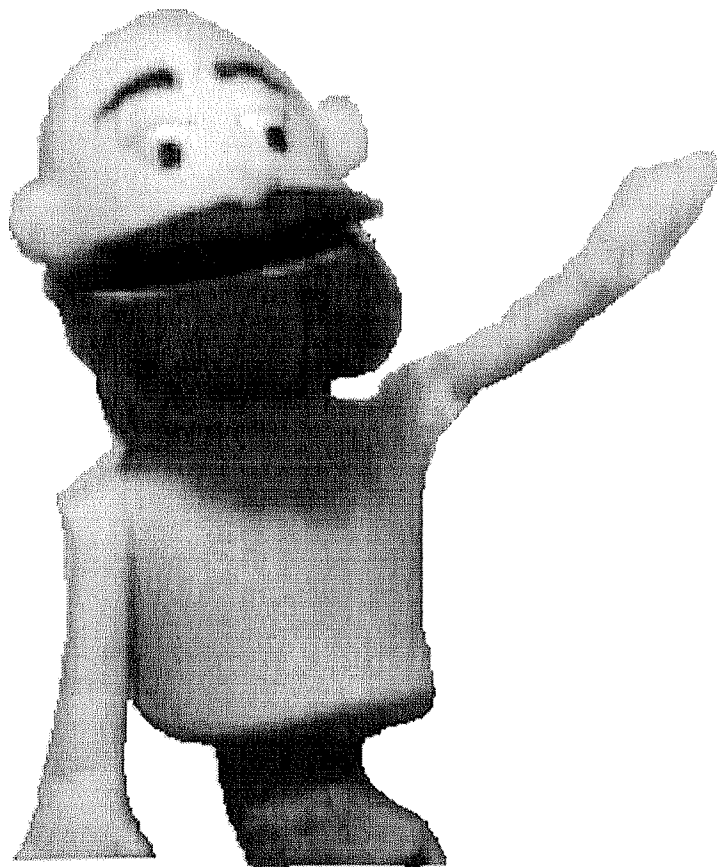


Puppet Ministry

Micki Schneider:
The Creator of Shepherd's Hands
Puppet Ministry



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Interview Summary
Micki Schneider: Creator of Shepherd's Hands Puppet Ministry

Micki Schneider is a lay person who attends Atonement Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, WI. Micki attended Dr. Martin Luther College, but later decided the public ministry was not for her. Instead, Micki raised a family of seven and began a very unique children's ministry called Shepherd's Hands. Shepherd's Hands is a puppet ministry that began at Atonement Lutheran Church in 1996. It was created in order to help young Christians grow in their confidence and ability to tell others about Jesus.

Puppet Ministry is a unique children's ministry. Puppeteers spread the message of Christ to children and all who will listen through Christian themed puppetry. This form of ministry has been effective and well-received by many on Milwaukee's North side. As Miki has said, everybody enjoys puppets. People will stop and watch a puppet show, both parents and children alike. Puppet ministry is a non-threatening method of planting gospel seeds. Micki has the success stories to prove it. Puppet ministry has also helped many young people grow in their faith.

It is hard to imagine how a puppet that is constructed out of some foam, plastic, and fabric could be so beneficial in aiding spiritual growth. However, Micki testifies that it has been. Shy young teens begin puppet ministry, and at first they don't even want to speak to anyone about anything. Soon they begin reciting scripts that speak of God's love for us in Christ. This helps them develop their own language for speaking about their faith. As teens develop their confidence through performances they also begin to express their faith out in front of the stage, without puppets. It is an encouraging transformation. Micki would not give all of the credit to the puppetry either. Shepherd's Hands begins with Bible study and ends with a prayer circle every time they meet. The young people are fed with God's Word, as they grow in their ability to spread that Word to others.

A puppet ministry fills some needed roles within the overall ministry of a church. An active puppet ministry can serve as an opportunity for teens to enjoy fellowship and to be involved in the ministry of the congregation. "It picks up those who would otherwise fall between the cracks," as Micki has said. Shepherd's Hands puppeteers assist in many areas of ministry within a congregation. In a church service they will serve in a capacity much like the children's sermon. During vacation Bible school Shepherd's Hands fills multiple roles. The puppeteers become helpers, teachers, and even entertainers. Shepherd's Hands has also been closely tied to outreach through the North Side Ministries in Milwaukee, and the Jesus Cares program. Shepherd's Hands has even traveled around the United States providing services for our WELS congregations.

Puppet ministry faces some unique challenges. First and foremost, puppet ministry requires interested teens and adults. Puppetry is an art that takes practice just like playing the piano. Commitment is necessary. Finding teens with the time and desire to make that commitment has proved to be difficult in Mick's experience. Secondly, once puppeteers

are gathered one must come up with puppets. Puppets are very costly, and building puppets takes time and skill. Thirdly, finding quality scripts is difficult. Right now puppet ministry is very active in reformed and evangelical circles. Therefore, many of the available scripts reflect their errors in doctrine. For this reason many puppet groups have chosen to write their own scripts. Finding the talent and time to do that is a major challenge. However, if one is able to meet and overcome these challenges puppet ministry could benefit the youth of a congregation greatly.

Micki Schneider is aware of the objections to such a ministry. Some have accused her of turning the gospel into entertainment, and churches into theatres. Micki is quick to point out that they are simply putting the gospel into visual form. They are teaching in a way that touches more senses. In addition she points to the spirit of the ministry. Shepherd's Hands is not there to dominate the church service, or to "steal the show." They are there to help spread the gospel. In addition, Micki also pointed out that puppetry has been used to teach, even with in the church, for hundreds of years.

The only concern that comes to this author's mind is not one based on method, but on motivation. Why is puppet ministry needed? Does it exist to provide teens with a fun way to develop their faith and their evangelism ability? Or is it because the old way of doing things doesn't work, but these new and exciting methods will really touch people's lives? The one is justifiable, the other borders on pietism. Micki admitted that the method is never the only reason why people respond to their work. It's not because Shepherd's Hands uses puppets or because a pastor preaches from the chancel that brings someone to faith. The power is in the gospel. However in the next breath Micki said that it is the enthusiasm and conviction of the evangelists that draws people to listen.¹ In other words, people will listen more if you are really on fire for Jesus. I struggle to understand these words properly because enthusiasm and emotion have become other methods to success. However, to be fair, one must admit that there are human methods that appeal to some more than others. Once again though, all forms of ministry are just the tools we use to show off the gospel.

The students and parents involved in Shepherd's Hands will all speak highly of Micki Schneider. Micki saw a need among the youth of her congregation, and she used her God given creativity to fill that need. Through the use of Christian themed puppetry Micki has helped many young Christians become confident in talking about Jesus, and she has spread the gospel message to some who otherwise might never have heard it.

¹Cf. *Hardball* scene on Puppet Ministry DVD