

Giving Strength To the Weak

Joe and Melissa Champlion say the Holy Spirit uses them—and their young son, Jesse—to bring smiles to elderly people who have yet to discover God's love.

Joe Champlion was on his way to McDonald's one morning when he noticed a homeless man sleeping under a tree. He went into the fast-food restaurant and came out with a "mcbreakfast." Passing it to the man, Champlion said: "Here's breakfast in bed. God loves you." It's just one example of how he and his wife, Melissa, find ministry opportunities in everyday situations.

The couple met more than a decade ago as members of a prison-ministry team. Melissa sang, and Joe operated the sound system. Today the two former Long Island New Yorkers live in a small community near Raleigh, North Carolina, where they take advantage of every ministry opportunity the Lord provides, including visiting nursing homes and recording music.

Joe had an experience with the Holy Spirit at age 11 during a visit to a Catholic monastery in Massachusetts, but he continued living life on his own terms. Twenty or so years later, in 1990, he was a successful recording engineer when he agreed, as a favor, to run sound at a service in a women's prison in upstate New York.

He says that's when God read him the riot act and said the period of permissiveness was over. "He had me surrender all my secular music, my masters and different productions, put them in the garbage and ship them out." He says it felt good to be obedient to God's calling.

Champlion's wife was given a similar ultimatum. "Around age 5 He gave me a dream. I was riding a bike up a hill," she says. "I got to the top of the hill, and it turned into a beautiful horse. I was so proud. At the bottom of the hill it turned

into a small, little cross. I was saddened, but I picked the cross up and put it into my pocket.”

The dream proved to be prophetic. Melissa spent increasing amounts of time preparing for horse shows until she was just a step or two away from appearing at Madison Square Garden. About 10 years after the dream, around 1986, she gave her heart to the Lord, and He told her to get rid of her horses. She gave them away, felt the pleasure of obedience and opened up time for ministry.

Melissa developed an interest in music ministry and trained under Gary Oliver, who was worship leader at Love Christian Assembly at the time. God gave recording back to her husband in a different form. Joe recently completed a Christian recording studio next to their home.

The couple moved to North Carolina in 1994 and started a nursing home ministry. “You play an old hymn, ‘How Great Thou Art.’ They are automatically brought back to their childhood, maybe to the back corner of a Baptist church, and they remember the feeling,” Melissa says. “After the service they go back for a nap and lay there and think about it.”

Dwayne Murchison is an activities director at Stagecoach Manor Rest Home in Angier, North Carolina. “I appreciate what the Champions try to do very much. It seems I almost have to do a back flip to get [the residents] to participate, but when someone from the outside comes in, they pay attention.”

Even Alzheimer’s patients are affected. Melissa Champion remembers one man who had not expressed emotion for years. “During the worship, he literally just started weeping,” she says.

Joe, whose Christian beginnings were in outreach ministry, says obedience to fulfilling the Great Commission motivates him to serve the elderly. His wife says she reaches out to them because without Jesus, they’re lost. Take the case of

Henry, who was more than 90 years old.

"We called him up to sing 'Happy Birthday' to him, and he started crying," she says. "He said, 'I'm so sorry what I did all my whole life, and I want to give my life to the Lord.' God was just all over Him."

Henry is not an isolated case. One time a man named Lester, who was 95 percent deaf, was in the audience. Melissa says that normally the only way a person could communicate with Lester was by pressing a button and speaking loudly into his microphone.

"I think it was a bit after the worship that the presence of God blanketed the place," she says. "Lester just started weeping and gave his heart to the Lord. He's dancing in heaven now."

The Champions' 6-year-old son, Jesse, accompanies his parents and prays for the residents. "I like to go hang out with my dad [at the services]." He has even been known to strum his toy guitar and sing "Jesus Loves Me." They named him after Bible teacher Jesse Duplantis, who used to be a guest speaker at their Long Island church.

Prison ministry, on the other hand, doesn't have the same kind of emotional feedback, though men and women do come to God. Joe, who has ministered to death-row inmates at Central Prison in Raleigh, says: "It really wasn't a lot of sitting around chitchatting. I didn't walk away with any friendships. It was more of a scriptural-based thing."

What kind of advice do the Champions have for someone thinking of moving beyond the pew into ministry? "If you have hands, go buy tracts," Melissa says. "You can put tracts anywhere. If you have ears, you can sit and listen to someone in a nursing home. They love to talk about when they were kids and share pictures. If you have a car, go buy a bag of cheeseburgers and feed someone."

Her husband adds, "Be obedient."

Several people have prophesied over the couple, that God was getting ready to do something so big they could not imagine it. The "big thing" may not put them up-front, but the Champions don't mind. For them ministry is not limited to something public. It's more often living day to day as Jesus would, responding to opportunities He provides and finding fulfillment in being obedient.

Steve Eastman *is a news anchor at WPTF radio in Raleigh, N.C.*

For more information about the Champions' ministry, write Soulkeeper Music, P.O. Box 442, Willow Spring, NC 27592. Send tax-deductible contributions to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL, 32795-2248.