

Someone is Stealing the Children

Hundreds of kids are abducted in the United States each year. Today, Christians are starting unique ministries that comfort distraught parents and help find missing children.

For most busy pastors trying to juggle the demands of ministry and family, answering the phone at home to someone who then hangs up on them is a rather guilty sweet relief—one less potential demand on their time. But for Danny Steyne, the dead air is sheer torture.

He wonders if it's a silent taunt by someone who knows something about his two daughters, Christy and Abby, who have been missing for more than three years since his former wife abducted them. He suspects the calls come from someone closely involved in the girls' disappearance.

"One time I could hear children's voices in the background," the 43-year-old says sorrowfully. "I'm pretty sure it was them."

While shepherding a move of God that has brought expectant visitors to his small-town church in Ahoskie, North Carolina, from across the country in the last year, Steyne has nursed a private heartache that has affected his life as dramatically as some of those touched by the Holy Spirit in services at his nondenominational Church at the Crossroads.

"I've come to realize that, really, we are not in control of anything—and that He really is," he says. "People make bad choices, and we have to live with those sometimes and make the

best choices we can for ourselves, but it doesn't excuse us from following God."

Steyne's experiences have spurred him into an unexpected extra ministry, trying to offer comfort and help to other parents in similar pain. "If there's one thing I have learned, it is that the abduction of kids is the most cruel thing in the world," he says.

"It's not like a death, when you can actually say goodbye; it's ongoing, living with the hope all the time that maybe you will see them again, or when the phone rings that someone will have some news."

Twelve years after her 11-year-old son, Jacob, was abducted at gunpoint near his St. Joseph, Minnesota, home by a masked man, Patty Wetterling appeals for answers in an open Internet letter to the kidnapper.

She asks for a telephone call from him to help Jacob's family and friends find the "peace and a sense of calm" that disappeared along with the youngster. "You have held the answers for so long," she writes. "You also hold the pain. Please talk to me."

A rash of highly publicized snatchings last year prompted the first-ever White House Conference on Missing, Exploited and Runaway Children, hosted by President Bush in October. But stranger kidnappings like Jacob's are rare—only 115 such cases in 1999, according to government statistics.

However, as Steyne found through his own loss, away from the headline-making incidents there is a surprisingly large

community of suffering parents—with 1999 also seeing 58,000 nonfamily abductions and almost 204,000 family abductions.

The majority of such cases involve children being taken by noncustodial parents in what the tabloids call “tug of love” wars. But there is little if any comfort for those who lose their children in knowing they are with a former spouse or partner.

There is usually a good reason why the parent who snatches the children hasn’t been awarded custody in the first place. Marsha Gilmer-Tullis, a social worker at the National Center for Exploited and Missing Children (NCEMC), observes: “Anybody that would put their needs ahead of the needs of their children is certainly thinking about themselves first.”

Fear that the children may be physically harmed is only one aspect. Abducted youngsters also face all kinds of psychological and emotional stress from often being forced to change their names and appearances, invent stories about their backgrounds and be wary of strangers wanting to know more about them.

“I didn’t realize how it was going to destroy my life and my brother’s and sister’s,” says Aja Morse of her abduction as a 9-year-old, along with her two siblings, by her mother. “[We] never went to a doctor, dentist or to school,” she says of the three years before she was reunited with her father. “I was always afraid that the police were going to find us or that I’d mess up on one of my new names.”

Writing at the Web site of Take Root, a support group formed last year for now-adult victims of parental abduction, Cecilie

Sarah Finkelstein shares the “deep sense of fragmentation and pain” that developed after she was snatched by her father, who for a period disguised her as a boy. “Only recently have I come to a clearer understanding of what makes up my self,” she says.

Faces on the Internet

Steyne’s search for his girls has taken him to the Internet, which is rapidly replacing milk cartons as the preferred gallery for photos of missing children. He started two Web sites to tell his story and ask for help, and began to feature other

cases. Among those he has spotlighted is that of Sheena Vasquez, 8, missing from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, since being taken by her mother in January 2002.

“It’s hard, wondering if she is OK,” says her father, Shawn Vasquez. “It brings tears to your eyes because there is really nothing you can do. You don’t want to go anywhere in case the phone rings. Her younger sisters think she is just sleeping in her room.”

When a little girl went missing near Steyne, he went to see the family to offer his support. He sent out a prayer appeal on his 65-country e-mail list, and a few hours later the child was found. The family later visited Steyne’s church and gave their lives to Christ.

Steyne offers other parents practical tips on how to keep their children’s cases “alive.” Like many parents of missing children he has become media savvy. In addition to distributing thousands of flyers across the country, he has

been on national television, seen his case make the FBI's "Most Wanted" list and had his girls' faces emblazoned on a racecar.

He also prays for and with other parents, as he can. "The only one who will bring them back is the Lord," he says. "It won't be the authorities; I don't have a great deal of confidence in them." While members of his congregation have been supportive, Steyne observes that many churches "don't understand the issue. A lot of folks avoid it because it's messy; it's like a disease they don't want to get."

As someone who has seen God move in powerful ways, Steyne has had to come to terms with the fact that in his situation, for some reason, he has not yet seen Him intervene. "I believe God has promised a reunion—even if not until they are adults, and I am an old man. But I keep hoping against hope every day."

Steyne has seen God work in him a deeper understanding of forgiveness. From initial feelings of "intense anger" through the "impotence" of not being able to do something—anything—to make a difference, Steyne says God has brought him to a place of forgiveness toward his ex-wife.

At home he and his second wife, Karen, include Christy and Abby—8 and 6 when they vanished—in the everyday prayers and conversations of their blended family life.

"We remember the things they did. We talk about them, their favorite things and different memories. We have really tried to keep them a part of the home." On bad days—holidays, birthdays—he says that "we just get through; we commit them to the Lord."

The strain of his hunt for his daughters affected Steyne's physical health for a time, and he has faced the burden of thousands of dollars' worth of bills for legal fees, a private investigator and other costs. Like others, he has also been approached by psychics offering their help.

At the NCEMC—founded by America's Most Wanted host John Walsh following the kidnapping and gruesome murder of his son, Adam, in 1981—Gilmer-Tullis notes that some parents don't come through as well as Steyne has, getting crushed by the emotional and financial toll.

Working with parents of missing children, she often encourages them to look for support from their local "faith community," seeing churches and other congregations as a place where parents living in a draining "limbo land of, 'Will this be the day?'" can find practical help and a listening ear.

For some, the joy of being reunited with an abducted child is soon shattered by the grief of discovering that their relationship has been irrevocably damaged by the separation and the lies often fed by the other parent. Dana Jordan founded PEACE (Parents of Estranged Adult Children Exchange) in 1999 to offer a support to parents at odds with their grown children, including abductees.

Almost 30 years after her young daughter's abduction, (see story on page 52) Marietta Jaeger Lane still gets calls from parents whose own children have disappeared. She laments that many churches don't seem to be aware of the opportunity they have to minister to such families in need.

"A lot of churches have prison ministries, but victim

ministries? What the families need is people who will love them and listen to them and hold them and pray for them.

“It’s not an easy ministry—to have people just hear the same story over and over again and nothing has changed because they don’t know where the child is.”

Hoping Against Hope

But some Christians have recognized a mission field among the abducteds’ moms, dads and wider families.

Child Search, a nationally recognized organization that tracks down abducted and runaway youngsters, operates as a ministry of New Liberty Church, a nondenominational congregation in Houston. “Who better to run [such a program] than Christians?” asks administrator Marilyn Ward. In more than 20 years of work, the group has “found more children through prayer than any other thing,” she adds.

“We pray over every single case as it comes in. We pray with the parents; we witness to them and minister to them,” says Lisa Ward, head of Child Search’s juvenile division and a seasoned investigator. “We just show them the love of Christ.”

With church contacts across North America, Child Search can mobilize local search and leaflet distribution teams on short notice. And knowing that time is often an important factor in locating missing children, the group also is able to make downloadable flyers available at its Web site within 30 minutes of a case being registered. The ministry has success with “cold” cases, too, once finding a missing girl after seven years.

A string of local abductions prompted Kansas City, Missouri, pastor Steve Gray—whose World Revival Church has seen an ongoing revival for the last few years—to look for a way to help alert people in the area of children's disappearances.

A computer expert in his congregation developed a program that installs a sleeping figure on subscribers' PCs, which "wakes up" and sounds an alarm when an abduction is reported. The church took out TV and newspaper ads to promote the free service to the community.

A returning missionary, Arron Nickens was stirred by the trauma a family in his Corpus Christi, Texas, community suffered when their little girl disappeared. Having some previous experience in private investigation, he founded Texas Missing Kids to educate the public about the dangers of abduction, help find the missing and offer support to families affected.

Nickens, a DJ at a local Christian radio station and a worship leader at his church, says: "I've been able to counsel with parents. I've had the opportunity to give them some hope. It's been awesome just to be able to be there, to be an ear for them and a shoulder to cry on and a comfort."

With about 2,000 children and youth going missing in the United States every day, authorities are able to offer only so much help in tracking them down. Higher priority naturally goes to stranger abductions involving younger children, but even here some complain of disparity.

Observers have commented how that while the abduction of a 14-

year-old girl at gunpoint from her wealthy white family's home in Utah drew widespread media attention last year, there was less interest in the baffling disappearance of two young black sisters from inner-city Chicago months before.

One local pastor organized a monthly prayer vigil for Tracy Bradley's missing girls—Tionda, 10, and Diamond, 3—while pastor Paul Jakes' Old St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church has helped the anxious mother with practical support and encouragement. Jakes says such incidents are an opportunity for congregations to “reach out beyond the walls of the church into the community.”

In Jacksonville, Florida, members of Christian Community Church opened their arms and doors to a group of families largely overlooked in their distress. The church has provided office space and a meeting room for Families of Missing Loved Ones, set up to offer support to families of missing adults.

Founder Linda Rice says she lost her faith for a time after her married daughter, Tina, went missing three years ago on the way home from work. “I did a lot of soul-searching and realized that there has to be a reason. God knows where my daughter is, and if He doesn't feel it's the time for me to know, that's fine. I have to have faith in Him.”

Vicki Smith, a fellow member of the group whose 23-year-old son, Joshua, vanished on his birthday two years ago, says that despite days of nonstop tears she and her husband have never doubted God.

“If this is what He has chosen for us, we just hope we can walk through it with dignity and not be dishonoring to Him,”

she says. "There are times in our walk with God when we just come to a place so beyond anything we can influence, we have to just lay down at the foot of the cross because the only thing we can do is rely on God."

Some church friends have responded with "great compassion," she says, while others have "turned the other way because it was too painful for them. They didn't know what to say or do."

While the news media finds space only for the more sensational cases of the missing—like that of Chandra Levy—those Steyne dubs the "left behind" families and sympathetic others have turned to the World Wide Web for help.

APART—the American Parental Abductions Resource and Support group—offers legal and practical advice, while scores of Web sites now post pictures of missing children, such as the one called the Garden of Missing Children Society

For Steyne, turning to the Internet in the early days after his girls' abduction was "a form of therapy" when he couldn't even bear to go into the pair's bedroom. But learning that a church had helped his former wife disappear with the girls again after they were traced to a remote Oregon town two years ago only added to the pain.

Now Steyne says God has taken him beyond a thirst for revenge.

"God has been faithful to bring me to a point where I truly don't desire punishment for the really, sincerely have a hope that their hearts will be warmed to the Lord," he reflects.

“The pain of missing my little ones has not gone away, nor has it subsided, but grace really has carried me through.”

The Prayer That Ended a Night

American missionary Debbie Norwood says prayer caused two child abductors in England to turn themselves in.

Prayer and divine guidance put American missionary Debbie Norwood at the center of a shocking double abduction that gripped hearts across England.

Following a prompting by God, the 50-year-old itinerant preacher found herself leading the parents of one of the missing girls in a prayer that unlocked what became one of the most expensive police investigations in British history—and led to an unlikely postscript to a tragedy.

For almost two weeks last summer, the nation was gripped by daily news reports updating the desperate search for 10-year-old friends Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells. The pair went missing while walking near their homes in Soham, a peaceful Cambridgeshire village thrust suddenly into the media spotlight.

Norwood, who has based her traveling ministry out of England for the last three years, felt stirred to drive to Soham for a meeting where authorities updated anxious members of the small community on their efforts.

Toward the end of the meeting she stood up and said: "I'm not a citizen of this nation, but I have come here tonight because there is a God in heaven who knows the answers to the questions we are asking. He knows where those children are."

Afterward, a local Christian approached Norwood and took her to a prayer meeting in the village. There Norwood urged them to agree in prayer regarding a passage from Isaiah 49 that speaks of "plunder retrieved from the fierce," and how God "will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save."

The next morning, Norwood sensed she should try to pray with one of the families concerned before leaving Soham, though the chances of getting close to them seemed remote. "The thing that was impressed upon me was that I needed one of the fathers to agree with me for what I was asking; I needed the authority of a father," she said later. When she found her way to the home of Holly's parents, Kevin and Nicola Wells, Norwood was surprised to be able to walk up to the front door unimpeded, despite the heavy police and media presence.

Norwood told the distressed couple about the Bible passage that had been impressed on her the night before, and how she believed it was important that Jesus be invited into the situation. They joined hands in prayer, and Norwood ended by declaring: "Whoever has these children, turn yourself in."

"It was not just a matter of us asking God to do something," she recalled for Charisma. We were literally speaking into the atmosphere and telling the forces of darkness, 'You have to give the children up.'"

Sensing her mission accomplished, Norwood drove the two hours home, getting back to news reports that two people subsequently charged in connection with the two girls' murders had turned themselves in to police. The children's bodies were found soon afterward.

Norwood wrote about her experiences in Soham at a Web site devoted to the girls' case, prompting an e-mail message from an Australian stockbroker moved by Norwood's account. He told her the girls' abduction had caused him to reassess his life.

Norwood responded by telling the writer of her own experiences, leaving a well-paid job as an executive recruiter to go into ministry, and challenged him to give his life to Christ.

"Your e-mail moved me to search my soul, and Jesus Christ revealed Himself to me," he wrote in reply. "I have accepted the Lord's pardoning of my sins and felt cleansed and renewed. Unfortunately, it took the death of those two beautiful young girls in Soham to set in motion the events which led to my Savior. It is true that He works in strange ways."

Forgiving the Unforgivable

Marietta Jaeger Lane says only God could give her the grace to pardon the man who murdered her daughter.

Almost three decades after her daughter's abduction and brutal murder, Marietta Jaeger Lane's astonishing story of faith and

forgiveness continues to bring new life to others.

The charismatic Roman Catholic has heard of relationship and physical healings among those to whom she has recounted the remarkable journey God took her on after her 7-year-old daughter, Susie, was snatched from her tent during a family camping trip to Montana in June 1973.

For a year Lane, her husband and other children suffered the agonies of not knowing what had happened to the youngster. Then, a year to the hour of Susie's disappearance, Lane answered a telephone call from a man claiming to have the girl with him.

Despite her anger and anxiety, Lane felt God giving her a supernatural concern for the caller. She developed a rapport with him, later meeting him face to face and telling him she forgave him. Arrested and charged with Susie's kidnapping and murder, the man also admitted to three other murders, but committed suicide while in police custody.

From the police Lane learned that a harrowing dream she had experienced shortly before the killer contacted her—in which she saw Susie being taken, sexually abused, strangled and dismembered—matched the details of the killer's confession.

"I don't dwell on it," Lane says today. "My consolation is that it is not her reality now. I couldn't spare her, but at least in a sense I could suffer it with her." The 64-year-old believes God allowed her to know the awful truth of what happened so that no one can question the wholehearted forgiveness she advocates. "They can't say, 'If only you knew.'"

Through her speaking to church and community groups across the country and overseas, people have been physically healed, and some have become Christians. "God had a plan in it all, and she paid the worst price," Lane says, "but she sits in the arms of God and celebrates life in a way I can't."

The rest of Lane's family found it harder to cope with the abduction. She believes the pain and stress led to her husband's early death. But she admits to a sense of "relief" when the year of not knowing what had happened was over, even with its grisly reality.

"At least I knew she wasn't suffering anymore, that she was safely home," she reflects, empathizing with those dealing with long-term disappearances. "When you have no idea if she is still alive, if someone is raising her as their daughter, or if she is being held captive in a closet; your mind goes crazy with all the possibilities."

But she avows passionately that forgiveness is the key, campaigning against the death penalty. "You have to let go of the hate and the desire for revenge," she says. "The violence has to stop wherever it is happening, whether on the streets or in the death rows."

Lane has even visited the killer's mother, the two women shedding tears together over their lost children and visiting their graves. And now she lives just a few minutes from where Susie was taken—for on the 25th anniversary of her daughter's abduction she traveled back to Montana to visit the church where the family worshiped the Sunday before the crime, meeting the man who became her second husband.

"I'm very conscious of how other parents are feeling, and I pray for them," she says of the news reports of the latest kidnappings. "We must never underestimate the value of our prayers. I know I'm standing straight now because of other people who prayed me through my experience. And in the time when in my own humanness and experience of what was happening I wasn't able to pray the way I should or wanted to, others would hold me up before the face of God."

An Innocent Lamb

Abducted and murdered at age 8, Christin Lamb shared her faith with everyone she met.

More than four years after her abduction and murder, Christin Lamb continues to touch lives through the foundation set up in memory of the young book lover with a vibrant, childlike faith.

"The fact that the foundation exists is a testimony to the fact that we believe some of what we learned can help other people," says her mom Laura Lampman, an Air Force attorney who is affiliated with the nonprofit organization that helps with missing children searches and offers security advice to families.

Eight-year-old Christin disappeared while on a summer visit to her grandparents' home in Powell, Wyoming. Her body was found 2-1/2 weeks later at a landfill, where it had been dumped by a 22-year-old man who had raped her. He was jailed for life.

Midway through Christin's disappearance an elderly male neighbor of the girl's grandparents told how, the night before Christin vanished, his granddaughter had asked him to pray with her to become a Christian because of the example of Christin's faith.

"When he told me that, in that instant God spoke to me, and I knew she was dead," says Lampman, who now lives in Great Falls, Montana. "Call it my mother's heart; I knew. The words I heard were, 'Her job here was finished.'"

That encounter with a summer friend was not the first time Christin had witnessed to others. She had prayed to receive Christ when she was 4, and soon after was telling a neighbor's child about Jesus. She also was a keen member of her local Awana Club. "She just had an unshakable faith," her mother recalls.

"She wasn't afraid to talk to people," says stepfather Eric Lampman, who has created a fund-raising cookbook filled with friends' favorite recipes and memories of Christin, and some of her best-loved Bible verses. "She would witness to anybody that would listen, and if they didn't she would work that much harder."

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